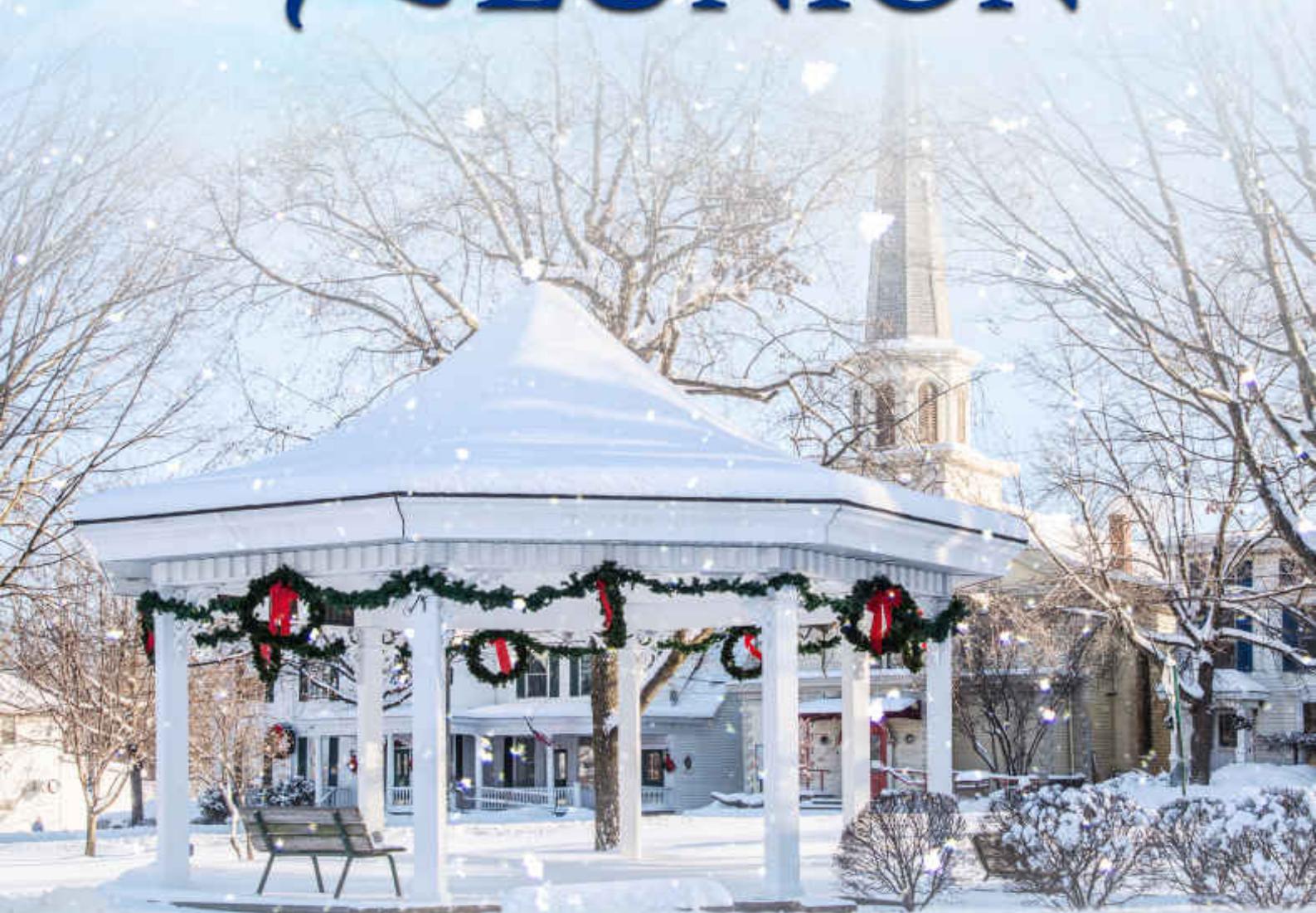


THE

*Christmas*

REUNION



SNOWY PINE RIDGE



FIONA BAKER

# THE CHRISTMAS REUNION

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SNOWY PINE RIDGE BOOK SIX

FIONA BAKER

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## CHAPTER ONE

---

“Gus! You have to let me go!” Mindy Harvey laughed as her small, fluffy white dog pranced around her feet, yapping excitedly. “I told you, you can’t go to the bakery with me, even if you do look outrageously cute in your new sweater.”

Gus sat back on his haunches, looking up at her with his big dark eyes and tilting his head to the side, his fuzzy ears flopping over as he regarded her. Earlier that morning, she’d dressed him in a turquoise sweater with tiny pink cupcakes on it, a match to the one that she now wore.

The outfit had gotten him more than a few compliments as they had gone out on their morning walk. The other residents of Snowy Pine Ridge had stopped to pet him as they passed and tell him what a handsome boy he was. So, in typical Gus fashion, he was ready to head back out the door and be showered in more affection. Mindy’s only problem was that because of all his preening, she was now running late. But she had to admit, his cuteness did make up for it.

“My customers are going to be banging down the door if I don’t get there soon,” she crooned, giving herself a second longer to scratch the dog behind his ears before standing and putting on her coat.

Gus whined low in his throat as Mindy opened her front door partway, but he didn’t make a move to dart out of the small crack between the door and the frame.

“I’ll be home as quick as I can,” she promised, blowing him a kiss before closing the door behind her and heading out

into the cold.

A fresh snow had fallen the night before, and the white, downy powder kicked up around her as she trudged through it. The early morning sun was glinting off the snow, casting dancing colors of gold, blue, and red across it, mingling with the Christmas lights that hadn't yet been turned off from the night before.

Mindy had moved to Snowy Pine Ridge a few years prior, establishing her bakery, Baking Fiend, and getting immersed in the community as quickly as she could. It hadn't necessarily been an easy road—her own fears and insecurities from her past had seen to that. But the beautiful town had wrapped its arms around her and welcomed her as if she'd always been there, despite her initial struggles. And it had felt like home ever since.

It wasn't a long walk to Baking Fiend, but that didn't stop her from passing several people she knew on her way. She spotted Clark Mitchell turning the sign on the door of his hardware store to "OPEN" as she passed, and he and Mindy exchanged a friendly wave. She loved the fact that it was like that in this town, that the people would greet you every day and wouldn't hesitate to make you feel like one of them.

Mindy breathed out a sigh of happiness as Baking Fiend came into view. The lights inside were already on, and she could see the telltale sign of Allison, one of her employees, taking down the chairs from the tables and getting everything ready for the first customers of the day. Normally, Mindy would have been there well before Allison, but Gus had been so cute that morning that she just hadn't been able to leave him.

She walked in through the front door, the familiar smell of the bakery wafting around her, and Mindy took a moment to tilt up her chin and sniff the air. She loved that even when there was nothing in the oven, the place still always smelled like baked goods.

"Good morning!" Allison beamed at her as she pulled down the final chair and arranged it neatly at its table.

“Morning! Sorry I’m late.” Mindy greeted the younger woman with a wave, rushing past Allison to drop off her bag and coat in the office.

“No worries at all,” Allison called after her. “It was kind of nice to have the place to myself. It’s a great spot for people watching.”

As soon as Mindy shrugged off her coat and scarf, pausing just long enough to push one of the blonde, corkscrew curls that had fallen across her forehead out of her face, she popped her head out the door. Allison was pointing toward the front of the store, which was really just one giant window. And sure enough, it gave them both a clear view of the town and the sleepy-eyed residents who were walking about.

“Yeah, that’s my favorite part about the mornings here too,” Mindy said, shooting Allison a quick grin before choosing her apron for the day from the hooks behind the counter.

Mindy was proud of the assortment that she’d collected over the years. They were bright and colorful, each one with its own cute or interesting pattern that had made her swoon. After looking down at her outfit, she chose an apron that was a bright pink to match the cupcakes on her sweater. It had white, horizontal stripes as well, and she liked the way the two fabrics didn’t quite match but somehow still complemented each other. The apron also went well with her brown eyes.

She and Allison made their way toward the kitchen, and she began reciting the recipe that she was going to be teaching her employee that day. A few months ago, she and Allison had decided that Allison would begin learning some of their staple recipes, and Mindy had taken up the mantle of teaching them to her one at a time. She would then give the younger woman a few weeks of being assigned to making just that pastry, using Mindy as a guide as she went along.

Ever since her time in culinary school in New York, Mindy had been passionate about teaching the art of pastry making to others, and she’d often volunteered in her classes to do demonstrations with their teachers. Being able to bestow some

of what she'd learned on Allison, an avid baker who had an incredible amount of talent and whom Mindy thought very highly of, filled her heart with joy.

As she walked Allison through everything, the dark-haired young woman nodded vigorously, taking it all in as Mindy showed her the delicate technique of folding butter softly into the dough for their flaky, delicious croissants.

"Do you think you've got it?" Mindy asked after her second time demonstrating, and Allison gave an enthusiastic, "Yup!"

Mindy stepped aside, giving her employee space to begin working, watching over her shoulder as she repeated the steps Mindy had just shown. But Allison was doing such a good job that there wasn't a lot for Mindy to supervise, and her mind began to wander.

She glanced up, her gaze drifting toward the massive windows at the front of the shop, and she spotted a few familiar faces as they walked by. Colette and Zach, two of her friends who had just recently gotten married, strolled by with their hands linked. They glanced at the window as they walked past, giving Mindy a quick wave and a smile before continuing on their way down the block. They were likely headed toward Zach's art gallery to get everything set up for the day, and then Mindy was sure Colette would be making an appearance at Baking Fiend soon for her daily coffee run.

"How does this look?" Allison asked, grabbing Mindy's attention again as she nodded down to the dough, which had been pressed and rolled out almost perfectly atop the counter.

"It looks fantastic." Mindy beamed. "Now let's get it cut and folded onto the trays."

Allison nodded as Mindy went to work behind her, grabbing baking sheets and lining them with parchment paper before setting them in front of the other woman. She offered to help Allison form the croissants, but the girl declined, saying she wanted the practice.

Mindy was all too happy to turn that portion of the work over to her peppy employee. So she stepped away, heading to the other side of the kitchen area, and started to pull out the items that hadn't sold the day before, marking them down at a discount.

She hummed "Baby, It's Cold Outside" under her breath as she worked, grinning as more and more sunlight began to pour through the windows. She began preparing the muffins, cookies, and scones, and soon the entire bakery was filled with the smell of the treats she and Allison were preparing.

An alarm went off, letting her know that it was officially time to open, and Mindy grinned as she walked toward the front door and flipped the sign from CLOSED to OPEN. Within minutes, she and Allison had their first customer of the day, which was no surprise to either of them.

Rudolph Hutchins almost always came in right as they opened, ordering a bear claw from them before heading toward Sweet Thing to get a coffee. Mindy's closest friend in town, Sarah Parks, owned the other bakery, and they often ran complementary deals.

Right now, they had a punch card reward system that was valid at each bakery, so if someone bought a baked treat at one shop and a coffee at the other in the same day three times, they'd get a coupon to both bakeries to use during their next visit. It was a great deal, and many of the townsfolk had been taking full advantage of it.

After the slightly grouchy older man grunted out his order and took it to go, a steady stream of people began to file into the warm bakery. Since it was the holiday season, it was the busiest time of the year for Snowy Pine Ridge, which saw a lot of visitors during this time of year. So many of the faces that crowded into the shop were unfamiliar, and after the first hour, Mindy's cheeks had begun to hurt from smiling as she greeted new customers.

A lull in the customers fell over them around mid-morning, and she and Allison took the time to begin refilling a few of the items that had started to run low. As she was

placing a new batch of blueberry crumble muffins into the display case, movement outside the window caught her attention.

Mindy's gaze flicked toward the front of the store, and she watched a sleek black car pull up to the curb across the street from the bakery and come to a stop. She was about to turn her attention back to the task at hand, writing the car off as another tourist or someone just driving through town. But then the door opened, and curiosity got the better of her.

She kept looking out the window as a man in a tailored camel colored pea-coat slid smoothly out of the car. As he brought himself to his full height, he had his back turned toward the bakery, so she couldn't get a good look at his face. Even at a distance, though, there was something about the set of the man's shoulders and his dark, perfectly styled hair that seemed familiar to her.

She wasn't entirely sure why, but her heart began to speed up at the sight of the man. He continued to look up and down the road on the other side of the street, and Mindy couldn't quite tell if he was taking in the town, or if he was waiting for someone.

Slowly, the mystery man began to turn, continuing his perusal of his surroundings. As more of his face came into view, Mindy's stomach dropped. Her breath caught in her throat, and her heart felt like it was going to pop out of her chest.

There was a reason that his stance and build had seemed so familiar to her. She had spent plenty of time memorizing his features back when they had dated.

Inch by inch, Noah Henderson's full face came into view, and Mindy had to work to control her breathing as she stared at her ex-boyfriend. There was no doubt that it was him. Same broad shoulders, same high cheekbones and wide set mouth, same strong jaw and thick eyebrows. He had aged well since the last time she had seen him, becoming somehow even more handsome, although his dour expression undercut his good looks a bit.

“Excuse me?”

The voice came from directly in front of her, and Mindy blinked hastily as she ripped her gaze away from her ex-boyfriend and turned it toward the customer who was standing at the cash register. She had been so caught up in the shock of seeing Noah for the first time in years that she hadn’t even heard the cute old woman now standing in front of her approach.

The woman was looking at her with concern in her gray-blue eyes, her head tilted to the side. “Are you all right?”

“Yes! I’m so sorry,” Mindy said much more shakily than she’d intended. Then she plastered a smile on her face. “I was just daydreaming. What can I get for you?”

The old woman began rattling off her order, and Mindy rang her up. But her mind was still reeling over the sight of Noah. She had to ask the woman to repeat two different things because she couldn’t seem to fully concentrate on her words. The only things that Mindy was able to focus on were the questions that rang out loud and clear in her mind.

*What on earth is Noah Henderson doing in Snowy Pine Ridge?*

*And how do I feel about it?*

Unfortunately, she had to admit that her answer to both of those questions was a simple, unsatisfactory, *I don’t know.*

## CHAPTER TWO

---

Noah Henderson nodded as he glanced around the town, taking in the picturesque buildings made of stone, brick, and wood, all of them painted in soft, quaint colors. There were Christmas lights hanging merrily from every roof, every light pole wrapped in garland and topped with holly, and nearly every tree had Christmas ornaments that sparkled in the sun.

“It looks like I’m trapped in the middle of a snow globe,” he muttered to himself as he swiveled his head again to take in more of the town.

He wasn’t particularly moved by the sight of all the decorations. While Noah could appreciate the amount of work it took to decorate an entire town from top to bottom, he’d never been one to be swayed by festive things or small-town charm. Although he did have to admit that in this particular circumstance, it would likely suit his purposes rather nicely.

His eyes landed on the words scrawled on the window of the business directly across the street from him. *Baking Fiend*. His eyebrows quirked up with interest, and he wondered for a moment if he had time to run in and see if they had coffee. But that thought was quickly pushed from his mind as a voice rang out from his right.

“There you are,” Hugh Brockton huffed as he hurried down the sidewalk toward Noah. “Was already down at the town hall when I got your text, so I nearly had to run here.”

Noah smiled at the local lawyer who had been hired to oversee the execution of his aunt Theresa's will, and he extended his hand for the man to shake.

"I didn't mean for you to rush. You could have taken your time," he said. "It would have allowed me to get better acquainted with the town."

"Can't," Hugh grunted, shaking his head so vigorously that the man's impressively bushy mustache shifted with the force of it. "We're already nearly late for your meeting with the mayor and some of the business owners in town."

Noah's heart kicked up a notch at that. He checked his watch, surprised to see that Hugh was right. He wasn't late, but he was much closer to it than he liked being. Noah had often abided by the rule that being early was being on time, and if you were on time, that meant you were late.

But as the second hand on his watch continued to tick away, he realized that if he and Hugh didn't get a move on, they were likely going to be actually late.

"All right then," he said, motioning for his lawyer to lead the way. "Off we go."

The two men turned and began navigating the streets of Snowy Pine Ridge as they made their way toward the bustling town hall. The standard brick building was the only one in the town he'd seen so far that hadn't been painted or enhanced in some way. And while there were a few Christmas decorations adorning it, the decorations weren't nearly to the level of everything surrounding it, giving the building a slightly more austere look.

"Just inside here," Hugh grunted as they trudged up the steps.

Hugh pulled open the door to the town hall, allowing Noah to walk in first. Immediately, he was wrapped in the warmth of the building, and he tugged on his scarf to loosen it a bit.

"Ah!" the lawyer exclaimed as he filed in behind Noah. "Mayor Thornton, sorry to keep you waiting."

Noah followed Hugh's line of sight to a tall, statuesque woman whose gray-streaked black hair was pulled back in a graceful chignon. She smiled at the two men warmly, shaking each of their hands in turn as she greeted them.

"No need to thank me." She nodded to Hugh. "I got down here just as you two were walking in." Her blue eyes swept to Noah. "You must be Mr. Henderson. A pleasure to meet you. Everyone is taking their seats now, so it should be just a few moments before we can move forward with the presentation."

"Thank you." Noah gave her a stiff, courteous nod. "Usually, I would have arrived in town much earlier than this, giving myself time to help everyone set up and make sure everything is set, but I had a late meeting last night and wasn't able to drive in until this morning."

Mayor Thornton shook her head. "It's not a problem."

One of the large doors behind them opened, and a young clerk popped his head outside.

"I believe they're ready for you," the young man said, his eyes sweeping over the people standing in the atrium.

Mayor Thornton nodded to the clerk before turning her gaze back to Noah and Hugh.

"That's our cue," she said, gesturing with her chin to a door on their left. "There's a coat closet there. Make yourselves comfortable, and then we can head inside."

Noah and Hugh both shrugged their coats from their shoulders, hanging them up in the indicated closet before they followed after Mayor Thornton, who strode confidently toward the double doors that the clerk had just emerged from. When they stepped inside, Noah saw that there were about twenty seats lined up in rows in the room, each one filled with someone facing toward the raised dais and podium at the front of the room. Noah could feel the eyes of more than a few of the people tracking him as he, his lawyer, and the mayor walked toward the platform, but he didn't shy away from the attention.

Being in business and real estate development meant that Noah had had to give many speeches and presentations in the past, and he was now so used to public speaking that it was essentially second nature.

The graphs, diagrams, and images that he'd forwarded to the mayor's office the previous week were all set up on display boards behind the podium, and his heart gave a little thump of pride as he saw just how well they'd turned out.

Noah and Hugh stepped onto the stage after the mayor, and as she made her way to the podium, the two men walked toward the three chairs in the back, seating themselves. Mayor Thornton began speaking, thanking everyone for coming out to the public discussion on the proposal that was being brought forth for Snowy Pine Ridge.

While she was doing her introductory spiel, Noah looked out at the crowd. A few of the people were dressed similarly to him, with smart, pressed suit jackets and ties, while others were in brightly colored, festive sweaters. He began making bets in his head about which of the people present would be receptive to his proposal, and which ones were going to kick up a fuss.

"Now, without further ado," Mayor Thornton said after another few minutes, waving one hand behind her to indicate Noah. "I'd like to welcome Noah Henderson up to the podium, so he can tell us all about the business proposal he has for his newly acquired real estate in Snowy Pine Ridge."

A spattering of applause sounded through the room as Noah pushed himself to his feet. He paused just long enough to smooth down the front of his navy blue, pinstripe suit before striding forward. Mayor Thornton stepped away from the podium, giving him the space that he needed to approach the small microphone.

He smiled back at her, turning his head halfway so that he could grin his thanks at her while also not turning his back to the crowd.

"Thank you, Mayor Thornton," he said as he turned his smile outward to the people in attendance. "And thank you all

for allowing me to speak with you today. I bet you're all wondering why some outsider is jabber jawing at you at nine-thirty in the morning, but I promise, I'll make it worth your while."

Noah then launched into his speech, explaining how his aunt Theresa, who had been a resident of Snowy Pine Ridge, had recently passed away. When he said her name, it elicited a few small gasps and nods of sympathy, and he was immediately able to mark those in the crowd who had known her.

He explained how, in her will, she had left him her property, a large parcel of land on the outskirts of Snowy Pine Ridge. While he had no use for it as it currently stood, he told the townspeople that he'd had an idea that might benefit not only him, but the town as well. When he reached that part of his pitch, Noah pointed toward one of the models on the boards behind him, showing a series of warehouses and truck yards.

"My proposal is to convert the land I've inherited into an industrial complex," he explained. "It will not only bring in a wealth of jobs to this wonderful town, but it will also mean that the business owners in Snowy Pine Ridge will see an influx of customers. Everyone from workers at the warehouses to the truckers who have to come here to pick up and drop off cargo will likely venture into town to shop. There will also be plenty of employees of the industrial complex who'll likely wish to move here so that they can be closer to their work."

He continued on, explaining the full list of benefits that he'd compiled during his risk assessment. And as Noah looked out at the crowd, he watched their faces as he spoke. There were a handful who nodded appreciatively as they listened to him outline his proposal, but most of them didn't seem convinced.

When he'd finally wrapped up his final point, pointing to the projected profits that the industrial complex would bring both the town and its residents, he wasn't sure how he felt about the varying responses.

“I believe that this project will allow Snowy Pine Ridge to prosper more than ever before,” he said, keeping his tone clear and confident. “And I’m positive that the growth and the revenue that this would bring will allow all of you to flourish as well. All that I ask today is that you take this information and mull it over. I’m happy to answer any questions you may have now as well. Ask away, please.”

Noah took one final look out at the crowd, hoping to see a few more faces that looked amenable to what he had proposed. But if anything, even more of them looked unconvinced than just a few seconds before. He didn’t allow it to dampen his mood though.

He’d never met a challenge that didn’t send a thrill racing through him, especially when it came to business. His competitive nature and drive had served him well up to this point, earning him a top spot in his family’s company. In fact, his father had been the one who’d helped him develop the plan for his inherited land, and although he could tell that the residents of Snowy Pine Ridge were skeptical right now, Noah was certain he could win them over.

He’d given pitches like this at least a dozen times before, each time ending with him getting exactly what he wanted. And Noah had no doubt that was exactly what was going to happen in Snowy Pine Ridge too.

\* \* \*

Lacy Morse’s phone buzzed where it sat on the coffee table, and she shot a glance toward the couch where Piper was curled up taking an early morning nap. Satisfied that the noise of the device hadn’t woken up her young daughter, Lacy pushed herself out of the recliner where she’d been curled up with a book and grabbed her phone.

She grinned as she realized it was a text from her husband, Derek. But when she swiped across the screen and read the message, her smile began to fade.

*DEREK: Hey, sweetheart. Bad news. That guy who showed up to speak at the town hall meeting this morning? He wants to turn Theresa's old property into a warehouse and truck yard.*

She frowned as she read over his text a second time, thinking through the implications that something like that would have on their charming little town. When Derek had told her about the meeting that Mayor Thornton had asked him and a handful of other business owners in town to attend, they had been excited.

They'd had fun speculating about what it could be about. A new ski resort, or a spa? They'd thought of several things that could bring in more tourists or support the long-term residents of Snowy Pine Ridge, all while preserving the spirit of the town they knew and loved—but neither of them had ever considered something like this.

Before she had a chance to type out a response, a few more texts from Derek came through. The meeting was still going on, and her husband told her that there was currently a Q&A happening. He filled Lacy in a bit more about the proposal and everything it would entail, then promised to get as much additional information as he could before signing off for the moment.

Lacy's head was spinning, and she knew she had to share the news of this surprising development with her friends. As quickly as she could, she pulled up the group chat that she had with several other women in town—all of whom were either business owners themselves or were married to local business owners. Her thumbs flew over the screen as she relayed the news that Derek had just told her. Less than a minute later, her phone chimed with several incoming messages from Colette McKnight, Shelley Martinez, and Sarah Parks.

*COLETTE: You have to be kidding me!*

*SHELLEY: Does this guy think that Snowy Pine Ridge is struggling or something? How does he think that this is going to benefit our town?*

*SARAH: Seriously. Even if it brings in money, the potential downsides far outweigh the upsides in my mind. I would love to see Snowy Pine Ridge continue to grow, but not at this cost.*

Text after text popped up on her screen, and Lacy felt validated that she and Derek weren't the only people concerned by the proposed industrial complex. She typed out a response, telling her friends that the meeting was still going on and saying that maybe there would be more developments that might ease their mind.

A second later, Mindy's name popped up on the screen, and as Lacy read the text her friend had sent, her eyebrows shot up.

*MINDY: If the meeting is still going on, I want to be there. I'm asking Allison to cover for me at the bakery for a bit, and I'm heading over to the town hall now. I'll give this guy a piece of my mind, don't worry!*

A chorus of support rose up in the group chat as Shelley, Colette, Lacy, and Sarah all chimed in with words of encouragement for their friend. Things like *Go get 'em, Min* and *Atta girl* filled Lacy's screen. Switching to a different message thread, she shot off a warning text to Derek, telling him that Mindy was on her way and asking him to get video of the showdown that was inevitably about to occur if he could. But before she got a response, Piper let out a soft sound as she began to stir, waking from her nap.

Lacy's attention was immediately drawn to her toddler, and she locked her phone and stuffed it into her pocket without a second thought as she strode across the room to pull her fussy daughter into her arms.

"It's okay, sweetie," she cooed as she bounced Piper on her hip. "Sometimes I wake up from a nap a little cranky too. That's all right."

The sound of the toddler's noises must have roused the dogs, because two fuzzy huskies trotted into the living room, sniffing lovingly at Piper's toes.

“Soon, you’ll likely have a silly video of your Auntie Mindy defending our town,” Lacy told her daughter, making a funny face that had Piper’s grumpy expression turning into a smile, and then a giggle. “That’s right. Your Auntie Mindy is going to go save us from the big bad businessman. Won’t that be wonderful?”

Piper’s sudden squeal of excitement let Lacy know that the little girl agreed with her wholeheartedly.

## CHAPTER THREE

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Noah shifted a bit on his feet, looking out at the crowd once more. He was almost regretting opening up the floor to a Q&A, because he had to give it to the residents of Snowy Pine Ridge—they were throwing him some real doozies.

“I understand the concerns at the sheer number of people that something like this industrial complex could draw in,” Noah said as he began to answer the question a gruff looking older gentleman in the front row had just asked. “I mean, one warehouse alone can employ a couple hundred people. But the truth is that something like this isn’t going to spring up overnight. There will be a steady but impressive influx of people moving to the area while the warehouses are being built. Then, when it comes time—”

The double doors at the far end of the room burst open, and Noah was cut off mid-sentence by the sudden sound. A woman stood in the now open doorway, and as Noah’s gaze settled on her, his mouth went dry.

“It can’t be,” he murmured to himself, the astonishment of the moment making him forget that he was standing in front of a microphone. The mic picked up his low voice, broadcasting his surprised words to the entire room.

Thankfully, no one seemed to have noticed that he’d spoken again, since all eyes in the room were focused on the newcomer as she strode into the room.

*Mindy Harvey.*

She was a bright spot in the center of the room, her blonde curly hair flying around her face and her turquoise sweater all but glowing under the fluorescent lights of the meeting room. She had on a bright pink and white apron, and it had bits of flour and what looked like jam caked across it. Noah couldn't help but wonder if the woman had even bothered to put on a coat before making her way to the town hall.

"What's this I hear about an industrial warehouse?" Mindy demanded, squaring her shoulders at Noah. He'd negotiated with high-powered businessmen plenty of times, but for some reason, he almost flinched under the weight of this diminutive woman's gaze. "And a trucking yard?"

"Well," Noah replied, coughing once to clear his throat as he began to point to the displays behind him. "You'll see here that—"

"No," Mindy interrupted him, stalking forward so that she was standing just in front of the podium and glaring up at him.

Now that they were this close, he could see the small ways that her face had changed over the years since he had seen her last. Her cheeks had lost some of the roundness from her youth, accentuating the delicate bones of her face. She had the beginnings of laugh lines at the sides of her mouth, and his heart gave an unaccountable twinge at the thought that he'd missed out on all the smiles that would have caused them.

While some things about Mindy had changed, the things he'd once loved about her remained the same. She had the same soulful brown eyes. And the ringlets of her hair, which he'd used to love wrapping around his fingers, were exactly the same as well. Apparently, so was her fiery spirit.

She continued chastising him, her words snapping him out of his fond memories.

"Did you ever stop to think about what this is going to do to our town?" she demanded, hurling the words at him ferociously. "Did you consider the fact that adding in trucking routes will cause so much traffic that it will make getting anywhere in Snowy Pine Ridge a complete nightmare?"

Noah heard murmurs of assent around the room, and his eyes flicked up to see a few of the people whom he'd thought had been on his side a moment ago now nodding their heads along with Mindy. *Uh oh.*

"I have a plan for the flow of traffic," he said quickly, her words getting under his skin a little.

She eyed him skeptically, clearly not buying his assurances. "I'm sure you did. And I'm sure you also considered the fact that, while you claim this industrial complex would bring additional clientele to the businesses in town, it will also *cost* the town existing customers and business, didn't you?"

"I'm not sure I'm following your—" he began, but once again, she cut him off.

"Of course not. The only thing you probably spent any time thinking about is your own profits. Did you stop to consider the fact that the customers that we currently have, the people who travel from all over the country to visit our town, do so because of its charm? There's not a single franchised business here. Everything in Snowy Pine Ridge is entirely locally owned."

She took another step forward, bringing herself so close that her thighs were nearly touching the stage.

"It's a town made of and run by small business owners," she went on. "The same people who live here. What happens to those small businesses when more people move here? When, suddenly, franchises begin poking around because we can't keep up with the demand?"

More murmurs filled the room as people began to wrap their heads around what Mindy was insinuating, and Noah's pulse picked up a little. This hadn't been going very well to begin with, and it was going downright terribly now.

"What happens," Mindy continued, really picking up steam now, "when our town that we love so much begins to lose its charm? I'll tell you what." She whirled, turning her back on him and facing the crowd, addressing her fellow

townspeople directly. “The people who love Snowy Pine Ridge as much as we do, who come here when they need to rest, when they need to be reminded that a little bit of magic exists in the world—they’ll stop coming.”

She said the last three words slowly, deliberately enunciating every syllable. Noah tried to hide his grimace, watching with growing frustration as every last face in the crowd became clouded with distrust. He glanced toward his lawyer and the mayor, his mind scrambling for a way to take control of the situation once more.

But it appeared that Mindy would be having none of that.

“You all know how important this town is to me,” she said clearly, still addressing everyone else in the room but Noah. “You welcomed me with open arms when I moved here. I knew this place was special immediately. And now I’m pleading with you not to forget all the things that make Snowy Pine Ridge unique. The things that make it a place worth loving.”

All around the room, people were nodding and murmuring in low voices, and Noah sensed that no amount of damage control would fix what she’d said. Not today. If he tried to rebut her little speech right now, the only thing it would accomplish would be to further alienate him from the rest of the town.

“She has a point.” The older man who’d asked a question earlier spoke up, his gruff voice filling the silence that had fallen in the room.

“You’re right,” Noah admitted, knowing that honesty was the only thing that could even remotely salvage this for him. “She made some excellent points. And they are all things that I have considered and have plans to deal with.” Mayor Thornton stepped up beside him, and Noah knew that was his sign to wrap things up. “Plans that I would be more than happy to discuss with you all in more detail either during your next meeting. Or you can contact me directly.”

Low, unsatisfied murmurs made their way around the room as Mindy finally moved away from the edge of the stage,

settling into a chair near the front row. Noah stepped back from the podium and allowed Mayor Thornton to take the place he'd vacated, and she addressed the crowd quickly once more, going over a few more items of business that pertained to the town.

Noah walked back to the seat beside Hugh, and his lawyer shifted uncomfortably.

"That didn't go very well," Hugh whispered under his breath, and Noah had to work to keep his expression neutral.

"I can come back from it," Noah murmured, and the other man gave a non-committal grunt.

The two of them fell silent as Mayor Thornton wrapped everything up. After the meeting was adjourned, Noah watched Mindy carefully, wondering if she would stay to rail at him some more. But although she cast an angry, distrustful look in his direction, she filed out with everyone else.

Noah and Hugh stood, waiting for the mayor to make her way back to them. As she approached, she wore an apologetic smile.

"I'm sorry if that wasn't quite the reception you expected," she said, not unkindly. "As you can see, our town's residents are passionate about Snowy Pine Ridge, and they have strong opinions about the future of the town."

"Well, Mindy clearly does," Noah murmured before he could stop himself.

His lawyer and the mayor both glanced at him quizzically, and he realized he'd spoken louder than he'd meant to.

"Oh? Do you know her?" Mayor Thornton asked, and from the expression on her face, Noah could tell she was surprised by that.

"Uh, yes," he said reluctantly, not wanting to share too many of the details of his and Mindy's past. "Or rather, I *knew* her. We haven't seen each other in several years."

Hugh and Mayor Thornton both still seemed a bit curious about what Noah meant, but neither of them pressed him for

more as they walked toward one of the exits at the side of the room. The few remaining townspeople who had attended the meeting were making their way toward the main exit, and Noah found himself appreciative that he and his lawyer were being led out another way. After everything that Mindy had said, Noah needed a bit of time to hone his proposal before he had to face more questions from agitated residents of the sleepy town.

They stepped out into the hallway, and the noise of those leaving through the front of the building echoed through the halls as the three of them turned to look at each other.

“Thank you for attending today,” the mayor said, giving Noah a respectful nod. “Normally, I would offer to continue to show you around, but I have another meeting to rush to this morning.”

“No problem at all,” Noah answered, waving that off. “Thank you for your time.”

“Mr. Henderson and I have a few things to discuss now that the meeting is over,” Hugh put in. “So don’t let us keep you.”

That was news to Noah, and as the three of them said a hasty goodbye, he wondered what else the lawyer needed to speak to him about. He and Hugh walked toward the coat closet in silence and retrieved their coats.

“What do you need to talk to me about?” Noah asked as he shrugged his camel-colored coat back onto his shoulders.

He hated the heaviness of the coat going over his suit jacket, disliking the way it made him feel confined in his own skin. But he pushed the thought aside, reminding himself that he’d be grateful for the added warmth once they stepped out into the frigid, early December air.

“We need to discuss some particulars of your aunt’s will,” Hugh said as he opened the door and stepped out into the cold, pausing to hold the door open for Noah. “We can head to my office. It’s just a few blocks away, so follow after me, please.”

Noah nodded and trailed after Hugh, glancing around to take in more of the town as he went. It appeared that even more people had woken up and begun their days since he'd entered the town hall building for the meeting, and they bustled down the streets all around him. Hugh gave Noah an informal tour as they went, pointing out a few of the different businesses they passed.

One in particular, a small restaurant called Frosty's Shack, had an impressive number of cars already in the tiny parking lot, and as they walked past, a customer was just opening the door. Noah sniffed at the air, his stomach giving a fierce growl of hunger at the delectable scent that drifted out.

"Ah, yes." Hugh smiled, sniffing at the air as well. "You'll have to make a visit to Frosty's while you're in town for sure. It's my favorite place to get breakfast. And their burgers? Best in town."

"I'll remember that," Noah responded, still feeling a bit stunned by all the decorations and the bright Christmas colors that seemed to be everywhere.

They paused outside of a sage green two-story building, and Noah caught sight of the name of Hugh's law firm emblazoned on the door. Once again, the lawyer held the door open as Noah stepped inside, then followed him in as they escaped the cold.

There was a large oak desk in the center of the entryway with a young woman behind it, typing quickly on the keyboard in front of her. She grinned at them in greeting as they passed but didn't take her eyes off her computer for too long as Noah followed Hugh farther into the tastefully decorated building.

They stepped into Hugh's office and Noah shut the door behind them, the silence of the room pressing in on him. He debated about whether to take off his coat, but he hadn't fully warmed up yet, so he opted to keep it on as he sat in one of the chairs across from Hugh, who had taken a seat on the other side of the desk.

"All right." The lawyer rubbed his hands together, then swiveled in his office chair so that his back was facing Noah

as he began to rifle through a tall file cabinet. “I know we discussed the basics over the phone earlier this week. But as I continued to go through the details of your aunt’s will, I found something in it that I need to discuss with you. A stipulation of sorts.”

“Stipulation?” Noah repeated, and Hugh nodded.

“Yes,” he said, pausing for only a moment as he pulled a file folder from the cabinet with a flourish. “Ah! There it is.”

He plopped the folder on the desk and flipped it open, grabbing a stack of papers from inside it. Noah caught a glimpse of the words “Will and Testament” emblazoned at the top before Hugh began flipping through the document.

“Your aunt loved this town very much,” Hugh explained, running his finger along the page as his eyes skimmed it. “It was her heart and her soul. And she wanted you to get to know Snowy Pine Ridge before you do anything with the property.”

“Get to know it?” Noah cocked his head to one side, confusion furrowing his brows as he worked to make sense of what Hugh was telling him. “How does someone ‘get to know’ a town? It’s not sentient.”

“Yes, well, in her own words...” The lawyer cleared his throat before he began reading directly from the document. “To ensure my nephew understands the full meaning of the gift I am bestowing upon him, and the magic of the place he will now own, it is my requirement that Noah Henderson spend a significant amount of time Snowy Pine Ridge before the property will fully transfer to him. He must reside here for no less than three congruent weeks, and in those weeks, he must spend sufficient time within the town, getting to know its people and its essence.””

Noah couldn’t stop the groan that pushed past his lips. “Ah. I see. And what exactly does she mean by sufficient time?”

Hugh lifted one shoulder, glancing up to meet Noah’s eyes. “It’s not spelled out in detail, but since you’re required to be here for at least three weeks, my recommendation would be to

spend as much time exploring the town as you possibly can. You might be surprised at how easy this place is to enjoy.”

Noah fought the urge to roll his eyes. He was sure that Hugh meant well, but there was no way the other man could possibly know exactly what this stipulation in the will would mean for Noah. Not only was the Christmas-filled atmosphere of the town the near antithesis of everything Noah enjoyed, but with the addition of the revelation that Mindy Harvey was living here as well? He couldn’t think of anything more likely to end in disaster than the two of them being stuck in such a small town together.

Although Mindy was the first—and only—woman he had ever loved, their relationship hadn’t ended very well. And if their interaction today was anything to go by, she certainly didn’t harbor any warm feelings toward him.

Hugh was still looking at Noah with an expectant look on his face, and Noah managed to muster up a small smile as he nodded weakly.

“Right,” he said, trying to inject an optimistic note into his voice. “I’m sure I’ll enjoy every moment of it.”

## CHAPTER FOUR

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Mindy swirled her glass of wine, careful not to let the pale liquid spill over the rim as she plopped down onto the couch next to Lacy. Shelley was on her other side, while Valerie Mitchell, Sarah, and Colette all sat cross legged on the floor at varying points along the coffee table. Valerie laughed softly as Gus snuggled up on her lap, and then all of the women looked at Mindy with obvious curiosity.

“So,” Sarah prompted, her eyes widening pointedly. “What happened when you went to the meeting? You were so vague on our group chat.”

“Derek said you were phenomenal.” Lacy beamed at her, and Mindy blushed. “He said you really let that new guy have it.”

Mindy took a sip of her wine, letting the delicious wine warm her a bit and give her courage before she spoke. She’d practiced her speech to her friends all day, wondering how she would convey to them everything that had happened without having to get into too much of her past with Noah. But now that she was in front of them, all the words she’d so tirelessly crafted flew from her mind.

“Well, I just asked him if he thought about how much the additional traffic was going to actually hurt the town, and then I spoke mostly to everyone else,” she said with a dismissive shrug, but Colette narrowed her eyes.

“From what I heard, you really went in on him.” Colette took a sip of her own wine. “Louise was at the meeting too,

and when I saw her at Frosty's Shack later, she told me that the guy looked like he was going to have a heart attack."

"Rudolph said you barely let him get a word in," Shelley quipped, her voice filled with approval.

"Well, I had a lot to say, and I wanted to get it all out. I just didn't want Noah to charm everyone in the room and win them over before they thought everything through," Mindy explained, an image of her ex-boyfriend flashing through her mind. "It's something he's always been good at. He might be a bit stiff and formal sometimes, but he's got a way of winning people over when he wants to."

"Wait." Sarah frowned. "What do you mean 'it's something he's always been good at'? Do you know him?"

Mindy hadn't realized how loaded with meaning those words apparently were, and she winced internally as all five pairs of eyes landed on her. Knowing that there was no way out of fessing up to the truth, she took two more long sips of wine, emptying her glass before leveling her gaze back at her friends.

"Yeah, I do know him. He's my ex-boyfriend," she admitted, chewing on her lower lip.

"Oh, wow. Like, 'dated for one semester in college and you barely remember him' boyfriend?" Shelley prompted.

"Or 'fell madly in love until the two of you broke each other's hearts and now no one else you date will ever compare' kind of boyfriend?" Valerie added as she scratched Gus behind the ear.

Mindy was suddenly very sad that she'd finished off the rest of her wine. She pulled a face as she admitted, "The second one."

Small gasps sounded throughout the room, and Colette leaned forward, setting her wine glass down on the coffee table.

"Tell us everything," she demanded, plopping her elbows up beside her wine glass and resting her chin in her hands.

Mindy's other friends all chimed in with a chorus of agreement, enthusiastically settling in as they turned toward Mindy and waited for her to continue. She took a deep breath, giving herself a moment to organize her thoughts before she started speaking.

Although she had gotten to be good friends with all of the women in the room, she'd never talked much about her prior relationship with Noah. Not that there was anything particularly scandalous about it, but it just wasn't something she often felt like discussing. It had been her first and only real heartbreak, and it was something that she had tried to leave in the past, for the most part.

But even though it felt like poking at a wound that had never quite healed, she felt safe sharing these kinds of things with her tight group of friends. After all, if she couldn't trust them with this stuff, then who could she trust?

"We met eight years ago," she said with a sigh, the images of those first happy days bringing a faint smile to her lips. "And it was an almost instant attraction. We were inseparable for the first year, moving in with each other not long after that. We lived together for three years, and we even talked about getting married."

She swallowed, a sudden rush of memories making a lump form in her throat. But she pushed past it.

"I thought we were going to get married eventually," Mindy explained slowly, working to control the emotions as they coursed through her. "But then things started to fall apart. Neither of us made enough time for each other, and we grew apart. So instead of getting engaged, we broke up instead."

Small inhales filled the room, and as Mindy looked around at her friends, she saw that they were all wearing matching expressions of sympathy and sadness.

"Oh, Min," Lacy breathed, setting a reassuring hand on Mindy's knee. "I'm so sorry. That sounds really tough."

"It was," Mindy admitted, pushing through the discomfort bubbling in her chest.

Along with the discomfort, she also felt a nearly overwhelming sense of gratitude as she looked at the women around her. They were incredible, and each one of them was looking at her with support and love brimming in their gazes. They also seemed to sense that Mindy wasn't ready to provide any additional details, so they didn't press her for more.

After a moment, Valerie cleared her throat.

"Well," she said with a conspiratorial grin. "Maybe the way you grilled him today at the meeting convinced everyone that his plan is going to be bad for our town, and he'll run away with his tail between his legs."

"I don't know if that's going to happen," Colette chimed in, brushing her strawberry blonde hair over her shoulder. "You know that Louise and Maisie are close, right?"

Everyone in the room nodded, and Mindy's brows drew together. Maisie worked as a secretary at Hugh Brockton's law firm, and although Mindy didn't know her well, she saw her at Frosty's Shack fairly often.

"Well, Maisie told Louise just today that she overheard Hugh talking to Noah. When Theresa passed away, she apparently put a clause in her will that in order to inherit anything at all, Noah has to live here in Snowy Pine Ridge for at least three weeks. And not just live here—he has to spend time out in the town to get familiar with it."

Mindy felt her eyes go wide. "What does that mean?"

"It means you're probably going to be seeing a lot more of him," Shelley said sympathetically. "For the next few weeks, at least."

Mindy's heart began to hammer as she thought about seeing him time and time again over the course of the next three weeks. There was a brief pause in the conversation, and the movement of Sarah cocking her head to the side grabbed Mindy's attention. She glanced at her best friend and noticed that Sarah's eyes had taken on a far-off quality and her nose was scrunched up. It was her "thinking face," the expression she normally wore when she was hatching some kind of plan.

“What is it?” Mindy asked, narrowing her eyes suspiciously.

“I’m thinking...” Sarah drew out the words hesitantly. “It might be a good idea for you to be the one to show Noah around town.”

Mindy immediately shook her head. “I don’t know if that’s a good idea.”

“Sure it is!” Lacy lit up, glancing between the two of them. “I think Sarah is on to something here. Considering the fact that you and Noah have a history, he’ll likely want to learn about the town from you more than anyone else. And who knows? Maybe you can convince him that his proposition is a bad one and get him to drop the idea of building that industrial complex.”

Mindy highly doubted that, but she didn’t say as much. Especially not since all of her friends were gazing at her with wide, hopeful eyes. She didn’t want to disappoint them, and more than that, she definitely wanted to save her town from the monstrosity of an idea that Noah had proposed earlier that day.

Everyone seemed to wait with bated breath as Mindy took a few seconds to consider Sarah’s proposal before finally letting out a sigh.

“Fine,” she agreed. “I’ll do it. I’ll reach out to him and volunteer to be his tour guide in Snowy Pine Ridge for as long as he’s here.”

Her friends all nodded excitedly, breaking into an animated conversation about how this was going to be great and how Mindy could use her past connection with Noah to get him to see reason.

But Mindy didn’t hear nearly any of it.

The only thing she could hear was the sound of her own heartbeat thundering in her ears as seven words repeated themselves in her head over and over in a loop.

*What did I just get myself into?*

\* \* \*

Noah had to fight the urge not to roll his eyes as he walked into the Warm and Bright Hotel. Like everything else in this town, it was decked out for Christmas. But this establishment had gone above and beyond anything else he had seen so far, and it was positively dripping with ornate lights, wreaths, and garlands.

He hadn't planned to stay in town this long, so he'd had to scramble for a place to stay after being informed of the stipulation in his aunt's will by Hugh.

"Can I help you?"

An elegant older woman behind the front desk greeted him with a smile, and he nodded politely to her.

"Yes," he said. "My name is Noah Henderson. I called just a short while ago to book a room."

"Ah, of course! It's lovely to meet you. I'm Evelyn."

She quickly checked him in and led him to a room on the second floor, telling him to let her know if he needed anything. Then she slipped out, leaving him alone in the room. Fortunately, Noah had initially planned to travel to New York for several days after visiting Snowy Pine Ridge in New Hampshire, so he had a suitcase with plenty of clothes with him. He would have to cancel his meetings in New York, but at least he had everything he would need for his unexpected stay in this little town.

He set his suitcase on the bed and began to unpack, carefully hanging his clothes in the closet. Although his movements were methodical, his thoughts were chaotic. His mind couldn't stop churning over the events of the day, and he kept flashing back to an image of Mindy and how she had looked when she'd stormed into the town hall meeting.

She'd been as beautiful as ever, even as her eyes had flashed with anger and dislike.

His phone let out a loud trill, announcing that he had an incoming call, interrupting Noah's thoughts. There was so much going on in his mind that he considered just letting it continue to ring, but it would be irresponsible to ignore a call. So he shook his head to clear it, then walked over and grabbed the cell phone from the table where he'd set it when Evelyn had brought him up to the room.

He caught sight of his father's name on the caller ID as he swiped across the screen to answer before bringing the phone to his ear. Noah didn't even have time to give the customary "hello" before his father began speaking.

"Noah." Brett Henderson's voice was as gruff and deep as ever. "How are things going in that town? Did you get everything squared away with the will?"

"Well..." Noah cleared his throat, running a hand over his dark hair as he sat down on the bed. "It wasn't as cut and dried as I hoped it would be. It turns out I'm going to have to be here a little longer than I expected."

Noah launched into an explanation of what Hugh had told him about the requirements of his aunt's will, as well as filling his father in on what had happened at the town hall meeting that morning.

He omitted the fact that Mindy had been the most vocal critic of the industrial complex, opting instead to just say that some of the business owners in town were skeptical and had asked him questions he hadn't been entirely prepared for. He wasn't quite sure why he kept that bit of information to himself for the time being, but he figured it didn't matter. His father had called to discuss business matters, not personal matters—and whatever complicated feelings Noah had about seeing Mindy again, they were very personal.

"Ah, Theresa." His father huffed a breath after Noah had finished speaking. "Somehow, I'm not surprised that your mother's sister would come up with a scheme like that for her will. Well, no matter. It shouldn't be a difficult requirement to meet. It looks like you'll just have to spend a bit more time in

the town then. I'll hold down the fort in the offices here in Boston while you're gone. Don't worry about that, kiddo."

Any time his father used a nickname for Noah, it sounded false and hollow, like he was doing it just because he thought he should and not because it was something that came naturally to him. And the 'kiddo' at the end of that sentence was no different.

Noah and his father had never had a close relationship in that way, despite the fact that Noah had started to work alongside his father in their family real estate business right out of college. They could discuss market trends, financial reports, and risk management for hours, but it always felt much more awkward if they tried to discuss personal matters —so they mostly just didn't.

He loved his father, even if the man was nearly impossible to impress. Which, of course, didn't stop Noah from doing everything in his power to win the man's approval. It had been like that his entire life.

"Thanks," he said. "According to Hugh Brockton, the lawyer handling the will, I need to get to know the town. So I'll have to spend some time doing that, whatever that means. But I can use the fact that I'll be stuck here as an opportunity to try to win more support for the industrial complex as well."

"Good. I trust that you'll handle it," his father answered before launching into the rest of what he'd called Noah to discuss.

Brett began filling Noah in on a few of their projects, and Noah suppressed a sigh over the fact that he couldn't be there to see them all through to fruition. But his father definitely didn't seem too bothered by the prospect of his extended absence, which Noah supposed was for the best.

When they finally ended the call, Noah let out a sigh. He was about to toss his cell phone on the bed so that he could finish unpacking, but before he could, the phone rang again. Assuming it was his father calling back to talk about something he'd forgotten, Noah didn't even glance at the screen before answering and bringing the device to his ear.

“Yeah? What did you forget?” he asked.

“Oh.” The surprised sounding voice that came through the speaker definitely didn’t belong to Noah’s dad. “Uh, sorry to contact you so late. I was just calling to let you know that someone volunteered to be your guide in Snowy Pine Ridge, but if it’s a bad time, I can call back tomorrow.”

Noah pulled the phone away from his ear, quickly confirming who he suspected to be on the other line before answering.

“Sorry, Hugh,” he said apologetically, “I thought you were someone else. You said I have an official tour guide?”

“Yes, yes,” the lawyer confirmed in his deep voice. “I just got off the phone with her.”

Noah wasn’t sure why, but a small knot of apprehension began to stir in his gut as he asked, “I see. And who is this stand-up citizen who volunteered?”

He somehow knew instinctively the name that Hugh was going to say before the lawyer said it, but it didn’t stop the words from hitting him like a shock to the chest.

“It’s... well, it’s Mindy Harvey. She owns a small business here in town,” Hugh explained. “You may have noticed that she was a bit, uh, agitated when she showed up to the meeting today. I figured this could be a good opportunity for you to smooth things over.”

“Right.” Noah scrubbed a hand over his face. “Are you sure this is a good idea? I can just show myself around the town, can’t I?”

“You *could*,” the lawyer answered. “But it’s probably better to have someone local show you around. That way, there will be confirmation from a third party that you actually followed the requirements of your aunt’s will in good faith. I know that Ms. Harvey might seem like an odd fit for the job, but she’s clearly invested in showing you around. I think that will only help you in the end.”

Noah couldn’t think of a good reason to deny the offer, and he couldn’t decide whether or not he wanted to anyway. Part

of him had perked up at the mention of Mindy's name and the realization that he would see her again. It felt a bit like playing with fire, but he didn't really have another option.

"Okay," he said after a moment. "Mindy will be my tour guide."

"Wonderful! I told her where you're staying. She'll be able to meet you at the hotel tomorrow after her bakery is closed for the day. I'll confirm the definitive time with her and text it to you."

"That sounds good." Noah nodded, his thoughts racing. "Thank you, Hugh."

The two men disconnected, and Noah tossed his phone onto the bed and blew out a long breath. Never in a million years would he have thought that Mindy would be the one who'd volunteer to show him around the town. He thought she'd made it pretty clear at the town hall meeting that she didn't want anything to do with him.

But maybe that wasn't the whole truth?

For a reason he couldn't entirely understand, that thought made his heart skip a beat.

Shaking it off, Noah quickly finished unpacking, then settled onto the bed, staring up at the ceiling. He glanced out the window at the snow-covered streets outside, shaking his head ruefully.

Whether he'd planned on it or not, Snowy Pine Ridge was going to be his home for the next few weeks. Mindy Harvey, the only woman he'd ever loved, was going to be the one showing him around the town.

And hopefully, it wouldn't all blow up in his face.

## CHAPTER FIVE

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Lacy rolled over in bed, catching a glimpse of her husband's eyes as they fluttered open.

"Good morning," she murmured, her voice quiet as Derek's gaze flickered to her.

"Morning," he replied, rolling over onto his side so that he was facing her. "Did you sleep okay?"

Lacy shrugged a shoulder. "Not too bad, but I woke up early and couldn't go back to sleep. I keep thinking about the annual party at St. Nick's Place. I want it to be perfect this year."

"It's perfect *every* year." He grinned at her as he propped himself up on his elbow. "If you haven't noticed, Christmas seems to be at its most magical here in Snowy Pine Ridge."

Unable to help herself, Lacy snorted a laugh and shook her head at her husband.

"What?" Derek protested. "I mean it. It might sound corny, but it's true. Just look at us and how we fell in love at Christmastime. So did Colette and Zach, Sarah and William, Matthew and Shelley..."

"All right, all right," she said with a chuckle, leaning up so that she could press a kiss to his cheek. "I get your point."

Derek smiled down at her, but before he could say anything else, the sound of Piper's voice came through the baby monitor that they still kept in her room, and both of them sat up.

“Looks like it’s about that time,” Lacy said with a grin, pausing just long enough to stretch out her back before throwing off the covers and slipping out of bed.

The two of them shuffled sleepily to their daughter’s room, which was right beside theirs. Piper was sitting up in her toddler bed, rubbing sleepily at her eyes.

“Good morning, sleepyhead,” Derek singsonged, catching their daughter’s attention as they stood in the doorway.

Piper, who was just about to turn two, turned her head toward them, her expression still a bit groggy from sleep.

“Dada,” she said, lifting her arms into the air in a clear bid for him to pick her up.

It was like this every morning, with them waiting for Piper to tell them which parent she’d like to have get her out of bed. And it was also a part of their routine that if you weren’t the chosen one, then you got saddled with breakfast duty.

Lacy looked up lovingly at her husband, pushing herself onto her tiptoes to press a quick kiss to his lips before he went to pick up their daughter.

“I’ll meet you two in the kitchen,” she said with a smile, and Derek nodded.

As she padded down the hall, their four dogs trailed after her. Fortunately, Moe, Curly, Sugar, and Pod were usually pretty quiet in the morning, so they never woke Piper up too early. But now that the household was starting to rouse for the morning, they were all eager for breakfast.

She fed the dogs first, then made her way over to the stove, beginning to heat up a pan to scramble some eggs. Derek and Piper came into the room a few minutes later, Piper babbling happily now that she was fully awake and could smell food in the air.

Derek placed her in her high chair, getting her situated with a bit of juice and her favorite sippy cup before walking over to Lacy.

“Need any help?” he asked as he came up behind her and wrapped his arms around her waist.

She shook her head as she snuggled into his touch as much as she could while still keeping an eye on the eggs.

“I’m almost done,” she answered, and he gave her cheek a swift kiss before walking over to the coffee pot to get it running.

A thought popped into Lacy’s mind, one that had been plaguing her off and on since she’d heard about the town hall meeting the day before.

“So,” she began, glancing over at Derek. “What are your thoughts on the whole Noah Henderson situation?”

“The guy from the meeting?” he asked, scrunching up his nose.

Aside from the few texts that they’d exchanged while the meeting was happening, they hadn’t talked about it more than that yet. Lacy had gone over to Mindy’s house with the other ladies as soon as Mindy had closed up the bakery for the day, so she and Derek hadn’t had a chance to talk over dinner like they usually did.

“Yeah, him.” She nodded, beginning to load up plates with the breakfast food she’d prepared. “What was your impression of him?”

“I don’t know. I mean, he seems like a smart, slick businessman, that’s for sure. But I’m hoping that he’ll see reason,” Derek told her. “Especially since most people at the meeting seemed to be pretty firmly against the idea after hearing Mindy go off on him.”

Lacy had to hide her grin, thankful for her husband’s perfect segue.

“Speaking of Mindy...” She turned off the burner so that the eggs wouldn’t overcook, then launched into a full rundown of everything that Mindy had told her and the other ladies the previous day.

Derek's eyes widened with interest as he listened, and he helped her finish up breakfast before they took their plates and Piper's over to the dining table and began to eat.

"So," Lacy prompted when she'd finished her story. "Do you think it'll help? Do you think Mindy will be able to get him to see the beauty in this place?"

Derek considered for a moment before giving a single, quick nod. "I hope so. If anyone can, it's probably her."

Lacy smiled at her husband, agreeing with him wholeheartedly as the two of them took turns feeding their daughter and also themselves. A comfortable silence fell between them, interrupted only by the soft babbling of Piper who sat between them.

"I'm not from here," she said after a while, softly enough that she wasn't entirely sure Derek had heard her until he glanced her way with a quizzical look.

"I know. But what do you mean by that?"

"Well, I think maybe I was a bit like Noah seems to be at first," Lacy admitted thoughtfully. "I just wanted to get here, deal with the property I'd inherited, and get out. But then I met the people of Snowy Pine Ridge. I met *you*. And I didn't just fall in love with you, I fell in love with the town. Maybe that will happen for Noah too."

"Let's hope so," Derek agreed, and the two shared a soft, warm smile.

As she sat there with her husband and her daughter, Lacy decided that was exactly what she was going to do. She would hope that Snowy Pine Ridge would do the same thing for Noah that it had done for her. That it would find a way to remind him what the important things in life truly were.

\* \* \*

The lock on the door slid into place with a click as Mindy closed up the bakery for the evening, turning to wave goodbye to Allison before striding down the freshly shoveled sidewalk

toward her home. After glancing at her phone to check the time, she realized that it was a little later than she'd anticipated, and she let out a sigh. Now she'd have to rush to get changed before Noah showed up at her house.

Hugh Brockton had texted her earlier that day, confirming what time she would be closing up and where he should tell Noah to meet her. Not wanting him to see the bakery just yet, Mindy had gone with the first other thought that had popped into her head and sent Hugh her address. It was something that she was doubting now, wondering if maybe she should have just had her ex-boyfriend meet her at the town hall, or Hugh's office, or even Sweet Thing before they got started on their tour. She would have preferred somewhere neutral, and she was a bit annoyed that she hadn't thought this through more clearly.

"Well," she said aloud to herself as her cute, small house came into view down the street. "There's nothing that can be done about that now, is there?"

The moment she opened the front door, Gus began jumping around her heels, making her chuckle.

"Hey, buddy," Mindy said fondly, stopping long enough to scratch him behind his ears in welcome.

He was still wearing his sweater from earlier that morning, and he pranced around in it proudly as Mindy walked through the house, following close on her heels. She let him out into the backyard so he could do his business while she changed, and the moment Gus was outside, she quickly made her way toward her bedroom, wrenching open the closet door and rifling through her clothes.

Not wanting to scare Noah off with the loud prints she usually wore, she searched and searched until she found a plain black sweater and skinny jeans. She tugged them on and then sprinted to the back door to let Gus back in.

Mindy hurriedly put her pup's dinner in his bowl, telling herself that as soon as she was done, she'd do a quick refresh on her makeup. But when a knock sounded at the door, she realized she was out of time.

She paused just long enough to smooth down the ringlet curls that she knew were frizzy and untamed around her face before striding toward the entryway. When she pulled the door open, she was unsurprised to find Noah standing on the other side of it.

As much as Mindy hated to admit it, he looked handsome. His dark hair was, as always, styled perfectly away from his face with just the right amount of product. And his green eyes shone brightly as a hesitant smile tugged up the corner of his full lips.

“Hey,” he said awkwardly as he shifted from foot to foot. “Your house is cute.”

“Thanks,” Mindy replied, trying her best to keep her own nerves from leaking into her tone. “I just need to grab my purse, if you want to step inside?”

She took a few steps to the side, allowing Noah to walk past her into the entryway of her home. Gus, who must have finished his dinner, was standing in the hallway. Upon seeing Noah, the dog gave three loud barks.

“Gus?” Mindy frowned, furrowing her brow in confusion as she walked toward her pup.

“I’m assuming that’s your dog?” Noah cleared his throat, and when Mindy glanced over her shoulder at him, he was eyeing Gus with open trepidation.

She nodded, walking toward the furry little animal with her arms outstretched, but rather than letting her pick him up, Gus darted between her legs. He gave Noah a little growl as he ran past him, disappearing into the living room and hiding under the couch.

“Huh,” Mindy murmured, putting her hands on her hips as she looked at the couch where Gus had disappeared. “That’s so strange. He usually loves people.”

“Yeah, well.” Noah grimaced. “I’ve never really been great with dogs.”

She eyed the tall, well-dressed man, recalling that he’d once told her that his parents had never gotten a single pet for

their family. It hadn't made sense to her then, and it still didn't make much sense to her. She had never understood how someone could be "not a pet person." As far as she was concerned, most pets were wonderful, including Gus.

"I'll be back in just a sec," she told Noah, not bothering to comment on the obvious distrust between him and Gus. She headed into the cozy den, where her coat and purse were both propped on a reading chair.

Mindy shrugged her coat over her shoulders and draped the purse's strap across her body, and by the time she stepped back out into the entryway, Noah had moved from the doorway to stare at the pictures on her wall. He was looking at a photo of Mindy and her parents—it had been taken on one of the few vacations she'd taken with her folks during her adult years, when they'd gone to Cape Cod to do a seafood tour. The picture brought back fond memories, despite the fact that her parents had only wanted to discuss Mindy's career the entire time, as usual.

"How are your parents?" Noah asked absentmindedly, throwing a glance over his shoulder at her.

"They're fine," Mindy answered, and her tone came out a bit more clipped than she had intended.

She hadn't wanted to acknowledge their past, not if she could help it. And yet, here Noah was, asking questions as if he wasn't a complete stranger to her now. They hadn't spoken in years, and she could only imagine all of the ways that he had changed.

"Want to get going?" she asked, nodding toward the door and not waiting for him to respond as she strode forward and pulled it open.

Mindy stepped out into the cold, waiting for Noah to join her before closing the door behind him and locking up. They began walking down the sidewalk, Noah's movements a little bit delayed as he tried to read which direction she was going to go. An awkward silence descended between the two of them, and as they turned off the residential street a few minutes later and the downtown area came into view, Mindy had to shake

herself internally with a reminder that her task was to make Noah come around on the charm of her small town. Surely she wouldn't be able to convince him that his plan to build a massive industrial complex here was a terrible idea without *talking* to him.

"So," she began as they turned onto Main Street. "This is Snowy Pine Ridge."

"I'd figured that much out for myself," Noah half muttered, and Mindy glanced at him, not able to stop herself from rolling her eyes.

Her heart thudded heavily at the sight of the all-too-familiar smirk that pulled at his lips, the one that she'd used to kiss away every time he flashed it at her.

*No, no. Absolutely not,* she thought as she forcefully banished all memories of any kissing they'd done in the past from her mind.

"We're coming into downtown," she tried again, grateful that the cold nipping at her cheeks would disguise the blush creeping into them. "This is where a lot of the local businesses are located. I'm going to take you to a couple that are staples."

"Will you be showing me yours?"

His question caught her off guard, and Mindy shot a look at him. She hadn't said anything at all about being a business owner, and she began to wonder if he'd been keeping tabs on her all these years. Noah must have read the question in her eyes because he quickly explained.

"When Hugh called me yesterday to say that someone had volunteered to show me around, he mentioned that you run a business in town." He shrugged one shoulder to finish his sentence.

"Oh," Mindy said, still feeling a bit flustered despite his incredibly reasonable explanation. "No, that won't be one of the places we'll visit today."

"What kind of business is it?" he asked, and when she didn't immediately answer, she could hear the grin in his voice

as he continued. “I bet it’s a bakery. Or some kind of artisanal café.”

She felt his eyes on her as they walked, and she didn’t look at him, wondering if her blush was now so blatant that it couldn’t even be disguised as the cold.

“It *is* a bakery, isn’t it?”

Mindy caved and glanced at him, finding a smug smile lighting up his ridiculously handsome face. And once again, her heart gave a powerful, painful tug.

“It’s a bakery,” she admitted sheepishly, and he rewarded her with an even larger smile.

“I knew it. That apron you wore when you showed up at the town hall meeting yesterday was a dead giveaway.” He chuckled, but then his expression turned more serious as he added, “I knew you’d have your own bakery one day. You were always such an incredible baker.”

Not quite sure what to do with that compliment, Mindy just shrugged, then quickly changed the subject as she pointed to a large building up ahead.

“That’s the ice-skating rink,” she explained as they walked toward it. “It’s owned by a man named Rudolph Hutchins. Shelley Martinez, who moved here a few years ago, was once an Olympic figure skater, and she works with Rudolph at the rink. She offers classes there for kids, and plenty of people from surrounding towns travel to Snowy Pine Ridge just to be able to skate. There’s also an arcade in the building, and—”

She led Noah inside, then cut off abruptly, blinking in surprise. Chaos had erupted around them the moment they’d walked through the door, and the sounds of whirring machinery and men yelling back and forth filled the air. Mindy stopped in her tracks, staring wide-eyed at the scene before her.

The rink was completely bare, not a single speck of ice to be found. And in the distance, through the large open archway that led to the arcade, she could see that every single machine was dark.

“Hey, Mindy,” a voice called from her right, and she turned to see Shelley waving at her as the petite woman approached.

“What’s going on?” Mindy asked, her gaze darting from her friend to the disaster zone that had once been a beautiful ice rink.

“Oh, Rudolph needs to reseal everything. So we had to melt it down and whatnot. It’ll be back up and running before too long. Rudolph didn’t want to miss out on the holiday skaters and the business they bring, so it’ll definitely reopen before Christmas, don’t worry.”

Shelley glanced at Noah, clearly putting two and two together in her head and figuring out who he was. Her gaze shifted back to Mindy, who nodded subtly to confirm her friend’s silent question.

Mindy introduced the two of them, and as Shelley and Noah shook hands, her mind began to scramble. She had hoped to impress Noah with the town’s state-of-the-art rink, and had also hoped that they might catch a class while it was in session so that she could show him how Shelley brought years of figure skating experience to her teaching. But now? She could only imagine how drab and decidedly *unimpressive* everything looked to him.

One of the men working on the rink called out to Shelley, grabbing her attention. With an apologetic smile, she excused herself, leaving Mindy and Noah alone once more.

“Well.” Mindy stuffed her hands into her pockets, feeling a bit deflated. “I guess we should head on to the next thing I wanted to show you.”

Noah nodded, although her worries were confirmed by the fact that he didn’t look excited about the next stop on their tour at all.

*Darn it, she thought. This isn’t off to a great start. So much for making him fall in love with all the things I adore about Snowy Pine Ridge.*

She was determined to turn this tour around, but unfortunately, things only went downhill after their inauspicious start.

The next place she took him to was Winter Run Racing, Derek and Lacy's dogsledding business. But when they got there, the sign on the office front door was flipped to CLOSED. She heard Lacy's voice around the back, and when she and Noah walked around the large building to see what was going on, Lacy explained that the dogs had gotten into some food scraps that they shouldn't have. And while they would all recover just fine, they were having some very unfortunate side effects that meant they wouldn't be able to offer any sled rides for a day or two.

Feeling more discouraged by the second, Mindy took Noah to a quaint little antique shop that specialized in novelty decorations and toys. At least Happy Memories Antique Shop was actually open for business, unlike their first two stops had been—but while they were browsing, one of the vintage animatronics set on a large display table began sparking. A few of the sparks landed on Noah's coat, leaving several tiny burn holes before he and Mindy were ushered out of the building so the owner could get the toy unplugged.

They went to the town square, but although a massive Christmas tree stood in the middle, it hadn't yet been decorated for the upcoming tree lighting ceremony, so it looked a bit plain and unremarkable.

Noah never said anything negative or rude about the less than stellar tour she was giving him, but Mindy couldn't help but feel like she was failing. She had set out to impress him, to show him the magic of this town, but instead, she felt as if she were just confirming his clear belief that the town was a boring, unsophisticated place.

Every single thing she tried to show him ended up being even more disastrous than the last, and by the time a few hours had passed, Mindy was feeling so defeated that there was a lump in the back of her throat. She cast about for anything at all that she could say, any topic to bring up that would

hopefully steer Noah's thoughts away from the chaos of the evening, but only one thing came to mind.

She had successfully avoided referencing their past for the most part, navigating the conversation away from it any time Noah had even hinted that he might be about to bring it up. But now, with nothing else to say and nothing to lose, she pushed past her nerves and began talking.

"So, how have you been?" she asked, her voice a bit strained. "How is your dad? Your mom? How's work?"

Noah glanced at her sideways, one eyebrow raising skeptically. Clearly, he'd noticed the fact that she'd avoided talk of their past like the plague up until now, but he didn't comment on it as he answered.

"Things are going great, actually," he said, a bit of a smile tugging at the corner of his lips. "I'm still in Boston, working with Dad."

"How's the world of real estate investing?" she asked, giving him a smile of her own and Noah chuckled.

"It's good. It keeps me busy."

He reached up, raking a gloved hand through his dark hair as he spoke. It caused a few locks of his well-styled hair to fall across his forehead, and a memory popped unbidden into Mindy's mind. Running his hands through his hair had always been a nervous tic of Noah's, and she could recall how it had felt all those years ago to reach up and brush the strands that fell out of place away from his face. Her fingers tingled from the memory of it, like they were itching to repeat the gesture now, and she shook herself internally.

"So you're enjoying it?" she asked, her voice a bit shaky. She hoped he wouldn't notice.

Noah nodded. "Yeah, I am. My dad can be a bit tough, but I'm pretty sure you already knew that."

The corner of his mouth tugged up in a wry smile, and Mindy laughed and nodded. During the entire time they had dated, she wasn't sure she had ever seen Brett do more than

crack a quick smile, and that had only been because he was sharing the news of a big acquisition.

“What about you?” Noah asked as he threw a pointed glance at the town that surrounded them. “What brought you to Snowy Pine Ridge? How did you end up here, of all places?”

Mindy shrugged. “I came here for a girls’ trip years and years ago, and I fell in love with it then. I knew that when it came time to open up my own bakery, I wanted to do it here. And I’m glad I did, because the people in Snowy Pine Ridge have been wonderful. The whole town has a happy, friendly vibe, especially around the holidays. It’s the most magical time of the year here.”

Noah scrunched up his nose a little, and she remembered how disillusioned he had always been about the holidays. She rolled her eyes at him lightheartedly, feeling a wave of nostalgia wash over her as one of their familiar conversations began to play out in her memory.

“I know, I know,” she said with a chuckle. “I don’t need the big speech.”

He arched a brow at her. “You already know what I’m going to say, do you?”

Mindy nodded. “Likely the same thing you’ve always said, which is that the only thing Christmas is good for is corporate profits. I just happen to disagree with you.”

He chuckled. “You always were more of a dreamer than me.”

There was something in his tone that she couldn’t quite identify, and it made her heart beat harder. They glanced at each other as they walked, the air between them growing charged with unspoken words. Her palms began to sweat a bit despite the cold, and when they finally turned down the street that led to her house, she shook her head, ridding her mind of errant thoughts.

“Well,” she said, glancing toward her front walkway. “I know today didn’t exactly go according to plan, but there’s

still a lot to see in the town. And I know you need to spend a certain amount of time exploring it, so do you want to meet up again tomorrow?"

"Why? So this town can actually kill me like it tried to do all evening?" Noah said, making her stomach drop before she realized he was joking. He hesitated for a moment, his gaze roving over her face, and Mindy had to fight the urge to squirm beneath the weight of his familiar green eyes. "Tomorrow it is."

"Okay. You can come by my place again, and we'll go from there."

He nodded, and the two of them stood awkwardly on the sidewalk in front of her house for a moment. She had no idea what the normal thing to do in this scenario would be. Should she go in for a hug? A handshake? Neither?

Finally, Mindy settled on giving Noah a little wave before beginning the trek up to her door. About halfway up the walk, she threw a glance over her shoulder, surprised to find Noah still standing at her gate, waiting for her to get safely into her front door.

"You don't have to watch me go in, you know," she said with a faint laugh, and Noah shrugged.

"Old habits," he explained, and Mindy felt her cheeks grow warm.

She got to her door, feeling his eyes on her the entire time she was working to unlock it. When the lock finally clicked and the handle began to turn, Mindy turned around before she could overthink it. Noah had just started walking away, apparently satisfied that no one was going to come grab her on her own doorstep.

"Noah," she called out. He stopped and turned to look at her expectantly. "I'll show you the bakery tomorrow if you want. You can meet me there instead of here."

His bright, enthusiastic smile and a quick nod was his only answer before he turned and began making his way down the street in the direction of the Warm and Bright Hotel. Mindy's

heartbeat picked up, making her face flush even hotter as she slipped into her house.

“I have to show him the bakery eventually,” she said to herself.

Gus appeared in the entryway at the sound of the door closing, his whole body wriggling with the force of his excited tail wagging as he rushed toward her. She scooped him up and held him to her chest, scratching behind his ears as he snuggled against her.

“Isn’t that right, buddy?” Mindy continued, happy to be able to at least talk to her dog about it. “I don’t have very long to show Noah that Snowy Pine Ridge is worth preserving just the way it is, and today didn’t go exactly as planned. So I have to show him the bakery, right?”

Gus’s tongue flicked out, lapping at the tip of her nose, and she laughed, taking that as agreement. And even if Mindy didn’t entirely believe her own words, she decided not to look any closer at the way the thought of seeing Noah standing in the center of Baking Fiend made her heart race. She’d choose to focus on the fact that this was all for the good of the town.

And she definitely wouldn’t give any mind to how good it had felt to be around him again.

No, Mindy would not be thinking about that at all.

## CHAPTER SIX

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Noah squinted against the bright rays of the rising sun as he made his way from the hotel toward Baking Fiend. When his phone had pinged with a message after he'd returned to his room the previous night and Mindy's name had popped up on the screen, his heart had begun to pound. But the message had been a simple one.

*MINDY: Baking Fiend opens at 7. Get there a little before then, I have a surprise for you.*

Before he'd been able to respond, a second text had come through containing the bakery's address. He'd groaned a bit at the early hour, but still, he'd texted back right away to let her know he'd be there. It wasn't that he wasn't used to waking up early. In fact, most of his days had begun at five o'clock in the morning for the last few years. But he had been hoping that he'd be able to catch up on a bit of sleep while in Snowy Pine Ridge.

Apparently, Mindy had other plans for him.

Noah was shocked at how many people were out and about at this time of day, several of them giving him friendly smiles as he made his way through the town. In Boston, people mostly ignored everyone around them. They definitely didn't spare a smile and an errant "good morning" for a stranger walking down the road. He couldn't quite figure out which he preferred, even if he did have to admit that the smiles and the kind words were making him have to fight the urge to plaster a smile on his face.

As the bakery came into view, though, Noah could no longer fight off his grin. It was the same building he'd noticed when he'd first arrived in town, and the thought occurred to him that he had been so close to Mindy that day without even realizing it. It almost felt a bit like fate—or it would if he believed in such sentimental things.

He dismissed those thoughts as he strode toward the door. The sign on the window was still turned to CLOSED, but when he approached the bakery, it was easy to see Mindy on the other side of the glass, darting back and forth as she got things ready for the day. He raised a fist, rapping it against the door lightly to get her attention.

Her blonde curls bobbed as her head snapped up, and a slow, almost unconscious smile tugged at the corners of her lips as she waved him into the bakery. Noah decided not to pay attention to the way that smile lit up her face, or the way his heart beat a little faster at the sight of it as he pulled the door open and stepped inside.

Immediately, he was wrapped in a cocoon of delicious scents. The aromas of cinnamon, blueberry, vanilla, and apple swirled in the air, making his mouth water. Noah had to fight to stop himself from raising his nose toward the ceiling and taking a deep sniff.

Instead, he turned his attention to his surroundings, taking in the retro black and white tile, the mismatched wrought iron tables and chairs, and the charming pastel blue of the walls, with prints and pictures that all had a distinctly Parisian theme. The space was small, but even he couldn't deny its charm, or the fact that the atmosphere of the bakery was so overwhelmingly *Mindy*.

“So,” she said from behind the counter, spreading her arms out to the sides to gesture to the space around them. “What do you think?”

“I can definitely tell you decorated it,” he answered, giving her a wink to let her know he was just teasing.

Mindy rolled her eyes at him and shook her head, chuckling as she walked toward one of the large ovens in the

kitchen area.

“Go ahead and sit down,” she said, pointing to one of the tables nearest to the front counter. “I’ll have your surprise in just a second.”

He did as he was told, eyeing the display case as he walked past it. Mindy had always been phenomenal in the kitchen, and as he looked at the beautifully decorated pastries in the case before him, he realized she’d only gotten better with the passing years. Everything inside the pastry case looked phenomenal.

“What’s the surprise?” he asked, plopping down onto a chair and scooting it closer to the table.

Mindy took a second to answer, and he glanced toward the kitchen, trying to see what she was doing, but her body blocked his view of whatever she was doing with her hands. A moment later, she turned around, holding an ornate serving tray that had about five pastries on it. They were all different, but each one was beautiful and intricate.

“I made you a sampler,” she said with a smile, coming out from the back and setting the serving tray down in front of him. “A couple of my regulars’ favorites, a couple of mine, and something new that I want to try out and haven’t put on the menu yet.”

Noah’s eyes raked hungrily over the offerings before him, and his mouth watered as he wondered where he should dig in.

“What are they?” he asked, his stomach giving an embarrassing little growl that Mindy, thankfully, ignored.

“This one is a bear claw,” she said, pointing to the twisted pastry that smelled strongly of cinnamon and brown sugar. “Then you have a morning bun, a strawberry galette, the blueberry crumble muffin, and something I want to try out—a chocolate, pistachio, and mint croissant.”

“These are incredible,” he murmured, entirely unable to keep the awe out of his voice as he plucked the bear claw from the tray, deciding that it’d be better to sample each item and just work his way down the line of pastries.

Noah took a bite of the bear claw, and the flavor of it exploded across his tongue. He couldn't help it, his eyes closed of their own volition and a small groan of delight found its way to the back of his throat. He couldn't imagine any of the others being better than this as he savored the rich, cinnamon infused treat.

But when he moved on to the next item on the tray, it was even better than the bear claw. He chewed slowly, finding himself in genuine awe of the talent the woman before him possessed. He glanced at Mindy, who was standing near the counter, hands pressed to her lips as she watched him with a bit of trepidation.

"Min," he murmured, unable to keep the appreciation from his voice. "These are incredible. Mind-blowing. Truly."

Her brow creased, and her brown eyes shone as she cocked her head to the side, her blonde ringlets glinting in the light.

"Really?" she asked, clearly worried that he'd just been appeasing her.

But Noah didn't have a chance to give her any more positive feedback as he took a bite of the strawberry galette, because it was so good that it struck him entirely speechless. Mindy must have noted his reaction and recognized it for what it truly was, and she grinned.

"You know," he said around a bite of pastry, "you could make a killing owning a bakery like this in Boston."

"I do just fine here," she answered, and he thought he caught a hint of defensiveness in her tone.

"I'm sure you do," Noah amended quickly, worried that he'd offended her. "I meant it when I said this was amazing. But, well..."

His words trailed off as he tried to decide how to phrase what he wanted to say next.

"Well, what?" she prompted, and he could feel her bristling.

“It’s just that this town is so small,” he said, furrowing his brows as he tried to make sense of why she would be offended by him telling her that she’d be successful in a place even bigger than where she was now. “And I know I saw another bakery not far from here when I pulled into Snowy Pine Ridge the other day. In a town this size, the competition has to have an impact on you. And you told me that you only got established a couple years ago. If that bakery has been here longer, then it can’t be easy to drum up customers in a town as well-established and loyal as this. Clearly, your pastries speak for themselves—”

“They do,” Mindy interrupted, and now Noah didn’t need to guess whether or not he’d offended her. It was clear as day that he had. “And I’m going to cut you off right there. Because, yes, it was hard to come here and get everything off the ground, but I can already tell you have the wrong impression of the type of town Snowy Pine Ridge is. Because never once did the people here make me feel like I didn’t belong, or like I didn’t have a place among them. And the other bakery? My ‘competition’?” She made air quotes around the word. “The owner is one of my absolute best friends and has been since very shortly after I opened Baking Fiend. We collaborate with each other. Learn from each other. Run deals that bolsters each other’s businesses.”

Noah swallowed, the bite of delicious food turning to ash in his mouth as he realized just how grievously he’d gotten things wrong.

“*That* is the kind of town Snowy Pine Ridge is,” Mindy continued, narrowing her eyes at him. “And that’s something you would have realized if you hadn’t come in here with your own preconceived notions of what was wrong with this place and how to make it more like your precious Boston.”

He tried to speak, but he ended up just opening his mouth and gaping at her as his mind scrambled for what to say. Mindy glanced at the clock on the wall and shook her head, a bit of her anger seeming to deflate.

“Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have to open up the store.” She paused for a second, tightening up her apron strings and

smoothing her hands down the front of it. “You can stay and enjoy your pastries for as long as you’d like.”

Noah still couldn’t figure out what to say to salvage the situation as she headed toward the front door and turned the sign from CLOSED to OPEN. The moment that the door was unlocked, a customer appeared. Noah recognized him as the gruff man from the town hall meeting two days prior, and he listened in as Mindy greeted the white-haired man with a friendly smile.

“The usual today, Rudolph?” she asked, all the anger draining from her face as she grinned warmly at her customer and situated herself behind the counter.

“Yup, you got it,” the old man grunted as he approached the register, fishing out his wallet from the pocket of his faded blue jeans. “Where’s Allison?”

Rudolph glowered in Noah’s direction when he noticed him at the table, and Noah tried not to shift uncomfortably in his seat.

“She’s off today,” Mindy answered the older man, sounding chipper as she rang Rudolph up and began putting a bear claw in a pastry bag for him.

“Hm.” Rudolph harrumphed, his eyes still shooting daggers at Noah as he handed over his payment and took the bag that Mindy offered him.

The old man didn’t say anything else as he took his bear claw and headed out the door. Noah almost commented on it, but before he could break the strained silence between himself and Mindy, a steady stream of customers began to pour in. Mindy busied herself greeting and serving each person who approached the counter, and Noah tucked back into his pastries.

He watched as she worked, noting the way that her entire face transformed with joy as she tended to the people who came through the door. She bustled from the register to the display case to the kitchen in the back with an ease and

confidence that he knew he shouldn't find surprising, but he did. Mindy was in her element here.

Noah didn't completely understand what she'd meant when she'd ranted at him earlier, or why she'd been so against the idea of opening a bakery somewhere like Boston. He'd meant what he'd said, that she would make a killing there even more than she clearly was here. A place like this, with this kind of atmosphere and her obvious talent, would have a line out the door every day. He couldn't wrap his head around why someone would want to stay in a town like Snowy Pine Ridge when they could find even more success and prosperity in a big city.

But as he continued to watch Mindy work, he started to understand just how much joy this job brought her. And she definitely hadn't been kidding when she'd said the town had welcomed her. Because the people that came into the bakery absolutely beamed at her, and she seemed to know every single person by name.

There was a moment, just as he was finishing with the final pastry on the serving tray, when Mindy's deep brown eyes found his. Something stirred in his chest as she didn't look away, holding his gaze as if daring him to say something else about how she'd be more successful in a bigger city. And Noah had to admit that maybe she'd had a point. Because he could clearly see how much she was thriving in this small town, and how much she seemed to fit in seamlessly.

He may not understand it now, but could he someday? At the end of the three weeks, would he be able to see the town as she did?

Noah blinked at the sudden, surprising thought, reminding himself that it didn't matter. It was all well and good for Mindy to love her life in this small town, but that didn't mean Noah had to embrace Snowy Pine Ridge the way she had. And it didn't change the fact that he had come here to accomplish a task, regardless of his personal feelings. He needed to stay focused on that.

\* \* \*

As the flow of morning customers continued, Mindy shot a glance in Noah's direction, finding him looking down at his phone as his gaze scanned the screen. The words that he'd spoken to her earlier flashed through her mind again, and she found her heart rate spiking with another wave of irritation.

When she'd invited him to the bakery, it had been her hope that seeing how well she'd been able to carve out a space for herself in the community would make him realize just how open-hearted and welcoming the town was. But somehow, he'd only ended up focusing on how she could be even more successful somewhere else.

It wasn't as though Mindy was unaware of that fact. She knew that her food was good, which was why she'd been so confident coming into such a tight-knit town and trying to make a name for herself. And she wasn't entirely surprised that Noah's first thought was that she could do and achieve more. He'd always been that way, constantly looking forward to the next big challenge, the next success. Never really stopping to appreciate how far he had come and the work that had gotten him there along the way.

But Mindy had definitely been disappointed that it had been his first thought, just because it showed how much work she still had to do to convince him that Snowy Pine Ridge was perfect exactly the way that it was—small-town charm and all.

Someone at the register cleared their throat, snapping Mindy out of her spiraling thoughts as she wrenched her gaze away from Noah and turned toward the source of the sound. Shelley and Colette stood in front of her, both of them wearing matching smug smiles as their eyes flicked from Noah to Mindy.

"Oh, hey, guys," she said, plastering a smile on her face that she knew they would see right through. "What can I get for you?"

“You can get us some details,” Shelley muttered under her breath, quietly enough that Noah wouldn’t hear.

Colette snorted and elbowed Shelley in the side before rattling off an order for the both of them. Mindy rang them up and took their payment, readying herself to get everything packed up when Noah stood and caught her attention.

“Can I help?” he asked, and she noticed that he was shifting from foot to foot, looking almost nervous.

She couldn’t stop her mouth from dropping open in surprise as she blinked at him slowly.

“You want to... help behind the counter?” she asked, completely unable to keep the astonishment from leaking into her voice.

Noah nodded. “You’re running back and forth, and it’s the least I can do.”

He shrugged one shoulder, as if the offer itself wasn’t the most out of character thing she’d ever heard him do.

Not that Noah wasn’t helpful. He always had been. But his particular brand of help had usually included hiring someone to do the things that they’d needed done around the house, rather than actually doing them himself. He was more of a corporate suit kind of guy than a hands-on guy. But maybe that had changed?

“Sure,” Mindy said hesitantly, pointing toward the wall of aprons on hooks. “Grab any apron you want, and you can help me pack things up.”

She glanced at her friends, noticing that the two of them were sharing a pointed look as Noah did as he was instructed before coming to stand at her side, looking a bit lost.

“They ordered a blueberry crumble muffin,” she explained, “a chocolate croissant, and a couple lattes. I’ll get the drinks if you pack up the food?”

“That works.” He gave a nod before turning toward the display case.

Noah looked so out of place, the turquoise and white polka dotted apron looking comically garish against the freshly ironed button-up shirt and pressed black trousers he was wearing. And as Mindy glanced down, she had to stifle a laugh as she caught sight of his perfectly polished dress shoes.

*Those will be absolutely covered in flour in less than five minutes*, she thought to herself, firing up the espresso machine as she began to make Shelley and Colette's lattes. She kept glancing over her shoulder, telling Noah which shelf the correct pastries were on and which bags to put them in when she found him just staring at the display case looking lost.

When the drinks were done, she found him struggling to pick a muffin up with the tongs.

"Here," she said, chuckling a bit as she reached forward to take the tongs from him. "Go ahead and give them their drinks, I've got this."

He nodded, clearly a bit perturbed that he hadn't been able to get everything packed up for her, then did as she had asked. Mindy made quick work of loading up the muffin and the croissant, closing up the bag with a flourish before crossing to where Shelley and Colette stood.

Her friends lingered as Noah helped Mindy take care of the remaining customers who had come in as part of the usual morning rush. Once things slowed down, the two women gave her a look, nodding toward the door in a way that made it clear they wanted a quick word with her.

There weren't any new customers lining up yet, so Mindy finally had a second to spare away from the counter.

"I'll be right back," she said to Noah, giving him a little smile. "If anyone else needs anything, you can just yell for me and I'll come back to ring them up."

He nodded, still shifting nervously from foot to foot. There was something about seeing Noah so clearly out of his element that made her heart swell, their previous argument long forgotten as she followed her friends toward the front door.

“So...” Colette prompted as they all stepped outside the door shut behind them.

The cold air nipped at Mindy’s nose, and she stuffed her hands into the pockets of her apron, glad that she’d chosen a thick wool sweater that morning when getting dressed.

“So, what?” she asked, feigning innocence as she widened her eyes at her friends.

“Oh, you know exactly what.” Shelley pursed her lips good-naturedly, her gaze darting back toward the bakery before shifting back to Mindy. “How is showing him the town going? Clearly it’s going well if you already have him basically working for you.”

“He isn’t working for me,” Mindy said with a roll of her eyes. “And honestly, last night was a bit of a disaster. But today seems to be going better. I’m hopeful.”

Once again, Shelley and Colette shared a look, a silent discussion occurring between the two of them. But before Mindy could press them for more details of what they were both thinking, the door behind them was pushed open and she glanced over her shoulder, finding Noah stepping outside.

“I’m so sorry,” he said sheepishly, “but I actually have to get going. I need to log on and get a bit of work done from my hotel room.”

“Absolutely.” Mindy nodded. “Thank you for stopping by this morning, and for helping out. Want to meet up tomorrow, and you can see a bit more of the town?”

“Sure. Just text me the time and place.”

Noah gave her a quick smile before turning and striding down the street. Mindy’s eyes stayed focused on him as he disappeared into the distance, and it was only when she heard Shelley snorting a laugh that her attention landed back on her friends.

“Yeah, you’re definitely hopeful about something,” Shelley joked, bumping her shoulder against Colette’s as the two of them giggled.

“Oh, get out of here, you two,” Mindy huffed, not refuting their claim at all as she waved her hand through the air. “I’ve got work to do.”

Colette and Shelley continued to laugh as they told Mindy goodbye, and she could have sworn that she heard them talking about Noah in low voices as she turned and walked back into the bakery. She shook her head slightly, a smile playing at the corners of her lips as she settled back in behind the counter.

She was feeling way more hopeful than she had earlier in the morning—that much had been true when she’d said it to her friends. And now, as she was getting more comfortable being around Noah again, Mindy was beginning to develop a plan.

She thought of everything he’d revealed about his way of thinking when he’d talked to her about Boston and how she’d be better off opening a bakery there. Maybe, in order to convince him that Snowy Pine Ridge was perfect just the way it was, she needed to change her approach. A small thrill ran through her at the thought, and an idea began to form in her mind as she turned and smiled at a new customer who had just entered the shop.

If Noah Henderson wanted to talk about success, she would show him exactly how successful people in Snowy Pine Ridge could be.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

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Two days later, Noah stepped back from the mirror in the bathroom of his hotel room, running his fingers through his hair in a final attempt to distribute some of the pomade through it and tame a few errant strands.

He was due to meet Mindy in twenty minutes, and if he didn't want to be late—something he hated more than anything—he needed to get going. But there was a knot of nerves in his stomach that was refusing to go away, so he was wasting time compulsively fixing his hair until he was satisfied that it was perfect.

Finally deciding that it was good enough, he walked toward the coat hooks on the far end of the bedroom, shrugging on his coat before striding from the room. Evelyn, the owner of the Warm and Bright Hotel, was standing in the entryway talking animatedly with one of her staff as he descended the stairs.

"Well, you look dapper," she said, taking in his styled hair and stylish wool coat with approval.

He grinned at her, nodding toward the woman's sleek chignon and cashmere sweater. "Right back at you, Evelyn."

The old woman beamed at him as he passed before returning to her conversation, and Noah chuckled. He'd liked her from the moment he'd first met her, finding comfort in the way that she was so well put together and business-like, even as she exuded warmth and friendliness. Even if she perpetually had some kind of Christmas themed brooch pinned to her

chest, everything else about her reminded him of the type of people he worked with on a daily basis, and he found that it put him at ease in a town that so often made him feel off kilter.

Noah wrapped his coat more tightly around himself as he stepped out into the cold. The snow that had fallen the night before crunched under his newly acquired snow boots as he walked toward the town square.

There had been a snowstorm the previous day, and he had been ill-prepared for the weather with what he'd packed with him. So, when he'd gone to meet up with Mindy clad in loafers and sharp dress pants, shivering under his coat, she'd chuckled at him and said that she was changing their plans.

They'd spent the first part of their evening at a clothing store, looking through thick jeans, snow pants, and snow boots for him to wear while he was in town. Mindy had laughed at the way he'd balked at the design of everything, telling him that he'd be thankful for it as he spent more time in the town. And although he'd never admit it to her, as his toes remained nice and toasty and his hands were warm in the gloves that he'd bought yesterday, he had to confess to himself that she'd been right.

When Noah turned the corner to the town square, he immediately spotted a crowd surrounding the massive tree in the middle of the square. It was the same one that they'd visited during his first day with her, and now it was decorated from top to bottom.

There were tents and vendors set up along the edges of the square, selling everything from hot chocolate to novelty Christmas items. Kids screamed and giggled as they ran through the snow, pelting each other with snowballs as others around them built snowmen. Noah looked at the joy around him, feeling suddenly more content than he had ever expected to feel in Snowy Pine Ridge.

“There you are!”

A familiar voice from behind him prompted him to turn around. Mindy was walking up, her blonde hair glinting in the

glowing lights and flickering fires from the warming station nearby them.

“I couldn’t find the gazebo,” Noah fibbed, not wanting to admit that he’d been so caught up by the festival that he’d forgotten to look for the place she’d indicated in her text.

“It’s okay!” Mindy waved a dismissive hand in the air. “I saw you right when I walked up, anyway.”

She turned, grinning at the tree and at the chaos around them.

“What do you think so far?” she asked, and he could hear the excitement in her voice.

“I think it’s... a lot.”

When she’d texted him earlier that day, she’d invited him to come with her to the tree lighting ceremony, a festive event that many of the town’s members came out to celebrate every year. He had agreed a bit grudgingly, since he didn’t usually enjoy holiday events, but he had wanted to spend more time with Mindy—and he also knew he needed to make a clear and verifiable attempt to get to know the town as his aunt had requested.

“This place is pretty much a carnival,” Noah observed, his head swiveling from side to side as he took it all in.

“And carnivals are fantastic.” Mindy beamed at him.

Before he could answer, reminding her of the way he’d always felt about carnivals and fairs, the sound of singing filled the air. Mindy turned, both of them coming to stand shoulder to shoulder so that they could look out into the crowd, immediately identifying a small group of carolers.

The other people in the crowd were beginning to take notice, forming a small circle around the performers as their voices rose higher and higher. The sound of it was beautiful, filling Noah’s chest with warmth in a way that he hadn’t experienced in quite some time, especially as all of the voices fell into a perfect harmony.

“Do they do this often?” he asked, leaning close enough to Mindy that he didn’t have to speak above a whisper, not wanting to disrupt anyone else around him.

He saw her nod from the corner of his eye while both of them kept their gazes fixed on the singers.

“There’s almost always some sort of caroling going on throughout the whole month of December,” she explained, keeping her voice equally low. “There are different groups that do it. There’s a senior’s choir, one for the kids, one for the teens. And so on.”

“Like I said.” Noah shrugged one shoulder. “This is a lot.”

She huffed a breath but didn’t respond as the carolers finished their song and everyone around them clapped.

“We’ve got about an hour before the tree will be lit up,” Mindy said, and Noah glanced down to see her checking her watch. “Want to walk around a bit?”

He shifted nervously, not really wanting to venture farther into the crowd of revelers, but Mindy reached out and rested a gloved hand on his arm.

“I know how you feel about festivals,” she said, her voice soft and coaxing. “Unless that’s changed?”

He shook his head, thinking of the way that the abrupt noises and the press of bodies always made him feel lightheaded and like everything was pressing in on him. No, his feelings on that definitely had not changed.

She nodded. “I didn’t figure it had. We’ll steer clear of the super crowded areas. And besides, this isn’t like the big street festivals in Boston. Things never get as crowded here, and people all look out for each other. And the whole point of you being here is to have fun and get to know the town. Right?”

He chewed the inside of his cheek, but when he caught sight of the hope shining in the depths of her brown eyes, he found that the one thing that sounded worse than spending time at a carnival was seeing disappointment crowd her features. Noah sighed, allowing the rush of air to clear the anxiety that was spiking in his body.

“Right,” he said with a nod, and he was rewarded when a beautiful smile lit up Mindy’s face.

“If it gets to be too much, just tell me.”

He nodded again, letting her lead the way farther into the festival. He noted gratefully that she mostly kept to the outer edge of the crowd, never once putting them directly in the center of a group of people. And the farther into the aisles of vendors they got, the more he realized that she’d been right.

Noah had become so used to the crowded farmers markets of Boston and New York City, or the pop-up street festivals that they so often had, that he had never stopped to consider how different those types of events might be in other areas. But the tree lighting ceremony, while definitely well-attended, wasn’t so densely packed that he felt like it was too congested. And the longer they walked, taking in the sights and the sounds around them, the more Noah began to feel himself relax.

They came across one booth where a familiar woman stood behind the table. He racked his mind, trying to figure out where he knew her from, and when he spotted a group of huskies playing in the snow behind her, it jogged his memory.

“You’re one of the dogsled people!” Noah exclaimed, excited that he’d remembered, and Mindy and the woman laughed.

“This is Lacy,” Mindy corrected, gesturing to the woman with the stylish brown bob. “And her husband, Derek.”

He followed where Mindy pointed to next, spotting a man a bit off to the side throwing tennis balls for the dogs to chase.

“But you are right,” Lacy said with a grin. “We are the dogsledding people.”

“They’re feeling better, then?” Noah asked as he nodded toward the dogs.

“Yup! They were only feeling iffy for about a day. And they’ve all been given a clean bill of health by the vet.”

“That’s great news,” Mindy chimed in. “I’m glad they’re back to their usual selves. I know you’ve got a lot on your plate with planning the party at St. Nick’s Place, and I’m sure taking care of sick dogs wasn’t in your plans.”

Lacy chuckled. “No, it really wasn’t. But luckily, between me and Derek, we were able to manage it okay.”

They chatted for a few more minutes, until a small group of people approached the booth behind them, taking up Lacy and Derek’s attention. Not wanting to distract the couple, Noah and Mindy said a quick goodbye and moved on. They began walking toward the tree, and Noah spotted a gazebo on the other side of it. There was also a massive digital clock to the right of the huge fir, counting down the minutes until the tree lighting.

“Only five minutes to go,” he said, stopping in his tracks and looking at Mindy. “Want to wait here so we don’t miss it?”

“Be careful, Henderson.” She grinned, stopping beside him as their shoulders brushed against one another. “Keep talking like that, and I might start to think you’re excited for the Christmas lights.”

“Don’t get your hopes up,” he answered, making her laugh.

They talked quietly, their breath puffing in the air in front of their faces, as the time on the clock continued to dwindle. When the final ten seconds showed on the clock, the entire crowd began yelling out, counting down with it until the clock struck zero.

The tree before them blazed suddenly with shining, twinkling lights. Whoever set up the lights must have had them programmed, because they began blinking in and out in intricate patterns, seeming to almost dance along with the music playing from the speakers beside the gazebo.

Noah stared at the lights in awe, a rush of air leaving him the moment the tree came to life. He had never expected something quite this beautiful, and it took his breath away.

“Was that a gasp I heard?” Mindy grinned up at him, and Noah shook his head.

“I was yawning,” he answered, keeping his eyes fixed on the tree and continuing to watch the blinking lights make their way around it.

“You’re smiling,” she pointed out, and he could hear the happiness in her voice. “It’s the first time you’ve really smiled since you’ve been here.”

He blinked in confusion as he tore his gaze from the tree and turned to look at her. “I’ve smiled before.”

“Nope. You’ve grinned or smirked. But you haven’t actually smiled.”

“There’s a difference?” He arched a brow, and Mindy nodded.

“Grinning and smirking are usually sarcastic, especially where you’re concerned,” she explained. “But this?” She pointed to his face. “This is pure happiness, my friend.”

He rolled his eyes. “I don’t get happy over Christmas trees.”

“That’s strange, considering the fact that you are totally happy over a Christmas tree right this second.”

“I am not,” he insisted, but his words were undercut by the smile that was still affixed to his face.

“Sure,” Mindy answered with a laugh. “I guess that means I’ll just have to keep trying to impress you.”

He stared down at her lovely face, the Christmas lights shining in her eyes as she grinned up at him. He held her gaze, not daring to look away as he said, “You already impress me.”

Noah hadn’t thought about his words before he said them, feeling so caught up in the rush of the moment that he hadn’t given a moment’s consideration to how they might be perceived. But as a lovely blush rose on Mindy’s cheeks, he found that he didn’t entirely care if he’d given away too many of his inner thoughts. Just as long as she kept smiling and looking at him exactly like that.

“I think I could impress you even more,” she said, her voice coming out a bit breathy. “What if I told you that you could be involved in something really special?”

“Right now?” He looked around them pointedly. “More special than this?”

“Does the name Valerie Bernard mean anything to you?”

“The actress?” Noah asked, not able to hide his confusion.

Mindy nodded. “She lives here now. And tomorrow, her boyfriend is proposing to her. He asked a bunch of us to help him surprise her when she gets back to town from working on a movie. Want to be a part of it?”

Noah’s mind was whirling. Valerie Bernard? She lived here? In Snowy Pine Ridge?

He realized that he was just standing there with a dumbfounded look on his face, not giving Mindy any sort of answer as she gazed at him expectantly. He forced himself to push the thought of an A-List movie star residing in this town out of his mind, chalking it up as something that he could think about later as he brought his attention back to Mindy.

“Yeah,” he answered, figuring it might be the only chance he’d ever get to be involved in the engagement of a celebrity. “Count me in.”

Mindy’s smile widened.

“Excellent,” she said, and Noah couldn’t help but wonder what on earth he’d gotten himself into.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

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Valerie Bernard grabbed her phone from her purse, shooting off a quick text to her boyfriend, Clark Mitchell, to let him know that she was getting into her car and would be on her way home soon. She'd been on site shooting a movie for the last eight weeks, and she'd missed him and their home terribly.

His response was immediate, letting her know that he loved her, to drive safe, and that he'd see her when she got home. Plugging her phone into her car, she quickly turned on her favorite playlist and began navigating her way out of the airport's long-term parking garage.

She sang along to the holiday music as she drove, images of Snowy Pine Ridge dancing in her mind as she executed the turns that she'd done many times before. The closer that Valerie got to home, the more her heart began to sing with joy.

Forty minutes later, she turned onto Main Street, catching sight of the massive Christmas tree in the town square that she knew had been lit up just the night before. She'd tried her hardest to make it back for the tree lighting festival, but their wrap party for the shoot hadn't ended until nearly midnight, and there had been no flights out that she could get onto any sooner than the one that she'd just come in on.

Orange flashed in the distance up ahead, and as Valerie got closer, she realized it was a ROAD CLOSED sign, with a detour arrow pointed to the left. No one was around, and as far as she could tell, the street beyond the sign looked completely fine. But what was she going to do? Drive past it and not heed the warning? Absolutely not.

She turned to the left, telling herself that she would just turn right on the next street and loop her way around. But as she got closer, she noticed that this new route was blocked with a ROAD CLOSED sign too.

Her brow furrowed in confusion, and she wondered if something serious was going on. Could it be a break or leak in some gas line? But as she glanced down the road a little farther, she noticed that the lights in the houses were all on, and more than a few people seemed to still be inside. So it couldn't be anything like that.

"Okay," she murmured to herself, continuing along the path indicated by detour sign after detour sign. "That's really odd."

As she had to take an unexpected turn due to yet another ROAD CLOSED sign, she wondered if she should pull over and call Clark. Surely if something this big was going on in town, he would know about it? But the fact that he hadn't called her yet to tell her everything, or which route she should take to get home indicated that he had no clue about what was happening.

She considered turning around, retracing her path, and hopping back on the highway. It would take considerably longer to loop all the way around the small town and enter it from the other direction, but she'd be able to loop around to the south side of Snowy Pine Ridge and come in that way. She had nearly made up her mind to do just that, pressing her foot gently on the brake pedal, when someone on the sidewalk caught her attention, waving their arms.

"Valerie!" the woman called, and it took her a second to realize that it was Mindy.

"Mindy, what's up?" Valerie asked, confusion in her voice as she rolled down her window.

"My car broke down," Mindy said. "Could I possibly get a lift to the ice rink? I'm supposed to meet up with Shelley there."

Valerie nodded, pointing toward her passenger seat. “Sure. Hop in.”

The ice rink was a bit out of her way, but she was happy to help a friend out, and she figured that maybe Mindy would be able to help her navigate the unexpected road closures.

“I have someone with me,” Mindy said, gesturing over her shoulder.

When Valerie glanced behind the other woman, sure enough, there was a tall, handsome man standing on the sidewalk behind Mindy.

“You can both ride with me if you want,” she said. She didn’t recognize the man, and she wanted to grill her friend to find out who he was and what they were doing together, but she knew that now wasn’t the right time.

“Are you sure?” Mindy asked. Valerie nodded again, and Mindy pulled open the front passenger door. “Thanks! This is Noah, by the way.”

The man dipped his chin in greeting as he slid into the back seat. “Nice to meet you. Thank you for the lift.”

“No problem. I’m assuming you’re a friend of Mindy’s?” Valerie asked as she began driving in the direction of the ice-skating rink that Rudolph Hutchins owned.

He and Mindy shared a look, and Valerie thought she caught sight of a slight flush on her friend’s cheeks.

“You could say that,” Noah murmured. “At least, I hope we are.”

“We are.” Mindy nodded, her blush deepening.

“What are you two meeting Shelley at the ice rink for?” Valerie asked. “Is she giving you a lesson or something?”

“Yes,” Mindy said quickly—almost *too* quickly.

Suspicion began to percolate in her mind, and Valerie tapped her fingers on the steering wheel as she commented, “I thought you already knew how to skate.”

Mindy's eyes widened a bit, but she shook her head. "I do. I just want to get better. And Shelley offered me and Noah both lessons."

"I see." Valerie nodded, her suspicion morphing into certainty. "So, do you know what exactly caused all the road closures in town? I was on my way back home, and I couldn't seem to get there."

"Oh... uh," Mindy fumbled, but Valerie didn't give her a second longer to come up with a lie.

"Something is up. Clark planned a surprise welcome home party, didn't he?" Valerie asked with a chuckle. Everything that she'd experienced since driving into the town limits was beginning to make sense as she put the pieces together in her mind.

Mindy's shoulders deflated a little, her eyes darting sideways, and Valerie grinned.

"That's it, isn't it? He set up the road closures to try to lead me where he wanted me. Because there's a party at the ice rink?"

"Well... maybe. But you have to promise to act surprised," her friend said, smiling faintly at her.

"Good thing I'm an actress."

Valerie cast a quick glance at Mindy, giving her a broad grin and hearing Noah chuckle from the back seat. She wanted to know more about this man who was hanging out with her friend, especially since Valerie had never seen him before. The two seemed pretty comfortable in each other's presence, and she hadn't missed the shared glances between the two. But as the ice rink and arcade came into view, she realized she didn't have time to question either of them. She'd have to have a girls' night with Mindy later and get the full scoop.

She expertly parked her car, noting that Clark's truck was at the far end of the lot, partially hidden by the shadows of the building, and she guessed that he had hoped she wouldn't see it.

“Remember,” Mindy said as she climbed out of the passenger seat, Noah sliding out to stand beside her. “Surprised.”

“You’ve got it.” Valerie laughed, giving a little salute as Mindy and her new friend rushed ahead of her into the building.

She took a moment to gather herself, getting in the right headspace to walk into the rink and pretend to be shocked that the people inside had gathered to celebrate her return to town. Once she was certain that her expression was perfectly neutral, she headed toward the main door of the building and stepped through it.

As the door closed behind her, she glanced around the space. She had expected to see her friends and Clark all crowded by the walls of the ice rink, calling out a loud congratulations, but the large room seemed empty. Even Mindy and Noah, who had disappeared inside less than a minute before Valerie, had disappeared.

The rink stood entirely empty, and Valerie strained her ears for any sound within the depths of the large building. The air around her was cold, and the ice in the rink looked freshly resurfaced, but there was no sign of a single soul. Valerie’s mind raced as she tried to figure out where everyone had gone.

“Rudolph?” she called, this time not having to fake the confusion in her tone.

“Valerie! Could you come help me with something?” The old man’s voice filtered out from the long hallway off to the right of the arcade that housed a couple party rooms, the bathrooms, and his office.

Valerie followed the sound, once again reminding herself to act shocked by the surprise party, but when she turned down the hallway, all of those thoughts faded from her mind.

Not a single overhead light was on in the hallway. Instead, a trail of candles lined the sides of the corridor, bathing it in soft, warm light. She took a step, looking closely at the floor

and noticing that not only was the hallway lined with candles, but it had been scattered with red rose petals as well.

About halfway down the hall, one of the doors stood wide open. The light emanating from it was a little bit brighter than the light in the hallway, and it wasn't flickering. That must be where they all were, and they must have turned the dimmers down on the lights.

"Wow. This is quite a romantic setting for—" Valerie began as she walked around the corner and into the room.

But her words were cut off when she took in the sight before her.

There were vases of roses everywhere, lining the sides of what looked like a red carpet. Her friends were on either side of it, holding toy microphones and dressed up like reporters. At the end of the red carpet stood Clark, looking handsome in a black tailored suit.

Immediately, Valerie's eyes began to well up with tears. And then she noticed what was behind the man she loved. It was a banner that had been designed to look like old film from a movie reel, and a scrawling, elegant script spelled out the words, *Will you marry me?*

The tears that had been threatening to spill over finally did as she walked farther into the room. She wasn't able to look anywhere else but at Clark as he sank to one knee, pulling out a velvet box from the pocket of his suit jacket.

"Valerie," he began. His voice was a little shaky, and she loved him all the more for it. "When you first came into my life, it was intimidating to think that this whirlwind of a woman was known by millions of people all across the globe. That she was loved by people near and far for her talent and the way that she brings art into the world."

Valerie choked back a sob, coming to a stop directly in front of Clark and gazing down at him. He still held the box aloft, but he hadn't opened it yet, just extending it out to her with a smile as he continued on.

“And yet, the more I got to know you, the more I realized that it only made sense that everyone loved you, because you are the single most lovable person I have ever met in my life. And while you jet across the world, sharing your talent and your love for acting with everyone, I remain in awe of you. Not just for what you offer to everyone else, but for what you bring into the lives of the people who know you best.”

She was full-on sobbing now, tears streaming down her cheeks in fast succession, and she couldn’t even bring herself to raise a hand to wipe them away. Valerie’s heart was pounding so hard that she feared it might pop right out of her chest. And still, Clark continued.

“You fill my life, and the life of every single person in this town with more kindness, more light, and more love than many of us ever thought possible. You breathe life into every single room that you enter. So tonight, here on the red carpet that you’ve walked so many times as the star you are, I want to ask you what’s hopefully the most important question you’ve ever been asked on one of these bad boys.”

He pointed down at the red carpet beneath him, and Valerie held her breath, already nodding as Clark opened the box. She gasped as she took in the ring, a beautiful vintage cushion cut emerald inlaid in a gold band. A perfect replica of an engagement ring from one of her movies—one that she’d mentioned once to Clark that she loved.

It had been an offhand comment, made only about a month after she had moved to Snowy Pine Ridge. And she hadn’t even been entirely certain that he’d heard her. But apparently he had. He’d heard it and committed it to memory, going out of his way to ensure that he brought that exact ring to life for her.

“Valerie Bernard,” Clark continued, tears that matched her own shining in the depths of his warm brown eyes. “Will you make me the absolute luckiest man in the entire world and grant me the privilege of being your husband?”

She laughed, nodding vigorously as she extended her left hand, barely able to squeak out the one word that would

become one of the most important that she had ever uttered.

“Yes!”

The smile on Clark’s face could have lit up an entire football stadium as he pulled the ring from the box and slipped it on her finger. It was a perfect fit.

He stood, immediately cupping her face in his work-roughened hands as he pressed his lips to hers. She wrapped herself in the embrace of this man whom she loved, a man she’d never seen coming, but who had become the single most important person in her life.

The crowd of friends and family around them erupted in applause and a combined cheer of congratulations. But Valerie was so lost in her own happiness and in Clark’s kiss that she barely heard them at all.

## CHAPTER NINE

---

Mindy's cheeks hurt from smiling as she wrenched her gaze away from the happy, embracing couple and looked at Noah, who was standing beside her. He was applauding, humor and warmth dancing in his vivid green eyes, but there was still something about him that seemed so rigid and businesslike, and she couldn't help but wonder if he'd had a good time.

"All right, everybody," Rudolph Hutchins called over the din of the crowd, stepping into the middle of the room to silence them. Valerie and Clark broke apart, turning their attention toward the old man. "The ice rink has been fixed up in time for the holidays, and it's now frozen solid. Drinks and snacks are on the house tonight as we celebrate the newly engaged couple."

People cheered again, and Mindy couldn't stop herself from chuckling. When she had first met Rudolph, he had been a bit of a curmudgeon. And he definitely still was. But when Valerie had come to Snowy Pine Ridge, and the truth about Rudolph's past relationship with the movie star's mother had come out, the two of them had begun to bond. And becoming something of a stand-in father figure to Valerie had brought out something softer and sweeter in the grumpy old man that they all loved.

She turned to Noah, about to ask him what he thought of the whole event when arms were flung around her neck, pulling her into a tight embrace.

"Thank you," Valerie whispered in Mindy's ear, squeezing her tightly. "Thank you for helping out with this and getting

me here. And for not giving away the true surprise! I was so shocked.”

Mindy squeezed her friend back before the two women took a step back, beaming at each other. “We all helped,” she explained happily. “We wanted to be a part of the big day for you and Clark.”

“And I’m grateful for each and every one of you.” Valerie put a hand over her heart, tears still dancing in her eyes. “And to you, Noah. I know we just met, but thank you. And I’m sure there’s plenty of a story about all this”—Valerie waved a finger between Noah and Mindy—“that you can tell me all about later.”

Mindy’s cheeks flushed with heat. She was about to tell her friend that there really wasn’t any story that they needed to discuss, but before she could, the newly engaged woman was pulled away from her on a tide of celebration by some of their other friends.

“A story, huh?” Noah’s voice sounded amused from where he still stood beside her, and when she glanced at him, there was a wry smile ticking up the corner of his mouth. “I’m surprised you haven’t been texting her and telling her everything already.”

“She’s been busy,” Mindy answered, hoping her voice sounded nonchalant, even if she didn’t feel it. “Want to go out and get ready to skate?”

Noah nodded, and the two of them began to follow the flow of the crowd as people followed Rudolph down the hall toward the main part of the building. Mindy couldn’t help but notice the furtive glances thrown their way, and she wondered what everyone around the town was thinking. It was a lot of pressure to be the representative for all of Snowy Pine Ridge when it came to showing Noah around and convincing him that an industrial complex wouldn’t be a good fit for his aunt’s property.

Rudolph and Shelley made quick work of turning on the lights, and the surface of the freshly frozen ice gleamed invitingly. Mindy and Noah walked over to the skate rental,

waiting their turn to tell Rudolph their sizes at the counter, then grabbing their skates and going over to a bench to get them laced up.

They sat side by side, their shoulders bumping into each other as they kicked off the shoes they'd come in with and donned the skates. The entire time, Mindy threw glances in Noah's direction. He seemed more stuffy than usual, and for a moment, she wondered if it was the crowd that had him so on edge.

But then she thought of the amount of people who had attended the tree lighting ceremony the night before. There had been considerably more people there than were currently at the ice-skating rink, and while Noah had been a bit uncomfortable there at first, he had relaxed relatively quickly. But Mindy couldn't think of anything else that it could be.

"So," she prompted as they made their way out onto the ice. "What did you think of the proposal? Pretty cool, huh?"

"I still can't believe *the* Valerie Bernard lives here, and that you're friends with her."

He sounded almost impressed, and Mindy tried hard to ignore the little thrill that ran through her at that realization. *Good.* Maybe he was starting to realize just how special Snowy Pine Ridge was.

"Well, like I keep telling you," she admonished as they began to skate side by side, falling into a familiar rhythm easily despite the years that had passed since they'd last done this. "It's a pretty cool little town. And Valerie being here just makes it even better."

"Yeah, yeah," Noah said with a chuckle.

Mindy glanced at him, noting that he was beginning to loosen up a bit more as they made their rounds, passing other townspeople as they went.

"I bet I can still beat you," she murmured, elbowing him lightly as she tried to draw him out of his serious shell.

He huffed a breath. "What, like in a race?"

“Yeah. You in?”

A grin split his face, making him look younger and more boyish. “Oh, you’re on.”

They stopped in their tracks, agreeing that they’d go on the count of three, and they began counting down together. When they hit three, Mindy took off. It had been a long time since she’d skated this hard, but her body fell into the familiar pace of it quickly. Her arms began pumping rhythmically at her sides, and the muscles of her thighs began to burn.

She knew better than to look behind her, her competitive nature telling her that to glance behind would cost her precious seconds. But she knew that Noah couldn’t be far back.

Sure enough, out of the corner of her eye, she caught sight of him, pulling up neck and neck with her until she put on another burst of speed. The end point that they’d agreed on was in sight, and she leaned forward as she propelled herself toward it.

Other people laughed as the two flew past them, pointing out the obvious race that was taking place on the rink. But Mindy didn’t pay them any mind, pushing herself even harder as the finish line drew closer.

But when she was only a few yards away, one of Mindy’s skates caught on the ice. Her arms windmilled as she started to lose her balance, but she was going too fast to get her legs back under her.

She started to go down, but before she could hit the ice, strong arms wrapped around her waist, catching her.

“Whoa there!”

Noah almost slipped himself as he caught her, and they ended up spinning around on the ice, both of them laughing. They came to a stop, and he kept his grip on her for another second to make sure she truly had her balance.

“You okay?” he asked.

“Yeah.” She nodded breathlessly, her heart racing from her close call. “I guess you win.”

He smirked. “Well, technically not. I haven’t crossed the finish line yet.”

They shared a look, both of them standing stock still for a second. Then they both took off again, racing to be the first one to make it the last few yards to the finish line. Noah had a bit of a head start on Mindy, so she was certain he would get there first—but to her surprise, he slowed a bit right before he reached the designated ending spot for their race, allowing her to cross the finish line before him.

She turned to face him as he followed after her, narrowing her eyes. “Did you let me win?”

He shrugged one shoulder. “You know I’m too competitive to ever do that. But you were in the lead before you slipped, so you would’ve beat me for sure.”

She laughed, surprisingly touched by the small gesture. “We can call it a tie.”

“Nope.” He shook his head as they continued around the rink at a more leisurely pace. “That was a clear win for you, Min. It wasn’t even a photo finish.”

“If you say so,” she agreed with a grin.

“I do.” His green eyes took on a slightly faraway, nostalgic look as he added, “You know, I’m pretty sure we raced the last time we skated together too. And you won that time as well, if I recall correctly. It was at the Winter Ice Rink in Boston, remember? Just after Thanksgiving.”

She smiled, searching for the memory he was referring to. As it popped into her head, she could vividly recall the chill in the air and the sound of the music playing through speakers as people skated. But her smile faded as she remembered what had come after that moment.

The last time they had been skating had been only a few days before they’d broken up. Their time at the Winter Ice Rink was one of her last happy memories with Noah, followed by the crushing pain of realizing that the relationship wasn’t working for either of them.

They had both been so competitive and ambitious back then, always striving for more and more. The only problem with that was that both of them had started to prioritize other things over their relationship. Work and career aspirations had taken precedence over their growth as a couple, and it had chipped away at the bond between them until one day, everything had finally come crumbling down.

Mindy's heart gave a swift, violent tug as memories of their breakup surfaced, and she suddenly knew that if she didn't get off the ice that very moment, she was going to break down right in the middle of the rink.

"Um, I have to go," she muttered, barely waiting to see if Noah had heard her.

She took off skating across the rink, going as fast as she could toward where her shoes waited for her. She grabbed them quickly, kicking off the skates and all but running them to the drop-off counter. Then she rushed out the door into the chilly night, never once looking behind her.

\* \* \*

Noah stood rooted to the spot as people continued to skate around him.

He'd been so surprised by the sudden change in Mindy's demeanor that he'd been unable to do anything but watch in shock as she'd skated away from him and hurried to throw on her shoes and return her skates.

His mind was reeling, unable to make sense of what had caused the sudden shift in her mood. It wasn't until a kid of about ten who hadn't been paying attention skated directly into him, almost sending him sprawling back out onto the ice, that Noah was able to shake himself and begin chasing after her.

He pushed himself as quickly as he could, trying to make up for lost time. He threw himself onto the bench by his shoes, all but wrenching the skates off his feet and shoving them into the boots that he'd worn earlier that day. When he'd returned the skates and finally rushed toward the front door, stepping

out into the cold, he looked every which way, but Mindy was nowhere to be found.

Noah trotted through the parking lot, hoping to catch sight of the bright blue coat that she'd been wearing earlier in the day. But it wasn't until he'd made it all the way out to the sidewalk that he spotted her in the distance.

"Mindy!" Noah called, breaking out into a run so that he could catch up with her.

He couldn't go as fast as he wanted, having to be careful not to fall on some of the small patches of ice that hadn't yet been scraped off the pavement. But he was able to catch up with her just before they reached the town square.

"Mindy, what happened?" he asked as he pulled up alongside her. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," she insisted. "I just needed some air. You should've stayed and skated more."

Her arms were crossed, and her gaze was set directly ahead as she refused to look at him.

"I didn't want to stay. I wanted to be with you. Seriously, what happened? Did I do something wrong? Did you get hurt when you almost fell?" he asked, his heart still racing from the effort it had taken to catch up with her.

"I'm not hurt. Not physically," she said, her voice sounding clipped and tight.

"Okay, then what's the problem?"

She stopped abruptly, causing Noah to take a few quick steps past her before he realized that she was no longer moving. He turned to look at her, finding Mindy glaring at him with her hands on her hips.

"The problem is that—that—"

She broke off, color rising in her cheeks as emotions churned in her eyes. Then she shook her head. Moving so suddenly that it caught Noah by surprise, she bent over, her mitten hands raking through the snow. She packed the flakes

into a little ball and then straightened and lobbed the snowball right at Noah.

It hit him in the chest in a puff of white powder, and his jaw dropped open.

“What the?” he sputtered, just as another snowball went whirling past his head. “Are you throwing snowballs at me?”

In answer, Mindy drew back her hand, preparing to throw yet another one, and Noah snapped into action. He bent, grabbing up a handful of the white powder at his feet and crafting it into a ball. Another one of Mindy’s missiles flew at him, and he jumped to the side, narrowly avoiding impact as he threw his own.

He caught a glimpse of her face just before she dipped to begin making another one, and most of the aggravation that had been twisting her features moments ago was gone. It had been replaced by a wild grin that lit up her features and threatened to steal his breath.

He shook himself, gripping the new snowball that he had forged and letting it fly. It caught her in the side, making her squeal in surprise, and Noah laughed before he started the process all over again.

Snowballs flew back and forth, some of them striking their intended target but most of them missing as the two ducked and dodged and threw themselves into banks of snow. With each passing strike, their laughter grew louder, until Noah darted backward in an effort to dodge Mindy’s most recent attack, and he stepped on a patch of ice.

His foot slid out from under him, his arms windmilling as he tried and failed to right himself. His back struck the ground with a thump, but thankfully he had fallen into a small bank of snow, which absorbed most of the impact.

Noah blinked up at the sky, and he heard Mindy calling out his name a moment before her face became silhouetted against the streetlight above.

“Are you all right?” she blurted, and even though he couldn’t fully make out her features in the shadow that had

been cast over her face, he could definitely hear the concern in her voice.

“I’m fine,” he grunted, chuckling as he pushed himself up onto his elbows. “Just my pride is bruised.”

Mindy took a few steps back, extending a hand to him to help him up, which he gladly took. But before she could pull him to his feet, she slipped on the same patch of ice he had, ending up falling onto the snowbank right beside him. She yelped, and he laughed, going up onto one elbow to look down at her.

“Are you okay?” he asked, echoing her question from a moment ago as he tucked a bit of hair behind her ear.

“Yeah. This was much less painful than falling on the ice rink would’ve been.”

She rose up onto an elbow as well, and their gazes met as silence descended between them for a moment.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Noah finally offered. “About what was bothering you? You don’t have to, but I’d like to know.”

Mindy hesitated, biting her lip. Then she nodded, sending her blonde curls bobbing.

He stuffed his hands into his pockets as they both sat up side by side on the snowbank. Her shoulder brushed against his, and even though they were each bundled in coats, he swore he could feel the warmth emanating from her.

“I’m sorry,” Mindy whispered. When Noah cast a glance sideways at her, her brow was creased with worry.

“You don’t have anything to apologize for,” he reassured her quickly. “But what got you so upset in the first place?”

She paused, and he could tell from the way her jaw was flexing that she was chewing on the inside of her cheek.

“Do you remember the last time we went ice skating together?” she asked.

Noah nodded, but the question didn't do anything to alleviate his confusion. All he remembered was the fact that she'd beaten him while racing, just like she had tonight.

"And do you remember what happened just a few days *after* we went ice skating?" Mindy prompted, her voice growing softer. "That was when we broke up, Noah."

The words hit him like a ton of bricks, a small rush of air escaping him as he realized she was right. In his head, the two events had never been conflated. There had been such a difference in the moods between the two things, the happiness and laughter that had happened on the rink and then the heartbreak of ending his relationship with Mindy. His memory hadn't been able to keep the two things closely connected.

But now that Mindy had pointed it out, he could see why the smile had dropped away from her face so suddenly back at the rink.

"I'm sorry," he said, grimacing. "I wasn't thinking when I brought that up. I honestly didn't put the two together. I should have..."

"It's okay." Mindy cleared her throat, the blush in her cheeks flaring once again. "I'm not upset anymore. It's just that being reminded of it all caught me off-guard. Water under the bridge."

She waved her hand dismissively, but while Noah nodded, he was also hit with a pang of hurt. He didn't want to forget about it. He didn't want it all to be 'water under the bridge' as she'd just said. Their past had meant something to him, and he didn't want it to be so easily dismissed.

But he was grateful that tears were no longer shining in Mindy's eyes, and that the tension between them seemed to have dissipated for the moment. So he gave a small cough to clear his throat of the lump of emotion that had risen to it.

"Yeah," he agreed. "Water under the bridge." Then he offered her a smile. "You know, you might not have been thrilled when you found out that I was in Snowy Pine Ridge,

but I'm happy that our paths have crossed. I'm glad it brought us back together, even just for a little while."

Mindy tugged her bottom lip between her teeth, resting a hand on his arm. "Me too."

He offered her a hand and helped her up, careful not to let her slip on the patch of ice again. And although neither of them commented on it, he didn't release her hand as he walked her all the way back to her house, the two of them striding side by side in companionable silence.

## CHAPTER TEN

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Valerie glanced down at her ring, watching the way the emerald glinted in the lights as Clark drove them both home. They'd left her car in the lot at the rink, with Clark promising to pick it up tomorrow, because she hadn't wanted to be apart from him even for the few minutes it took for them to drive home.

He pulled into the driveway, and the light beside the front door glowed invitingly as she gazed out the passenger side window. The party at the ice rink had gone well into the night, and by the time everyone had left and she'd helped Rudolph clean up—despite the older man's protests—she was absolutely exhausted.

Clark climbed out of the truck, telling her to stay put while he came around to the passenger side and opened up her door. Valerie grinned at him as she stepped out, pausing for a moment to wrap her arms around him in a tight hug.

"I love you," she murmured, her words muffled as she pressed her face against his chest.

It was the first time she'd gotten to really be alone with him since coming home, and a feeling of utter contentment washed over her, making her emotional.

"I love you too," Clark responded, squeezing her a little tighter and enveloping her in his warmth.

They stood like that for a few heartbeats, the peaceful feeling of the moment amplified by the quietness of the town around them. Small snowflakes began to fall from the sky,

dancing in the streetlights and the light on their porch, and Valerie watched them, feeling more full of joy than she had in weeks.

“Did the last day of the shoot go okay?” Clark asked, pulling back just enough so that he could look at her.

“It went great.” She nodded, reluctantly separating from his embrace as the cold began to creep in again.

Clark took her hand, heading up the paved and shoveled walkway to their front door. As they neared the house, a wave of emotion crashed into her. She loved filming, she truly did. But there was something about the way Clark’s hand felt in hers as he led her home that pushed her over the edge, and she spoke without even thinking, blurting out the words that had been in her mind all night.

“I don’t want to wait,” she said quickly as Clark put the key in the door and began to unlock it.

He turned to glance at her, his face scrunched up in confusion as he turned the key. He pushed open the front door to their house, allowing her to walk in first before he followed and began kicking off his boots and shedding his coat.

“Don’t want to wait for what?” he asked.

“To marry you.”

Clark’s head snapped up, his hand stilling on the zipper of his coat.

“You want to get married right now?” He grinned, sliding his hand back up and taking his zipper with it. “Because I can run down to Mayor Thornton’s house and have her open everything back up. I’ll marry you tonight.”

Clark made a big show of putting his boots back on, and Valerie snorted a laugh.

“No.” She shook her head at the man she loved so much that she felt like her heart was going to explode. “Not tonight. But very soon. I don’t want a long engagement, I want to start our life together.” She gasped as a thought struck her. “Oh!

What if we did it at the Christmas party at St. Nick's Place? If Lacy is okay with it."

Clark cocked his head at that, taking the briefest of moments to consider it before nodding.

"I love that idea." He began to take his coat off again, the smile never once fading from his handsome face. "We can talk to Lacy tomorrow. I'll tell her we'll handle the decorating and everything if she'll let us commandeer her party a little."

"You know she won't let us do all the decorating ourselves," Valerie pointed out with a grin.

"She'll let us help, at least."

Now that his coat and boots were off, he extended his arms to her again, a request for her to step into them. Valerie did so gladly, wrapping her arm around his waist and hugging him tightly as Clark planted a kiss to the top of her head.

"So, we're really doing this?" he asked, his voice muffled against her hair.

"We're doing this," she agreed in a whisper.

And never in her life had she thought that three seemingly simple words could sound so wonderful.

\* \* \*

Mindy crouched with one knee on the floor, moving Gus's little legs to and fro as she pulled on his sweater for the day. It was red, with a Christmas tree that lit up on the back. She knew that it would garner plenty of attention, which her precious pup would absolutely love.

"And then Clark knelt down on one knee, and everyone went wild," she explained to Gus, who rewarded her by licking her face. "It was like something straight out of one of Valerie's movies."

She'd been talking to Gus all morning, giving him the rundown of everything that had happened the night before. When she'd come home, she'd been so exhausted from the

exertion and the emotional highs and lows that she'd just taken Gus out for a quick final potty break and then gone right to bed. But now, in the light of the morning, Mindy was feeling much better—which translated into her talking to the furry white creature before her.

Gus cocked his head to the side, and Mindy nodded.

“Yeah, I did spend time with Noah last night too.” She and the pup shared a look as she stood and grabbed his leash from the wall. “Oh, don’t look at me like that! It’s part of what everyone asked me to do. I can’t very well convince him that the town doesn’t need an industrial complex without spending time with him.”

Gus just looked at her again, which she immediately took as him agreeing with her, and now that she was satisfied, they trotted out the door for their morning walk. She couldn’t help it if her thoughts drifted to Noah from time to time, especially not as she and Gus walked past the very spot where they’d had the snowball fight the night before. And each time, she couldn’t help but think about the way his eyes had softened when she mentioned the breakup, or the way he seemed softer as they’d talked after.

Mindy had to keep reminding herself that despite their past, Noah was technically the enemy. He was the whole reason the town was worried in the first place. And she knew that was something she couldn’t afford to forget.

As always, people stopped in their tracks when Gus trotted past, commenting excitedly on his sweater. He rewarded every single one of them with kisses, and for one little girl in particular, he showed her exactly how fast he could chase his tail, eliciting a giggle of delighted surprise from both the girl and her mother before they continued on their merry way.

Mindy stopped in at the bakery for a moment, checking in on Allison who had agreed to run it for the day due to Mindy’s plans. She had been nervous about it, since it was Allison’s first day handling things entirely on her own. But the younger woman assured her that everything was going fine, and it

appeared to be the truth. So Mindy and Gus headed back home for breakfast and to wait for her friends to arrive.

At eleven a.m. sharp, her doorbell rang. She could hear her friends laughing and talking on the other side of the heavy wooden door before she even had the opportunity to pull it open. Shelley, Lacy, Valerie, Sarah, and Colette stood on her front stoop, grinning at her and urging her to hurry up, since they had shopping to do.

The six of them walked down the sidewalk, heading for downtown Snowy Pine Ridge as they chatted excitedly.

“All right,” Mindy demanded, glancing sidelong at Valerie. “Let me see it in the daylight.”

Valerie grinned, extending her hand to show off the engagement ring. The women oohed and aahed over it, and Mindy had to admit that it was absolutely spectacular. When she glanced back at her friend, ready to tell her exactly that, she realized that Valerie was looking a bit nervous.

“What’s wrong?” Mindy asked. “Are you worried about the ring? I promise, we really do love it. It’s spectacular.”

Valerie chuckled and shook her head. “No, no, it’s not that. I just have something to ask. Something for *you*, actually,” she added, turning toward Lacy. “Clark and I don’t want to wait long to get married, and we had a bit of a crazy idea. We were thinking about saying our vows at the party at St. Nick’s Place. We wouldn’t completely take over the party, we promise! But would you be willing to let us get married there that night?”

As Valerie went into more detail, explaining how she and Clark wanted to get married during the holiday party and how they wanted to chip in and help with the cost and the décor, excitement built in Mindy’s chest. Colette and Sarah shared a thrilled look, and Lacy agreed enthusiastically, telling Valerie that it would be an honor for them to get married at her event.

“Thank you!” Valerie looked like she might faint with relief. “I’m so excited, and Clark will be too!”

“Of course.” Lacy was beaming. “You know, I was just telling Derek that I wanted the party this year to top every

other year, and now I'm positive it's going to."

The women chattered excitedly about the upcoming party and the wedding that would be part of it, only breaking off when they reached their first stop for the day, darting inside a clothing shop with a newfound zeal as they began to look for dresses to wear for the wedding.

The shop's owner, a woman named Judith, was in her late fifties and had at one time been a costume designer on Broadway, watched them with thinly veiled amusement. She chimed in from time to time, giving them critiques on what colors matched their complexion and what jewelry they should use to accessorize.

By the time they were finished, each woman held an oversized bag containing the perfect dress, shoes, and jewelry for what they were now all affectionately calling "the event of the season."

Mindy's stomach gave a loud, obvious growl and Colette turned to look at her.

"Hungry?" she joked, and Mindy nodded, laughing when Shelley's stomach did the same.

The women decided that since shopping had completely and utterly exhausted them, they would grab lunch together at Frosty's Shack. They walked toward it, shopping bags swinging merrily from their arms, when Rudolph Hutchins' truck sputtered past.

"How's Rudolph doing, anyway?" Colette asked, turning to glance at Valerie.

"He's great. He's so excited about the engagement," Valerie answered. "He pulled me aside last night and gave me the biggest hug, and I'm so glad the proposal happened at the ice rink. I think that meant a lot to him. I actually think I'm going to ask him to walk me down the aisle, but I haven't had a chance to talk to him about it yet. He'll be thrilled when I tell him the wedding is going to happen soon though."

"Do you think he gets lonely?" Lacy mused, cocking her head to the side as she watched his truck fade into the distance.

“Yeah, I do, actually,” Shelley chimed in. “He always lights up when the kids show up for classes at the rink, and I think he’s gotten to be a lot more social since Valerie moved to town, but I’d love to see him put himself out there and find someone.”

“So would I.” Valerie nodded. “Knowing that Rudolph once loved my mother came as a shock when I first found out, but I know he’s capable of that kind of love. And it would be amazing to see him find that kind of happiness again.”

“Maybe we should fix him up?” Mindy asked and was rewarded with excited agreement from all of their friends.

They discussed Rudolph’s love life and who they could possibly fix him up with as they walked into Frosty’s, and Mindy paused when they entered to inhale deeply as her mouth began to water.

Frosty’s had an all-day brunch menu that she was dying to get her hands on, and she was already plotting out all the things she wanted to order as the women slid into a large booth along the far wall of the restaurant.

“Should we order a little mimosa from Louise to celebrate all the good news?” Colette asked, giving an excited shimmy as she grabbed one of the menus from the center of the table.

“There aren’t even mimosas on the menu,” Sarah retorted with a chuckle.

“Doesn’t mean Louise won’t have the stuff to make them in the back.” Colette waggled her eyebrows, eliciting another round of laughter.

Mindy glanced at Shelley, waiting for her response. Usually, Shelley was the first one to start talking about mimosas or margaritas, and she expected her friend to start planning exactly how they were going to persuade Louise to bring it out for them. But instead, she found the woman blushing, glancing down at the table with a hesitant look on her face.

“I actually won’t be drinking,” Shelley said softly. The chatter at the table died out as the other five sets of eyes turned

to look at her. “I’m pregnant.”

Gasps went up around the table, and congratulations began to flow. Valerie began to wave her hands in front of her face as if trying to banish the sudden tears of excitement that had sprung to her eyes.

Mindy was as excited as the rest of them, but she couldn’t help but notice that although Lacy gushed about what great parents Shelley and Matthew were going to be, she seemed a little more reserved than the rest. Lacy’s hand kept fluttering to her stomach almost absentmindedly, and Mindy wondered if maybe her friend wasn’t feeling well. But as Shelley continued to speak, all thoughts of Lacy’s somewhat strange behavior was pushed from Mindy’s mind.

“We’re so excited,” Shelley explained. “Even if it happened a little bit sooner into our marriage than we’d hoped. But I’m nervous to tell Brandon.”

Shelley and Matthew had gotten married six months prior, a gorgeous summer wedding at the base of the mountain that bordered the town. Matthew’s son, Brandon, had been his best man.

Immediately, Shelley’s friends rushed in to ease her concerns.

“Brandon is going to be a phenomenal big brother,” Sarah insisted, and Mindy nodded her head vigorously in agreement. “And he’ll be so excited about having a sibling!”

“Are you sure?” Shelley asked, worry etching itself into the lines of her face.

“We’re positive,” Mindy insisted, reaching her hand across the table to rest on top of her friend’s. “You, Matthew, and Brandon are a family, and you have been for a while. Now you just get to add a little more love. He’s going to know that. He’s a good kid, and this is a good thing.”

Shelley gave her an appreciative smile, and Mindy’s heart warmed. Louise finally bustled over, notebook poised to take all of their orders. They didn’t ask for the mimosas, ordering celebratory hot chocolates instead to go with their food.

“Oh,” Louise said just as she was about to walk away.  
“Did you hear about the gingerbread house competition?”

Mindy and her friends shared confused glances before shaking their heads.

“It’s going to be at the town hall tomorrow afternoon,” Louise informed them. “I could have sworn Mayor Thornton said she was going to send out flyers. But anyway, you all should come down. Show everyone how it’s done.”

Louise grinned at them before bustling away to put in their orders, and everyone around Mindy began chatting all over again. But she didn’t join in. As Louise had brought up the competition, all Mindy could think about was Noah. The gingerbread house competition would be a perfect thing to show him.

It was charming and interactive and might be just the thing that she needed to convince him that the town and all of its traditions were worth protecting.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

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The next day, Mindy stood in her bathroom, anxiously trying to tame her curls into submission. Gus sat on the bathmat beside her, tilting his head from side to side and being absolutely no help at all.

“What do you think? The cream sweater with the little gingerbread men on it?” Mindy asked her pup as she racked her mind for what to wear. “Or should I keep it simple with the red sweater? Oh, and then maybe I could do my light-up Christmas tree earrings.”

She glanced at Gus, who just blinked his big dark eyes up at her.

“You’re right,” she said excitedly to him. “The red sweater and the earrings are always a showstopper. You’re so smart, buddy.”

He yapped excitedly at the praise as Mindy gave up on her hair and started on her makeup. She was just finishing up swiping mascara on her lashes when the sound of her doorbell chiming brought her up short.

She winced as she checked the time, realizing that Noah was ten minutes early. Granted, that was something that she should have expected, coming from the man who had always insisted that to be on time was akin to being late. But she hadn’t thought of it, and now she was standing in the middle of her bathroom, still in her sweatpants and a ratty old t-shirt with Santa Claus on it.

“Well, nothing to be done about it, I guess,” she said to Gus before striding out of the bathroom and toward the front door.

Mindy pulled the door open, her heart pounding at the sight of Noah standing there. He looked very handsome in his tailored camel coat and a red cashmere scarf. His eyes raked over her as he arched a brow.

“This must be a much more casual event than I thought,” he said, giving her a smirk as she stepped back and waved him inside.

“Come in, come in, before I freeze to death,” Mindy insisted, giving him space as he walked through the door.

She heard the telltale sound of Gus’s nails tip-tapping on the hardwood floor as he came into the room, then glanced over her shoulder to find the pup standing there, completely still, glaring at Noah.

“I just need to get dressed really quickly,” she explained, hiking her thumb over her shoulder to indicate the back of the house where she’d come from. “You can get comfy in the living room, or wait in the kitchen. Wherever you’d like to get cozy. I’ll only be a minute or two.”

She turned to move away before noticing that Noah hadn’t taken so much as half a step. Not only that, but he hadn’t even moved to take his coat off as his gaze stayed locked on the small white dog a few feet away.

“Are you okay?” she asked, unable to hide the amusement in her tone.

Noah pursed his lips nervously. “Are you sure he won’t, you know... attack?”

Mindy snorted a laugh. “Gus? No. I promise, he’s not an attack dog.”

From their time dating, she had always known that Noah didn’t really consider himself an animal person. His father had always insisted that they not keep pets, so he’d never known how to interact when he was around them. She had honestly figured that in their years apart, some of that would have

ebbed, but Noah seemed even more nervous around the little dog now than he had the first time he'd met the pup.

Mindy gave a good-natured roll of her eyes before walking back toward Noah.

"Here," she said. "Hang your coat up so you aren't so stiff looking, and then you're going to sink down and extend your hand to him gently."

He did as he was instructed, and when he shrugged off his coat, she noticed that he was wearing a full suit. She shook her head and laughed.

"This is not a formal event."

"Apparently." He glanced pointedly at her sweats before bending over like she'd shown him, extending his fingers out toward Gus.

"It's okay, buddy," she said in a low voice, coaxing the nervous pooch closer.

Gus eyed her warily before taking a few hesitant steps toward Noah to close the distance between them. Mindy watched with bated breath as Gus began to delicately sniff at Noah's fingers.

"It tickles," Noah whispered, and Mindy didn't miss the amusement now flickering in his eyes.

"Just wait," she murmured, and the two of them remained still as Gus continued to sniff.

Finally, apparently satisfied that the man in front of him was a friend and not a foe, Gus's tongue flicked out of his mouth and planted a sloppy lick across Noah's fingers. He sat down on his rump, his tail thwacking against the floor as he wagged it and panted happily.

"See?" Mindy beamed. "You're all clear."

Noah stood, grinning at her and seeming more than a little pleased with himself as he told her he was going to wait in the living room. She made her way to her bedroom so she could get dressed, and wasn't even mildly surprised when Gus decided to follow after his new friend instead of her.

She made quick work of pulling on her outfit, the red cashmere sweater, and the blinking Christmas tree earrings she'd told her pooch all about. As a last-minute addition, she swiped red lipstick across her lips for a bit of added festiveness.

Mindy walked back through the house, the sound of her heeled booties clunking against the hardwood, and found Noah sitting on the couch, playing tug of war with Gus.

"Looks like you two have become fast friends," she joked.

Noah clearly hadn't heard her approach because a look of surprise flashed across his handsome face, and he immediately dropped the toy. He turned to face her as he pushed himself to standing, his large hands smoothing over the jacket of his suit to press out the nonexistent wrinkles. His eyes widened a little at the transformation she had undergone in the bedroom.

"You look lovely," he said.

"You don't look too bad yourself," Mindy joked, keeping her voice airy and light despite the blush that was creeping into her cheeks.

Noah grinned at her but didn't say anything else as the two of them put their coats on and headed out into the snow. One of the things Mindy loved most about Snowy Pine Ridge was how walkable everything was. She always took the time to relish how picturesque everything was each and every time she left her house.

They walked through town, Mindy stopping to point out things of note as they made their way toward the town hall. When they finally climbed the steps to the large brick building, Noah rushed ahead of her to pull open the door.

They were immediately met by the sound of Christmas carols playing over the speakers that lined the walls, and the sound of everyone else in the room all chatting excitedly amongst themselves. The center of the large room had been decorated with long tables and chairs, and each chair had a gingerbread house "station" in front of it, containing everything someone would need to decorate the small house.

Louise, who sat at the main table, waved them over in greeting when they stepped through the door. The older woman eyed Noah with open curiosity, but she didn't comment any further as she advised them to go ahead and take their seats and gave them a rundown of how the competition would go.

Mindy led Noah through the gathered townsfolk toward two empty chairs side by side. They nestled themselves into the space easily, and her eyes roved over everything laid out before her. The house was already put together, because the competition was going to be on decoration only. But frosting, food coloring, and tools for piping and spackling were laid before both of them.

A few people called out Mindy's name as they passed, and she glanced up to see Valerie and Clark walking by to take their seats. She gave them a friendly wave before turning her attention back to Noah.

"I forgot to tell you," she said. "Valerie and Clark have decided to get married soon. In two weeks, actually, at the annual holiday party."

Noah's mouth popped open in surprise. "That early?"

Mindy shrugged one shoulder. "They're in love and they don't want to wait. I think it's sweet."

"It's very sweet."

She grinned at him, surprised that he was having such a normal reaction to this. Years ago, he would have gone on a long, drawn-out rant of how silly it was to rush something that was as important as a marriage. She chose not to comment on the change in him as she continued on.

"It's going to be a big effort on our end to get everything ready," she explained. "We're changing quite a few of the decorations around to be more wedding appropriate but still very Christmas oriented, and Sarah and I are going to work together on a wedding cake. All the things."

"I can pitch in."

Now it was Mindy's mouth that dropped open in surprise.  
“You're offering to help?”

Noah nodded, and she shook her head, trying to make sense of this out of character offer of assistance.

“You're sure?” she said, emphasizing her words. “Really, really sure?”

Noah nodded again, eyeing her like she'd lost her mind.

“Yes,” he answered, saying the word as if the answer should have been obvious. “I'm invested now. I was there for the proposal, after all. Might as well help see it through to the wedding.”

Mindy gaped at him, astonished at what had just transpired.

Just as she was about to open her mouth to say as much, while also thanking Noah profusely, a voice rose up over the din of conversation in the room, announcing that it was time for the competition to start.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

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Noah rubbed a hand over the back of his neck as he tried to stop the blush from creeping into his cheeks at Mindy's clearly shocked gaze. Thankfully, a woman was tapping into a microphone at the front of the room, demanding everyone's attention.

"Thank you all for coming today," she said, beaming at all of the people seated at the tables. "This is going to be, I hope, a fantastic evening for everyone involved. For those of you that don't know me, my name is Julie Chen, owner of Happy Memories Antique Shop down the way. And I've been partnering with Mayor Thornton to bring this all to life."

She launched into an explanation of the competition, saying that people could compete individually or in pairs, as long as only one house was submitted. And they would have only two hours to complete it. Noah darted a quick glance around the room, noting that people were cracking their knuckles, stretching their arms, and apparently taking things much more seriously than he had imagined they would.

"Now, on the count of three," Julie announced, pointing to a giant digital timer mounted on the wall that was set for two hours.

Everyone in the room chimed in for the countdown, a cacophonous riot of, "Three, two, one!"

The final word reverberated off the walls as the timer started, and the room exploded into a flurry of activity. Noah

turned and stared down at his gingerbread house, not knowing at all where to begin.

He glanced next to him where Mindy sat, noticing that she was already expertly combining icing with some of the food coloring to make her own beautiful colors inside the piping bag. As he watched her, he realized with a sinking feeling that he didn't stand a chance.

She must have felt his gaze on her because her brown eyes turned toward his.

"Everything all right?" she asked.

Noah nodded, hating that he was feeling suddenly so self-conscious. He was a man who prided himself on being good at things. It was embarrassing enough for him to have to admit to being afraid of crowds, but apparently, when it came to decorating a gingerbread house, he was entirely out of his depth.

"Everything's all right," he answered, but he must not have sounded very convincing because instead of going back to the task at hand, Mindy just arched an eyebrow at him and continued to stare. He sighed, realizing that she wasn't going to let this go. "This might have been a bad idea. I don't know what I'm doing."

He waved his hand over the table, gesturing vaguely at all the tools and instruments laid out before him. Mindy's eyes began to dance with humor as she realized what his problem was, but he had to give her credit for not actually laughing.

"You can work on mine with me," she offered, pointing to the house in front of her.

Noah cocked his head to the side. "You sure?"

"Yeah. Julie said we could compete in pairs. It's no trouble at all."

He hesitated for only a second, studying her face for any sign that she wasn't sure about this, but there was none to be found. He nodded, a bit surprised that she would offer at all. The Mindy that he had known all those years ago had been highly competitive, most of the time to a fault—just like he

had been. But as they moved his supplies out from in front of him and shifted the house she was working on to the center between them, there was a much more relaxed air to her than he'd expected.

"Okay, so here's how you'll pipe the icing," she said, demonstrating to him exactly how he should pinch the bag and move it back and forth to create swirls of lavender along the edge of the house.

After a few strokes, she passed the bag to him, watching carefully as he repeated the steps. She gave him a few patient critiques before moving on to decorating the bottom of the board, using a fluffy white icing dabbed with blue food coloring to look like shimmering snow.

As the time continued to tick down, he couldn't help but marvel at how well they were working together. It had been a very long time since he and Mindy had been a team, but they fell into the old habit of it all rather seamlessly.

And the longer they worked together, the more apparent it became just how much she had changed. She still definitely wanted to win. It was easy for him to read that in the determined set of her jaw and the way she was hyper-focused on every single detail. But she wasn't so focused on it that she would do whatever it took to win, and he found that he quite liked this new version of Mindy.

"All right, everyone," Julie called out an hour later, her voice ringing out over the hum of the competitors all murmuring excitedly as they worked on their houses. "We're halfway there!"

Noah glanced at the clock, finding it hard to believe that a full hour had already passed. But sure enough, the digital timer was showing fifty-nine minutes and thirty seconds, and dwindling.

His heart began to race, realizing that they still had so much to get done. With a jolt, it dawned on him that if they didn't win, Mindy was going to be disappointed. That thought, more than anything, spurred Noah into action. He finished piping some icing onto the chimney in record time, then

followed Mindy's carefully articulated instructions on where to place the sugar-coated gumdrops along the edges of the roof.

Although he would never have expected his knowledge of real estate to be helpful in a situation like this, Noah had always prided himself in having an eye for architecture and design, so he was pleased to be able to offer a few suggestions for decorating ideas as well, which Mindy gladly accepted.

They created a full scene, going above and beyond to decorate not just the house but the cardboard base it was set on, using candy and icing to make a little yard. Mindy used the frosting to build garden beds of lollipops instead of flowers, making them look like they were dusted with snow. Meanwhile, Noah added detailing to the windows that made them look beautiful and ornate.

As the host began counting down the final minute, they worked quickly to add their final touches.

“Three!” Julie called, and Noah realized that he had one final idea.

“Two!”

He swiped the piping bag with a flourish, allowing it to loop along the window so that it perfectly resembled a shutter that had been thrown open.

“One!”

Mindy added a tiny drop of frosting to the front door in the shape of a door knocker.

“All right, time is up! Put your tools down!”

Noah dropped the frosting bag onto the table, a triumphant grin spreading across his face as he turned to glance at Mindy. She was wearing an elated grin of her own. It had come right down to the wire, but they had finished. And as Noah looked at the work of absolute art that they had created together, he realized that although he hoped they would win because he wanted to see Mindy's smile grow even wider, he honestly didn't care about who came in first place. He had enjoyed the

process of creating the house so much that it felt like its own reward.

As instructed, they wrote their names on the card in front of their house and then pushed their chairs back from the table, giving the volunteer judges space to move around the room and look at everyone's creations. He and Mindy walked over to a stand in the far corner where another volunteer was doling out hot chocolate and Christmas sugar cookies.

"Okay, so I scoped out some of the competition," Mindy whispered to him as they grabbed their drinks and walked away from the crowd.

"And?" Noah prompted, taking a bite of his sugar cookie.

"And there are some talented people in town, but they aren't as good as us."

She looked up at him and winked, and Noah noticed that she had a small smear of whipped cream dotted along her upper lip, a remnant of her hot chocolate. He laughed, and without thinking, he reached up a hand to brush it away.

Her skin was just as smooth and warm as he remembered, and for a split second he was transported into the past. All of the times he'd done this exact motion came flooding back to him, and for a moment, it seemed the same images darted through Mindy's mind as well. Her eyes turned soft, and Noah could have sworn that she began to lean into his touch.

"All right, everyone, the judges have conferred, and we've picked our winner!" Julie's voice came over the speakers once more, snapping both Noah and Mindy out of their shared past and into the present.

He jolted, jerking his hand back and shaking his head in an effort to clear it. Mindy was blinking rapidly, as if she too, was banishing the memories to the back of her mind as they both turned toward the center of the room to face the host.

"Everyone put in so much effort," Julie continued. "And all of your houses were award worthy, as far as I'm concerned. But in a unanimous decision, there was one that stood out

amongst the rest. Would Mindy Harvey and Noah Henderson please step forward?"

Applause broke out among the competitors, and Noah could've sworn he heard a whistle from the other side of the room as the people in front of them began to part so they could walk toward the mayor. The applause continued all the way until they stood beside Julie Chen and the panel of judges.

"Noah," Julie said, looking directly at him. "I've heard you're a visitor in Snowy Pine Ridge. What do you have to say about winning the gingerbread house decorating competition?"

The woman extended the microphone toward him, and his cheeks grew hot.

"I think it's great," he admitted, glancing at Mindy with a small smile. "But the truth is, I wouldn't have been able to do anything without my partner. Looks like it pays to have such a world class baker as a teammate."

There were a few chuckles around the room before Julie asked Mindy how she felt about the win.

"Noah can talk all he wants about my skill," Mindy said, her brown eyes meeting his. "But he did more than half the work. So I couldn't have done it without him either."

"Well, congratulations, you two. And now, for second place..."

Julie continued speaking, inviting the second-place winners to step forward, but Noah didn't hear a thing. It was hard to focus on anything else when Mindy kept looking at him with a wide, happy smile that made his heart race.

As the team that had won third place was called up after the second-place winners, Noah and Mindy clapped for them, and when the announcements were over, they strode back into the crowd.

People were still milling about, checking out the booths and vendors that had taken advantage of the crowd and lined the walls. As Noah and Mindy walked around the perimeter of the room and Noah bought a few things to make his hotel room a little cozier, a feeling of comfort washed over him.

“Excuse me,” came a voice from behind him, accompanied by a quick but insistent tap on his shoulder.

He turned to find an older woman standing directly behind him. Her long white hair was brushed back from her face and secured into a tidy braid, and her piercing hazel eyes were regarding him with a curious expression.

“You’re Noah Henderson, aren’t you?” the woman asked, her voice raspy but not unfriendly. When Noah nodded, the wrinkles on her face deepened as she smiled. “Ah. I thought so. My name is Edith Brinkley. I was a friend of your aunt Theresa’s.”

She extended a wrinkled hand for him to shake, which he did gladly. Her grip was stronger than he’d expected, her hand soft and warm.

“I was sorry to hear about Theresa’s passing,” Edith said, her voice dropping a little as the handshake ended.

“I’m sorry for your loss as well, since you lost a friend,” Noah answered, and Edith’s throat bobbed with emotion.

“Thank you.” She took a quick breath before her expression lightened a bit. “I bet you don’t remember me, but we’ve actually met before. When you were just a tot.” Her eyes flicked to Mindy, and they lit with amusement. “He was a cute little thing when he was younger.”

“Is that so?” Mindy asked, giving the woman a sly grin as Edith nodded.

“Seems like he turned into a fine young man as well,” Edith responded, giving Noah a considering look.

He didn’t know why, but her praise made him proud. When he thanked her for it, she quickly waved away his words.

“Nothing to thank me for,” she insisted. “I wouldn’t have said it if I didn’t mean it. You were a sweet little thing then too. I know Theresa was proud of the man you became.”

Once again, warmth filled Noah’s chest. Her words touched him more than she probably knew.

Someone at the next booth started calling out for Edith, and she wished them both goodbye, telling Noah not to be a stranger while he was still in town before rushing off to meet her friend. When the older woman was out of earshot, Mindy bumped her shoulder against his.

“Careful, Henderson,” she said jokingly. “Keep getting glowing reviews from cute old women, and people might think your cold-hearted thing is just an act.” She leaned in close, her eyes dancing with amusement. “Don’t worry, your secret is safe with me. I’ll let everyone keep thinking you’re just as frosty as a snowman.”

Noah gave a halfhearted laugh as Mindy turned away from him, her attention grabbed by something else in the crowd. But something in her words hurt him, and the smile soon fell from his face.

He didn’t like the idea of Mindy thinking he was cold-hearted. Even if she was joking, he didn’t like it one bit. And with a growing sense of determination, he realized that he needed to do whatever he could to change her perception of him.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

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A few days later, Noah was at the Warm and Bright Hotel doing some work. He had spent every day since their big gingerbread house win with Mindy, but today, he had to catch up on some emails that had been gathering in his inbox.

The sound of his phone ringing pulled him away from thoughts of his latest adventure with Mindy, and he glanced down at the screen to see that it was his father calling.

He groaned, and for a moment, he contemplated not picking up. Although he'd been working toward fulfilling the requirements of his aunt's will, he hadn't made any headway on convincing the locals that the industrial complex was a good idea. In fact, he hadn't even brought it up to anyone since the very first meeting in town. But he wasn't eager to tell his father that.

Still, he knew that his father would just call him again if he didn't answer, so he grabbed the phone off the table and pressed *accept*.

"Noah," his father barked, his voice as brusque as usual.  
"What's going on? How are things in Snowy Pine Ridge?"

"They're good," Noah began hesitantly. "The time is passing quickly."

"Good, good. How are things with the complex?"

Of course his father would get straight down to business. Slowly, Noah blew out a breath to steady himself before beginning on his explanation.

“It’s... going,” he answered. “But I’ve been thinking. What if we did something else there? Something that would feed off the charm of the town and enhance the area, rather than make it turn industrial.”

“Oh, Noah,” his father groaned, and Noah could picture him rubbing his temple. “We’ve talked about this. We crunched the numbers. *This* is the most profitable option. Don’t get any kind of fancy ideas in your head, kid. Keep with the plan.”

Noah was quiet for a moment, hating the image of the industrial complex looming over the town that he had started to like so much. In his mind’s eye, the large warehouses looked garish and out of place. The trail of massive semi-trucks that the complex would bring with it clogged the streets in his vision, causing people to honk angrily at each other, filling the town with the sound of their annoyance.

He didn’t like it one bit. But he could tell from his father’s voice that he wouldn’t hear of anything else—at least, not right now. The land had been left to Noah, but he and his father had planned to develop it together, so he would have to find a way to get Brett on board with a different plan.

For now though, without facts and figures to back up his argument, he decided to let it go.

Glancing at the small clock on his bedside table, he realized that he needed to head out soon, or he was going to be late for his meeting with Mindy. So Noah quickly ended the call with his father, promising him that he’d do more work on winning over the people of Snowy Pine Ridge.

The moment he hung up the phone, he pushed himself to his feet and grabbed his coat. Throwing it over his shoulders, he strode through the hotel and out into the blustery cold day.

Noah did like the fact that staying at the Warm and Bright Hotel put him well within walking distance of the house that Mindy owned. Of course, in Snowy Pine Ridge, everything seemed to be within walking distance. He had hardly even moved his car since he’d first arrived in town. Once he’d driven it from the parking spot in front of the bakery to the

parking lot at the Warm and Bright Hotel, it had remained there the entire time.

He recognized a few of the people that he passed while walking to Mindy's, and even though he couldn't immediately recall their names, each of them still gave him a friendly wave as he passed and told him to have a good day.

The blustery day got even windier and colder as he walked, and by the time he made it to Mindy's doorstep, there was a large gray cloud hanging above the town, looking like it was about to pelt snow down on them at any moment.

"You ready?" she asked the moment she pulled open the door, already fully bundled up in a bright red puffer jacket and a black wool scarf.

Noah nodded, turning so that she could walk beside him as they made their way toward town. They'd had a plan to go see the dogsledding business again, with Mindy assuring him that it would be much better this time around. He'd told her that under no circumstances would he actually be getting on a dogsled, but that he would check out the facilities, at the very least.

She'd seemed happy enough with that response and didn't push him any further on it as they turned a corner, spotting Winter Run Racing several blocks away. As they strode toward it, the wind suddenly began to whip up around them. The sky, which Noah had marked as ominous not long before, began pelting down snow.

"Yikes!" Mindy yelped, lifting up her mittened hands to move her scarf and shield her face, while Noah tucked his chin down into his coat to try to hide it from the force of the wind and the snow.

"Hurry!" Mindy told him, raising her voice over the sound of the wind. "I'm sure Derek and Lacy will let us warm up in the kennels for a bit while we wait for the storm to pass."

"Okay," Noah called back, the wind nearly stealing his breath with its cold force.

They both bowed their heads against the sudden snowstorm, all but running in the direction of the building they had seen just moments before. By the time they reached it, the snow was falling so thick and so fast that he could hardly even make out the houses across the street.

Mindy stopped in front of the door at the front of the building and wrenched it open, and then both of them darted inside. The moment the door snapped shut behind them, the howling sound of the wind outside grew quieter.

Derek was behind the front desk, and he glanced up at them, blinking in surprise. “What are you two doing out? It looks bad out there!”

“It is bad,” Mindy told him. “That storm came up out of nowhere. Do you mind if we go see the dogs and wait out the worst of it in here?”

“Oh, of course not. They won’t be going out for any sled runs during this snowstorm, so they’ll be happy for the company.”

He led them to the back, grabbing them a couple of chairs so that they could sit with the dogs. Noah had to remind himself of his pleasant interaction with Gus the other day, telling himself that these dogs were likely just as friendly as he tried to overcome his nerves—and to his delight, he was right. He held out his hand like Mindy had taught him, and the dogs sniffed at him with interest before licking his knuckles.

Once the dogs settled down from their initial excitement and Derek returned to the front office area, Mindy and Noah settled into two folding chairs that Derek had placed along one wall.

“I can tell these guys are well-loved,” he commented, gesturing to the huskies.

“Oh, they are. Derek and Lacy adore all their dogs,” Mindy answered. “They’re the most spoiled pups on the planet. They get so many treats and training and play time. They’re the happiest dogs I’ve ever seen.”

“Besides Gus, obviously,” Noah pointed out, drawing a grin from her.

“Besides Gus,” she agreed.

Silence fell between them, filled only by the whistling of the storm outside. But it didn’t feel awkward, not like it had between them when he’d first arrived at Snowy Pine Ridge. He felt like they’d worked past some of that, forging a new kind of relationship instead of just falling into the same patterns of their old one. And as he sat huddled next to the massive heater with her, he was glad for that.

“How are your parents doing?” he asked, realizing that he’d asked the same thing the very first day she’d shown him around the town. “Have they been well? Do you see them often?”

But at the time, she hadn’t seemed keen to answer. He was hoping that now, with things a bit more easy and comfortable between them, she’d give him a more honest and thorough answer.

“Yeah, they’re doing well,” she answered, which was almost the exact answer she’d given him before. But it wasn’t in the same clipped tone, and this time, she continued to elaborate just like he’d hoped she would. “They’re both still working all the time, even though I wish they’d retire. But they love their jobs, so it isn’t something I think they’ll ever give up. Not unless they’re forced. They work too hard, I think. They always taught me that that was the thing that mattered most, but I’m not sure I agree with that anymore. I think I see things more Gram’s way now. She always used to tell me life wasn’t a race, and I should stop and smell the roses.”

“Used to?” Noah asked, not missing her use of the past tense. “Did she...”

Mindy nodded, sadness entering her eyes. “She passed right before I moved to Snowy Pine Ridge.”

Her voice had become thick with emotion, and Noah’s heart lurched at the obvious pain losing her grandmother had

caused.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” he responded honestly. “She was an amazing woman. I always liked her every time I met her. We don’t need to talk about it anymore if it’s too painful.”

“No.” Mindy shook her head. “It isn’t too painful. It’s just...” She gave a small shake of her head as if to clear it before continuing. “I still think about baking with her, you know? About spending time in the kitchen with her. She always encouraged me to have fun and to keep trying new things. I miss her.”

Noah nodded. “That’s what Aunt Theresa was for me too. She was an inspiration, and someone I always admired, even if we grew apart as I got older.”

“It’s a shame I never knew she was your aunt while she was alive.”

Noah blinked in surprise. “You met her?”

“Of course I did,” Mindy said, giving him a quizzical look. “It’s a small town. Granted, I only met her a couple of times. But she was always so sweet the few times she came into the bakery.”

He sat still, letting that information wash over him. For some reason, he had never stopped to consider the fact that Mindy might have met Theresa. In his head, they had always been two entirely separate entities—the two women that had helped forge him into the man that he was today. And to find out that they had their own connection, one that didn’t really have anything to do with him, felt strange. But strange in a way that he kind of... liked.

It had him feeling so off-kilter that Noah didn’t really stop to consider what he was about to say next.

“Do you ever think that if we both hadn’t been so consumed with our careers and our own ambition, we would have been able to make things between us work? That we would’ve stayed together?”

The words fell from his lips quickly, before he realized the impact they might have on the woman in front of him. To her

credit, Mindy's eyes just turned pensive as she considered her answer. A few moments passed before she spoke, and when she did, her voice was quiet.

"I don't know," she said simply. "Maybe. But we both had a lot of growing to do. So maybe not."

He nodded. It was the answer he'd expected, and a part of him was certain she was right. She was definitely a different person than she had been back then, and he liked to think that he had grown and matured too, although he still felt far too imperfect when he considered himself through Mindy's eyes.

"I don't know why I'm going to say this," he admitted, bringing up his hand to rub at his chin awkwardly. "But I haven't really dated much since you. Not seriously, anyway."

Mindy's eyes widened, and Noah's heart began to race. Had that been the wrong thing to say?

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

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Mindy stared at Noah as she processed his words, trying to make sense of what he'd just told her.

Somehow, this handsome, incredibly put together man was sitting across from her, admitting that he hadn't dated seriously since their breakup over five years ago. She didn't pay attention to the small thrill that the words gave her, pushing that deep down inside her as she finally found the courage to speak.

"Same here," she admitted with a shrug, hoping that her words came out sounding somewhat casual. "Don't get me wrong. I've had a boyfriend or two, if you can even call them that. But none of them ever lasted very long."

A look that Mindy couldn't really read flashed across Noah's face before he rearranged his features into something more neutral.

"I'm sorry that you haven't found anyone yet," he murmured. "You deserve the absolute best. You deserve a man who will treat you like a queen."

"Thank you," she whispered, blushing so deeply that she was sure she could walk outside into the blizzard and melt every single snowflake. Glancing away, she shifted the conversation. "So, tell me about your life now. You've seen mine during the tour of the town. Now I want to know more about you and what you've been up to."

She nudged him with the toe of her boot, eliciting a chuckle from him, a deep sound that rumbled in his chest.

“It’s pretty boring,” Noah admitted, raking a hand through his dark hair. “I work all the time. I usually steal maybe an hour to myself each day to go to the gym or for a run. But some days, I can’t even do that.”

“That sounds like a lot,” Mindy murmured, and Noah gave her a quizzical look.

“You mean you don’t have your hands full with the bakery?” He snorted and gave her a slight eye roll.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” she asked, narrowing her eyes.

“To hear your friends, or really anyone who has met you, tell it, you’re *always* working.”

“Correction.” Mindy held her finger up in the air. “I *used* to always work. But I got some help at the bakery, and I take days off when I need them. I’ve learned to delegate.”

“Wow. That’s impressive.” He grinned at her, clearly letting her know he was teasing, and she returned it with a smile of her own.

“I thought so too,” she said with a satisfied nod. “I do put in a lot of hours at the bakery, although it hardly feels like work sometimes, since I love it so much. But I’ve definitely learned to have a better work-life balance.”

“You know...” Noah leaned back in his chair a bit, crossing his arms over his broad chest as he regarded her. “I’ve been wondering, how did it go when you set up shop in Snowy Pine Ridge, anyway? Like, how did this all go down?”

“Well, you know about the girls’ trip already,” she began, and Noah nodded. “When I first moved here, oh, Noah, I was so miserable. And not in an unhappy way. I was miserable *to* people.”

She shuddered, thinking of how her arrival in Snowy Pine Ridge had gone down, and Noah sat patiently as he waited for her to continue.

“I was so competitive when I first got here. When Baking Fiend opened, I thought for sure I was going to be the best in

town, to bake absolute circles around Sweet Thing, Sarah's bakery, and eventually it would be just me left. I was determined to be the best."

Slowly the whole truth of her story came out. She filled Noah in on that first Christmas in town, the one where she'd nearly ruined any shot she'd had at being friends with Sarah by viewing her only as competition and not as a potential friend. They'd even gone so far as to have an actual bake-off to try to determine who was the better baker, and Mindy had broken down when she'd had an unexpected disaster with one of her recipes. But Sarah, as always, had been so incredibly gentle and understanding, giving Mindy much more grace than she still felt she deserved.

She told him how her friendship with Sarah had evolved since then. How they'd made it a point now to run sales and specials that complemented the other one's business, even going so far as to having a shared rewards program that gave you discounts at either store. She told him about how Sarah helped her through her most recent breakup, even if it hadn't exactly been a huge emotional turmoil since she hadn't been seeing the guy for very long.

By the end of it, Mindy was filled with so much gratitude and love for the town and the people within it that her cheeks hurt from how hard she was smiling.

"I know it is a bit of a step down from the ambitions I used to have," she said softly, locking eyes with Noah and thinking of all the times she told him about the bakery she'd own in New York City or some other glamorous place. "But I love it here. My dreams have changed, my wants have changed, *I* have changed. And it's now to the point that I can't really see myself calling anywhere else home."

Noah shook his head, pushing himself forward so he was perched nearly on the edge of his seat, making it so that they were only a few inches apart.

"For what it's worth," he told her, his voice low and husky. "I don't think you gave up anything at all. The bakery and the life that you've created here is amazing, Min. I never thought

I'd see you this happy. And I'm just happy that I get to witness some of it."

Mindy's cheeks flushed under the heat of his gaze, and the air between them became thick with tension. She was finding it hard to breathe as Noah began to lean forward. She wet her lips as, inch by inch, they both moved to close the distance between them. He was so close, close enough that she could feel his breath tickling against her cheek. Another inch, another centimeter, and their lips would—

The door to the kennel was pulled open, and Noah and Mindy shot away from one another as Lacy strolled inside. The sound of dogs barking in greeting rose up around them, and Lacy's eyebrows rose at the sight of the two of them.

Mindy could barely meet her friend's knowing gaze. Despite the fact that she and Noah were no longer leaning toward each other and gazing longingly into each other's eyes, their chairs were angled toward each other, their knees nearly touching. And the flushed, embarrassed look on Noah's face was also a dead giveaway as to what had happened... or *almost* happened, Mindy corrected herself.

"We got caught in the storm," she said hastily, her voice a bit high as she jumped to her feet. "We were on our way here so I could show Noah the dogs, and then the storm came out of nowhere and we had to dip inside. Derek said we could hang out with them for a bit."

"Of course." Lacy's eyes were still filled with amusement, but she didn't comment any further on what she'd walked in on. "Well, they always love the company. I'm making some coffee in the office if you'd like to drink some and warm up a bit more."

"Thanks, that's sweet of you," Mindy said, shooting a look at Noah. He nodded, and the two of them followed Lacy into the office.

It took another hour or so for the storm to pass, and to her surprise, Mindy found herself having a wonderful time hanging out with Noah, Derek, and Lacy. The four of them chatted like old friends, and Mindy was shocked at how easily

Noah got along with the couple, bantering with Derek as if they'd known each other for years.

He didn't just seem like a different man than he had when they'd dated five years ago. He almost seemed like a different person than he'd been when he had arrived in Snowy Pine Ridge not that long ago. His whole demeanor was softer and more open now, and Mindy found it impossible to resist him when he was like this.

By the time the bad weather cleared, they had opened a package of Christmas cookies as well, and Noah and Mindy were well-fed and well-caffeinated as they bid goodbye to Derek and Lacy and stepped outside.

Mindy and Noah began walking down the sidewalk, their shoulders brushing as they fell into an easy stride together. The storm had faded, leaving a fresh blanket of snow over the town that glinted in the streetlights.

The sun had started to set, painting the white, downy powder a beautiful, sparkling orange as the Christmas lights began to flicker on. They walked toward the town square, the top of the gorgeously decorated Christmas tree beckoning to them.

As they stepped into the square, a speaker fired up somewhere nearby, and Bing Crosby's voice began floating to them.

Mindy turned, looking at Noah. She was about to say something, but when she saw the way he was looking at her, his green eyes lit with an emotion that she couldn't quite place but that had butterflies erupting in her belly, the words died before they could ever reach her lips.

"Dance with me," Noah murmured, extending his gloved hand to her.

She knew that it was likely a bad idea. Their past, along with the reason Noah had come to Snowy Pine Ridge in the first place, combined to make their situation complicated at best. But his face was so open, so filled with hope, and so heart-achingly familiar and comforting that even with the

knowledge that it would likely be a mistake, Mindy couldn't bring herself to say no.

She placed her hand in his, a rush of emotion rising inside her as he pulled her close. Noah's large hand rested on the small of her back, holding her carefully as she rested her cheek against his chest, and they began to sway. Small, fluffy snowflakes still fell from the sky, wrapping them in a cocoon of silence, broken only by Bing Crosby crooning a Christmas song.

So much had happened since Noah's first appearance in Snowy Pine Ridge, and Mindy's mind and heart were having a hard time keeping up with it all. So she decided to think about it all later. For now, she was content resting her head against Noah's solid chest and hearing the steady, comforting thump of his heart beneath his coat as they danced in the town square.

Mindy promised herself that there would be plenty of time to be worried about mistakes being made later.

Now? Now was a time for joy, in whatever way she could find it.

And she was very much finding it within the comfort of Noah Henderson's arms.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

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The next afternoon, Mindy was wiping down the counter of the bakery, preparing to shut everything down for the day when the sound of the bell on the door jingling merrily grabbed her attention. Her gaze snapped up to see who had entered, and surprise filled her when she saw Noah standing in the doorway.

He grinned at her as he approached, and she returned his smile despite her confusion.

“We didn’t have plans for touring the town today, did we?” she asked.

He shook his head. “Nope, but I do have a surprise for you.”

“Oh, really? What is it?”

He arched one dark brow at her. “You do know what the word ‘surprise’ means, don’t you? I can’t tell you that yet, or it would give away the surprise.”

Mindy chuckled. “Okay. Well, I’m just finishing up here, and then I need to walk Gus, if it’s something that can wait for a little bit?”

“I can help you close up,” he offered, shrugging his coat off and slinging it over the back of the nearest chair.

She was shocked to find him in jeans and a fitted, casual sweater. Granted, the outfit was only casual in comparison to his usual attire of a perfectly tailored suit. The jeans still looked like they had been ironed and the sweater was

definitely a very expensive cashmere. But still, the more relaxed look caught her off-guard—almost as much as the words he spoke next.

“You can bring Gus with you for the surprise too. As long as he does okay with car rides?”

“You want Gus to come in your car?” Mindy asked, unable to hide the shock in her tone.

“Is he going to do okay in it?” Noah asked, and she could have sworn that there was concern for *Gus* lacing his tone. “Because if he doesn’t like cars or something, I can just stay with you while you walk him and then we can head out. I don’t want to stress him out.”

Mindy studied him as he walked behind the counter, took one look at what she was doing, then grabbed a rag of his own and began to help her wipe everything down. She was dumbfounded. Absolutely perplexed.

Over the past twenty-four hours, she’d barely been able to process the fact that they’d almost kissed, let alone the beautiful moment they’d shared while dancing in the snow.

And now he was showing up with surprises and helping her with the bakery? And worried about her dog?

She shook her head, once again telling herself that there would be time to figure it all out later as she continued going through her end-of-day routine. As a thanks to Allison for taking so many extra shifts at the bakery lately, Mindy had been on her own all day as she’d given the other woman the full day off. So even if she was incredibly confused by all of it, she wasn’t going to decline Noah’s help.

“He does great in cars, actually,” she told him, working faster than ever now that she had a surprise to look forward to.

“Then it’s settled,” Noah answered with a grin. “Gus will come with us.”

They worked in tandem, with Noah needing surprisingly little direction in what to do to close up the shop. Before Mindy knew it, she was locking the front door and walking toward Noah’s car.

It was the same black car that she'd seen the day he'd arrived, and as she climbed into it, she eyed the back seat.

"It's a good thing Gus is small," she said, almost to herself as she eyed the expensive looking upholstery. "And he's well-behaved too. But you might end up with some dog hairs on your seat."

"I don't mind," Noah said, truly sounding like he meant it as he pulled away from the curb to drive toward Mindy's house.

They made small talk as they drove, and since it was only a few blocks to her house, there wasn't enough time for things to get awkward or anything.

They hadn't talked about what had happened the evening before. When the dance had ended, they'd broken apart and walked back toward Mindy's house with their hands linked, and there'd been a moment when he dropped her off at her house where she'd once again thought he might kiss her.

But now, neither of them brought up the dance or the almost kiss, although unspoken words hovered between them.

When Mindy unlocked the front door of her house, Gus was already waiting in the entryway, dressed in the bright green Grinch sweater she'd selected earlier that morning. Noah began laughing when he saw him, shaking his head at the dog's attire.

"You put him in the most ridiculous stuff," he said as Mindy hooked a leash to Gus's collar.

"He loves it though! Don't you, buddy?" she cooed to the dog, who was currently dancing between their legs.

Now that Noah actually understood how to interact with the pup, the two of them were getting along swimmingly, and Gus eagerly followed along with them both as they strode back out the door and made their way to Noah's car.

Once in the car, she glanced at the back seat and decided to hold Gus in her lap instead, despite what Noah had said about not minding some fur. The pup was all too happy to curl up on

her legs and take a snooze as they drove, so it worked out just fine this way.

Mindy looked out the window as they made their way through town, noting with interest that they were headed away from downtown and toward the south side of Snowy Pine Ridge. As they made turn after turn, she began to get an idea of where they were heading. And about twenty minutes of driving later, that suspicion was confirmed when Noah pulled off the road and down a long, tree-lined driveway.

What used to be his aunt Theresa's house stood silhouetted against the early evening sky. The last rays of sunshine were slowly fading to the west, and as Mindy's eyes raked over the entirely undisturbed snow, she wondered how long it had been since someone had visited the property.

She and Gus waited patiently as Noah unlocked the door, walking through the threshold and into the house the moment he swung the door open. It was warm inside, letting her know that the heat, at least, had been turned on recently. She took off her coat and hung it on one of the hooks beside the door before kicking off her boots.

"I've never been to Theresa's house," she said, her eyes wide as she looked around at the beautiful home.

It was a Tudor style house, and the inside wasn't modern by any means, but it was truly gorgeous. The textured walls of almost every room they walked past contained built-in bookshelves that were filled to the brim with either books or knickknacks. The furniture, while clearly expensive, had a cozy feeling to it, as if it had been bought when it was at the height of luxury and then well-loved and lived in ever since.

"I spent as much time as I could here when I was a kid," Noah explained, and Mindy turned to look at him, struck by the emotion that laced his words. "I loved it here."

"I can see why," she answered honestly.

They stepped into a brightly painted kitchen, and she gasped. The back wall was one big window, looking out over a beautiful backyard that also had a stunning view of the rolling

hills that made up the ski runs to the south. She could just make out the dancing lights of the ski club, especially as the sky was becoming speckled with stars that rivaled the pinpricks of glowing light on the ground.

“She used to bake here all the time,” Noah said, walking farther into the room. Mindy watched as he absentmindedly trailed his fingers over the butcher’s block countertops. “I loved to come in and help her.”

She stepped closer, following after him. “Really? You never told me that before.”

“I didn’t really carry the hobby or the love for baking into my adult life,” he admitted with a shrug. Then, turning his gaze back to her, he gestured toward the staircase just off the kitchen. “Want to see the rest of the house?”

Mindy nodded, following after Noah as he led the way. They walked to the second floor as he told her stories of the times that he had spent here. With every room they visited, she learned more and more about him, and it filled her with an odd sense of regret to know that although she and Noah had once been so close, she hadn’t really known about this part of his life at all.

It made her wonder if maybe they’d both been so consumed by their own lives and their own ambitions that they hadn’t paid as much attention to each other as they should have. The love had absolutely been there, she had no doubt about that. Especially since the thought of him still tugged at her heart even after all these years. But perhaps, Mindy thought, there had been a lot more to fix than they’d realized.

He showed her the room that had been his when he’d visited, and she grinned as she saw the little remnants of the boy he had been. There was a shelf full of action figures, which he told her his aunt had collected for him. Mindy trailed her hands over them, imagining what it would have been like for him in another life if he had gotten to spend more time here, where his interests and passion were celebrated and cultivated, rather than stifled.

The sound of a phone ringing startled her, and she glanced toward Noah as he delved a hand into his pocket.

“Sorry,” he murmured.

She shook her head. “It’s okay.”

When he pulled out the device and glanced at the screen, he grimaced slightly.

“It’s my dad,” he explained, an apologetic look in his green eyes. “I have to take this. Feel free to keep exploring.”

She nodded and told him to take as long as he needed as he pressed a button on the phone and brought it to his ear. The sound of his voice faded as he walked out of the room, and she heard the creaking of the stairs as he went down to the first floor.

She stayed in the guest room for a few minutes, curiosity getting the better of her as she took a stolen peek inside the closet. But she found it empty, and not wanting to just stay put, she walked back out into the hallway.

Mindy could hear Noah talking downstairs, and she thought she picked up a hint of frustration in his tone as he talked to his father. His voice grew louder and then softer again, and she imagined him pacing as the two of them talked about whatever his father had called to discuss.

She was forced to admit that, more than likely, they were talking about Noah’s plans in Snowy Pine Ridge. And once again Mindy had to remind herself that no matter their past and no matter how good it felt to be spending time with him now, Noah’s ambitions were still a threat to the town and the people that she loved.

A door at the far end of the hallway caught her attention, one that they hadn’t gone anywhere near on their tour, and curiosity tugged at her once more. She walked toward it and turned the old brass knob to open it.

The space beyond the door was dark, but the light from the hallway illuminated just enough that she could see a stairwell going up to another level.

“An attic,” she whispered to herself, eyeing the walls on either side of the stairs for a light switch.

She found one relatively easily and was rewarded with a flood of bright light coming from the room above.

Mindy had always had a fascination with attics and had never lived in a house with one. But she’d read so many books as a child, and all of them had painted attics as magical, dusty old places. As she took the final step and walked into the room above, she found that what she’d read in books was half true, at least. There was dust everywhere, making it clear that no one had been up here since long before Theresa had passed away.

Mindy poked around a little, and she was just about to leave when a box in the center of the room caught her attention. It was cleaner than the rest, as if it had been put up here more recently, and it was secured with a bright red satin ribbon, the only spot of color in the entire space—which was likely why it had grabbed Mindy’s attention.

Curious to know what was contained within the box, Mindy walked forward. The attic floorboards creaked beneath her weight, and she sank down onto her knees in front of the box, then reached out and tugged carefully at the ribbon.

Making sure not to damage anything, she undid the bow in the ribbon and lifted the edges of the box, revealing stacks and stacks of envelopes that had been stuffed with something. Mindy reached inside, plucking one of the envelopes from the top of the pile and turning it so that she could read the writing on the front.

It was addressed to Theresa, but the return address was what caught her attention the most. Because the name at the top of it was none other than Noah Henderson.

These letters were decidedly not her business, but she couldn’t stop herself. She carefully opened the envelope, which had already been torn open at the top, and tugged out the folded paper that was nestled inside.

It was definitely Noah's familiar scrawl, and Mindy excitedly began to devour the words.

Noah was telling his aunt all about college, and how much he was liking it, despite the fact that he was studying business like his father demanded instead of literature like he had wanted. He told Theresa about how he missed Snowy Pine Ridge, and how he'd been missing it for some time. But he added that it was kind of okay because he'd met a girl named Mindy, who he really liked so far.

With a little thrill of shock, her eyes darted up to the date in the top right corner, immediately registering that he must've written this at the very beginning of their relationship.

She reached down and grabbed another one at random from the pile, this one from a little bit before they met. And as she read this letter, she began to learn even more about what Noah's life had been like before she'd ever even known him. Letter after letter, Mindy kept reading, losing all sense of time. For a while, she even forgot where she was as she read Noah's words from all those years ago.

She was beginning to see Noah's life through his eyes more than ever before, and she learned quite a bit about him that she hadn't previously known—or at least, not fully.

In more than one letter, he talked about his father and how he felt like he'd never live up to Brett's expectations. Noah had often spoken to Mindy of wanting to please his father, expressing concern over his dad's high standards, but he'd never truly discussed the stress that it put him under. In the letters, however, he was open and honest in a way that tugged at her heart.

The stairs creaked, the sound of it jostling her out of her reverie and reminding her that she wasn't alone in the house.

She blinked, looking down at the papers in her hand. Feeling suddenly a bit guilty, she began putting the letters back in their envelopes and slipping them back into the box. But she hadn't managed to put all of them away by the time Noah got to the top of the stairs.

“I’m sorry,” she blurted, moving as quickly and carefully as she could to put the rest of them back in the box. “I shouldn’t have looked at the letters. Curiosity got the better of me, and I just couldn’t not do it. You said to explore, and I—”

“Mindy.” Noah’s voice was soft as he walked over to her, dropping to his knees so that he was at eye level. “It’s okay. I told you to explore. I meant it. I don’t mind that you read these. In fact, I’m glad you did.”

Her eyes flicked up and met his, finding nothing but sincerity lingering there.

“Really?” she asked, chewing on her lower lip. “You’re not mad?”

“Not at all. I may not remember every single thing I wrote to my aunt, but I know I didn’t say anything I’m ashamed of. I’m actually pretty sure I gushed about you quite a bit.”

She blushed. “There might have been *some* gushing.”

Noah chuckled as he helped her place the letters back in the box and secure it with the ribbon. When the box was back in its place, they stood, both of them taking the time to brush the dust off of their pants before walking back down the stairs.

She was burning to ask how the conversation with his father had gone, but she also didn’t want to end up on the topic of his plans for the town. Things had been going so well between them lately, and she didn’t want to get into an argument or sour the good feelings between them. So she opted for a little bit safer territory instead.

“I agree with what Edith said at the gingerbread competition,” she murmured as they stepped back out onto the second-floor hallway. “I think Theresa would have been proud of you.”

Noah paused, and as he turned to look over his shoulder at her, she could have sworn that his green eyes were tinged with regret. “I don’t know if that’s true. But it’s nice of you to say it.”

He glanced at the walls around them, a faraway look in his eyes, and she wondered what he was envisioning. When he

looked at this house, the one that was filled with so many happy memories from his childhood, did he imagine the destruction that would need to be caused in order to build the industrial complex in this very spot?

She could see the way the thought of that hurt him. She would have had to be blind not to see it, in fact.

*I don't know if that's true. But it's nice of you to say it.*

His words echoed in her mind. If he had said something like this when he'd first gotten to Snowy Pine Ridge, had hinted that maybe his aunt would have been disappointed in him for the decisions he was making in regard to his inheritance, Mindy probably would have agreed with him.

But now? After spending time with him over the course of the last week and a half, she wasn't so sure anymore.

"No matter what you decide," Mindy said suddenly, meeting and holding his gaze. "No matter what you do with the land she left you, I know that Theresa loved you, and that she would be proud of you. Don't forget that."

The line between Noah's brows softened, and he reached up and placed a hand on Mindy's arm, giving it a soft squeeze.

"Thank you," he murmured. "That... that means a lot, Min."

He looked like he wanted to say more, but instead, he turned and led her back toward the staircase and down to the first floor.

Mindy followed after him, finding Gus playing with a ball of paper in the living room. She laughed at the pup, picking him up and cradling him to her chest as Noah chuckled. And all the while, she could still feel a tingling warmth in her arm from where Noah had touched her.

\* \* \*

Valerie reached forward, pulling open the door to the ice rink with a huff of effort before stepping into the space. Her gaze

instantly landed on Shelley, who was skating happily in the center of the ice rink.

She waved at her friend as she passed, making her way toward where Rudolph stood behind the concession counter, taking inventory of the snacks. She must have made some kind of noise as she approached, because the white-haired older man turned to face her, and a grin lit up his face.

“Hey there, kid,” he said, his gruff voice filled with affection as he looked at her.

He was still mostly the grouchy old man whom she’d met when she’d come to Snowy Pine Ridge over a year ago. But there was no denying that he’d softened toward her, and to everyone in general, since Valerie’s appearance in his life.

She thought for a split second about how much time Rudolph spent alone. She knew that he was busy with the rink, and she was also certain that if she even hinted at fixing him up with someone, he would immediately shut her down. But she couldn’t stifle the desire to see him happy and content, with a special lady to spend his free time with.

Valerie filed that thought away for later, reminding herself that fixing her surrogate father up was not why she’d come to the rink today.

“Hi, Rudolph. I wanted to talk to you about something,” she said, leaning her elbows on the counter.

“You don’t have to give me a whole preamble,” he grunted good-naturedly, and Valerie chuckled. “Get on with it.”

“Fine,” she said, giving him a slight roll of her eyes, which made him grin. “I’ll get on with it. I came to ask you to walk me down the aisle.”

Rudolph’s hand stopped moving on the clipboard he’d been writing on, his whole body going rigid as he turned to face her. She stared at his deeply lined face, noticing the way his blue eyes gleamed as studied her.

“You... what?” he asked, his voice thick with emotion.

“I want you to walk me down the aisle,” Valerie repeated, saying each word slowly and deliberately as Rudolph’s smile grew. “If you’re willing. You’re the closest thing to a father I have, and it would mean so much to me.”

Instead of speaking right away, he set his clipboard down on the counter and walked around to the other side of it. He extended his arms out to her and pulled her into an almost bone-crushing hug.

“It would be an honor,” he said, his gruff voice cracking as he spoke.

She could feel his shoulders shaking as he embraced her, and she squeezed him back. Rudolph might be an old curmudgeon, but when he loved, he loved hard. And she was so incredibly thankful to have him in her life.

“Thank you,” she whispered. “You’ve already made my wedding day just a little bit better. I can’t wait.”

They stepped out of each other’s embrace and spent several minutes talking about a few details of the rapidly approaching wedding day. Once they’d hammered out a few plans and she had filled the older man in on what they had decided on so far, she left Rudolph to get back to work, striding out of the rink with a wave goodbye to Shelley.

As she stepped back outside into the cold, bright day, Valerie smiled widely.

In just a few short weeks, she would be Mrs. Clark Mitchell. She couldn’t wait.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

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Mindy waved goodbye as her final customer of the day made his way out the door. She paused and watched him walk away, noting that the tree in front of the bakery was bending pretty badly in the wind. There wasn't a snowstorm expected that day, but it had gotten a bit windy again, strong gusts blowing things about.

She pulled her phone out of her pocket, shooting off a text to Noah. She let him know that she was starting to close everything up and then would be on her way so that they could go forward with their plans for that night. She smiled when he texted her back immediately, telling her he was looking forward to it.

It would be an understatement to say that Mindy had been skeptical when Noah had first shown up in Snowy Pine Ridge. But after spending so much time with him over the past days, she honestly felt like this holiday season was shaping up to be one of her favorites yet.

She didn't want to analyze too closely why that might be, because she knew that eventually, she would come to the conclusion that it had a lot to do with Noah. But she couldn't deny the fact that she was ridiculously, deliriously happy.

Mindy was walking through the empty bakery, humming lightly to herself as she stacked the chairs on top of the tables for the evening, when a resounding crash from up at the front of the shop made her jump.

She wheeled around, letting out a shocked breath when she saw the giant branch that had just come crashing through the front window of Baking Fiend.

“Oh, no,” she breathed, frozen in place for a moment as she took in the damage. Then she shook herself out of her stupor and strode quickly to the counter, grabbing her phone from where she had left it mere moments before.

She selected Noah’s name from her contact list and immediately pressed “call,” her mind racing as she waited for the line to connect.

“Hello?” Noah sounded a bit confused when he answered —probably because she had just texted him.

“I’m so sorry,” she said, realizing that she was speaking in a rush but unable to slow her words. “I have to reschedule our plans tonight. Something… came up.”

He could clearly sense the panic in her voice, because his tone immediately became concerned.

“What’s wrong? What’s going on?”

Mindy could hear shuffling on the other end of the line, and she closed her eyes, imagining that he was beginning to pace. A soft smile tugged up her lips at his obvious worry, despite the stress that was rushing through her.

“It’s all right. I’m all right,” she assured him. “I just need to take a raincheck for today. Is that okay?”

Noah hesitated before asking, “You’re sure you’re all right?”

“I’m sure,” Mindy answered, trying to put as much confidence as she could muster into her tone. “So, the raincheck?”

“Okay,” he agreed. “Raincheck it is.”

They said their goodbyes, and she hung up the phone, turning around to stare at the gaping hole in the front of her business. Not knowing what else to do, Mindy let out a long sigh before walking to the storage closet in the back of the building and pulling out a broom and dustpan.

She made her way over to the window, beginning to sweep up the mess that had spread across the floor as she tried to keep her spirits up. Humming “Merry Christmas, Darling” under her breath, she focused as hard as she could on cleaning everything up, losing herself in the steady motion of moving the broom back and forth as she tried to gather all the broken shards into a pile on the floor.

Just as she was making her third trip back to the trash can, carrying the dustpan carefully so that the glass within it wouldn’t spill out onto the floor, a knock sounded at the front door. She turned toward it quickly, worried that another gust of wind was about to send something else crashing through her windows. But when she saw a figure silhouetted against the glass, her pulse began to slow.

Hurriedly, Mindy dumped the glass into the trash can and then rushed back to the front door where Noah stood, waiting patiently for her to open it.

“What are you doing here?” Mindy asked as he stepped into the empty bakery.

“You sounded upset, and I knew better than to wait for you to ask me for my help.” He gave her a pointed look. “So I decided to come here for myself and see what was going on.”

“But we agreed to a raincheck.” She shook her head, although she couldn’t deny that she was so grateful to see him.

He chuckled. “Well, the raincheck is right now. Tell me how I can help.”

For a moment, she considered telling him not to worry about it, that she could deal with it on her own. But she was touched that he had come, and she didn’t want to reject his offer of assistance. And besides, it truly would be a lot easier to take care of this if she had help.

“There’s another broom and dustpan in the back,” she said with a small smile. “Grab it, and let’s get this glass up. Then we’ll work on covering up the window.”

He nodded, shrugging off his coat despite the cool air coming in through the opening the branch had created, then

walked toward the back. He reappeared a moment later, carrying the broom and dustpan she'd indicated, a determined look on his face.

They fell into step easily, both of them working side by side as they cleaned up the glass and the sticks that had scattered over the floor during the impact. When that was done, which happened much more quickly now that Mindy wasn't working alone, they began delicately extracting the branch from the window, all while trying not to send more glass skittering across the bakery floor.

It took some maneuvering and lots of teamwork, but eventually, they were able to get the branch out with minimal additional damage. Their final step was to place a bit of plastic tarp over the hole and tape everything up, sealing it as best they could against the elements until Mindy could have someone come out to replace everything.

When she and Noah were finished, they took a few steps back, eyeing their handiwork.

"Well," Mindy said appreciatively. "It's not perfect, but it'll get the job done."

"That's all we need for now," he responded, turning to face her.

She reached for one of the brooms so that she could put it away for the evening, and Noah made a move to grab it at the exact same time. Both of their hands came to rest on the broomstick, their fingers brushing against each other's and sending tiny bolts of electricity skittering across Mindy's skin.

Their eyes locked, and the electricity between them seemed to spark through the air.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

---

Noah stared down at Mindy as they each held on to the broom, completely and utterly lost in the familiar, comforting brown of her eyes.

His gaze flicked down to her lips, aching to bend down and bring his mouth to hers. He wondered if her kiss would be as soft as it had been all those years ago, if it would still make him feel as happy and whole as it had then.

Just like it had the other day, something built between them, as if an invisible force were pulling them together. But before he could take the leap and lean down to kiss the woman standing before him, Mindy cleared her throat, stepping back. The moment between them broke, the tension in the air dissipating.

“Thank you,” Mindy told him, letting out a breath. “For coming to the shop to help me. I really appreciate it.”

Noah shook his head. “You don’t have to thank me. I was glad to do it.”

“Well, I’m still grateful.” She lifted one shoulder and then let it drop in a small shrug. “Not everyone would do something like that, and it means a lot to me that you came.”

They gazed at each other in silence for a long moment, the quiet broken only by the sound of the wind outside blowing lightly against the tarp they had taped to the window. Finally, Noah licked his lips and opened his mouth to speak.

“Do you want to—”

“I have wine in the back,” Mindy blurted at the same time, and they both gave each other an amused grin. She eyed him, clearly waiting for him to continue with what he’d been saying, but Noah just waved his hand between them, gesturing for her to go on.

“Wine,” she tried again. “In the back. I have a bottle. Do you want to split it as a thank you?”

“As a thank you? No. I don’t,” Noah said, and then hastily amended as he watched her expression begin to fall. “But I *will* split it with you just because I enjoy your company.” He grinned as he added, “I told you. You don’t need to thank me.”

She chuckled and rolled her eyes at him before heading to the kitchen. She returned a moment later, carrying both the bottle and two oversized coffee mugs.

He watched as Mindy glanced around at the space before deciding to sit on the floor with her back pressed against the counter. She patted the floor beside her before she began uncorking the bottle of wine.

Noah laughed quietly as he walked over to sit beside her, and the moment he was fully seated, the cork was freed from the neck of the bottle with a satisfying *pop*. Mindy poured the wine into the mugs that she’d brought over, then passed one of them to Noah.

He took a sip, savoring the way the wine flowed across his taste buds and warmed him from the inside out.

“Ah...” Mindy let out a sigh after taking a drink as well. “This is just what I needed.”

“Yeah, I bet.”

They chatted easily for a while, discussing the window and what each of them had done that day. As Noah finished describing a stressful video conference he’d had to attend during the day, Mindy looked over at him curiously.

“If you could do anything other than what you’re doing now, what would it be?”

Her question caught him off guard, and Noah blinked at her in confusion.

“You mean, for work?” he asked, and she nodded. He took a moment to consider before answering. “I think I’d want to start consulting.”

“What do you mean?” She took another sip from her mug.

“I’ve worked in real estate development with my dad for so long,” he explained. “But the part of this job I like the most is the project planning. I like seeing the blank space of everything, seeing what something could be and then bringing it to life. I think I’d like to do that for small businesses and startups.”

Mindy eyed him, a smile that reflected something like pride beginning to tick up the corner of her mouth.

“Sounds like you’ve got some pretty big dreams,” she said, her grin widening.

“I don’t know if you’d call them big.” Noah paused to take another drink of his wine, swirling it in his mug. “But they’re definitely something. I don’t know. I guess now that I’ve done this for so long and see the grind that it takes, I could see myself wanting something a little slower. Something where I can find fulfillment doing what I enjoy during the day, and then go home to my wife and kids.”

He realized what he’d said a few seconds after the words left his lips, and his eyes widened before flicking to Mindy. She was watching him with open interest, cocking her head to the side.

“A wife and kids, huh?”

Noah nodded. There was a part of him that thought it was strange to be talking about this with her, of all people. Especially considering that there had been a significant portion of his life where he’d thought the wife he would be coming home to and the kids that he would have would all have been with her. But there was another part of him, one that was growing a little bit louder every day, that was begging to talk

about it with her. That thought it wouldn't make sense to talk about it with anyone else *but* her.

The wine was making him feel a little bolder than he had before, and he continued on.

"It would mean giving up almost everything that I've worked for. But I don't think I would mind that as much as I used to think I would."

Mindy gave him a soft smile, one that warmed him even more than the wine did.

"Honestly, it doesn't seem like it would be much of a sacrifice to me," she said simply. "Not if it's what you really want. It may not be the big job in the big city that you've always dreamed of. But I think there's more to life than that."

She looked pointedly around her bakery, and Noah thought that for the very first time since arriving here, he finally understood what she meant.

"I'll get someone to come out and look at the glass tomorrow," he told her, nodding toward the covered up window across the room.

Mindy shook her head. "You don't have to do that."

"I know." He reached out to squeeze her hand. "But I'm still going to."

She gave him a soft, appreciative smile, not arguing with him about it any further but accepting his offer. They both gazed at the window, listening as the wind raced by outside of it.

"Let's go to dinner," he blurted, and Mindy turned to face him again.

"Right now?"

She looked so startled that Noah had to chuckle as he shook his head.

"Not now. Tomorrow. After you close up the bakery."

Mindy paused before giving him a small nod. "All right, I guess it's important for you to see some of the restaurants in

town too. We could build that into the tour and—”

“No,” Noah interrupted, his heart beating a little harder. “Not as a part of the tour. I want to take you out to dinner for no other purpose than to enjoy each other’s company.” He swallowed, and then, just to be totally clear, he added, “I want to take you on a date.”

A flicker of surprise darted across her lovely features, but it was slowly replaced by a soft, hopeful smile.

“A date?” she asked. When Noah nodded his confirmation, her brown eyes shone. “All right. A date it is then.”

And at those five simple words, Noah felt like he might float right off the floor with the happiness that coursed through him.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

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“I can’t believe he showed up at Baking Fiend,” Shelley said from where she sat on the floor of Mindy’s bedroom, playing with Gus.

“I can’t believe he had the window fixed in less than a day and is refusing to let you pay for it,” Lacy chimed in as she sat cross legged beside Shelley.

“Can you two focus?” Colette chided. She picked up the sweater that Mindy had just discarded and tossed it at them, and Mindy couldn’t help but laugh as the other two women ducked and giggled. “We’re here to help our friend pick out an outfit for her date.”

“And I can’t believe I’m going on a date,” Mindy herself piped up from inside her walk-in closet, grinning when she caught sight of the look that Colette threw her way.

Her words were true though, she couldn’t believe it. For the past twenty-four hours, she had been trying to wrap her head around the fact that not only was she going out on a date, but it was a date with *Noah Henderson*.

After he had asked her out the night before, they had re-corked the bottle of wine, cleaned up the last little bit of debris and then gone their separate ways. She had immediately texted the group chat with her girlfriends, filling them in on everything that had happened. Which, of course, had led to a flurry of questions and an insistence that some of them come over to help her get ready.

Then, just as he had promised, Noah had shown up around midday at the bakery with a contractor. And much to Mindy's surprise, they had ended up replacing the window that day. Now the fresh glass was just waiting for the new signage to be painted on it, which she'd talked to Zach about earlier that day. Zach had agreed to design a custom window paint mural for her that she was incredibly excited about.

She turned back to the items in her closet, her gaze roving over her options before landing on a wine-red sweater dress. Feeling inspired, she grabbed it from the hanger and tugged it on over her head before stepping out into her room.

“You look amazing!” Shelley gushed, and the other women chimed in with *oohs* and *ahhs* as Mindy searched for a pair of tights.

Because Mindy never felt like an outfit was complete without a little pizazz, she grabbed a pair of boots that had small Christmas trees stitched on the sides, accompanied by tiny jingle bells on the top.

She took a step back, eyeing herself in the mirror and finding that she was more than satisfied with the look she'd pulled off.

“So, how have you been feeling?” Colette asked Shelley, and Mindy turned around to find her friend's hand resting on her belly.

“Good,” Shelley answered as she gazed lovingly down at her stomach. “The morning sickness is still a battle. But Matthew and I finally told Brandon.”

“And?” Mindy prompted eagerly. “How did it go?”

“He took it really well. You all were right, he’s excited to be a big brother.” Shelley beamed as Colette gave her a ‘we told you so’ look.

Mindy’s eyes flicked to Lacy, finding her sitting silently on the floor staring intently at the carpet. She recalled how strange her friend had acted when Shelley had announced her pregnancy and was surprised to see the same thing happening again. Lacy’s cheeks were flushed, her expression slightly

pensive, and Mindy watched as Lacy blinked her bright green eyes hastily, clearing them of the unidentifiable emotion lurking within them before glancing up at Shelley.

“That’s great, Shelley,” Lacy said, her tone warm. “I’m so happy that it all worked out.”

Mindy stored the look she’d seen on Lacy’s face away as something that she’d bring up later. Maybe she needed to talk to Lacy one on one? She hoped nothing was wrong. Lacy seemed to be in good spirits otherwise, so maybe Mindy had just been imagining things.

Just then, the doorbell rang, drawing her out of her thoughts. Gus started barking, and all of her friends’ gazes landed on Mindy.

“He’s here,” Lacy said with a gasp, all previous strangeness gone from her voice as she grinned widely.

“Which means it’s our cue to go,” Shelley said, giving Mindy a wink as she pushed herself to standing before extending a hand to help Lacy off the floor.

Mindy’s heart beat wildly, and she was filled with sudden nerves as she walked through the room to the front door. Gus was prancing around by her heels, yapping excitedly as he waited to see who was on the other side of the door.

The women paused in the entryway, and Mindy gave them just long enough to start putting their coats on before pulling the door open to reveal Noah on the other side of it. Her mouth went dry at the sight of him, looking more handsome than ever in the golden light of the setting sun.

“Hi,” she greeted him, her voice a little breathy.

“Hey,” he answered, giving her a boyish grin before his gaze moved behind her and landed on the women donning their coats and scarves.

He arched a questioning eyebrow at Mindy, and she chuckled.

“They’re just leaving,” she explained.

“Yes, yes.” Colette laughed merrily, slipping past Mindy as she stepped out onto the front step. “Don’t you worry your perfectly coiffed head, Noah. We know all about your *date*.” She emphasized the word, waggling her eyebrows at them as Shelley and Lacy made their way out the door as well. “Have a fantastic time. Make sure to get her back home at a reasonable hour!”

Mindy watched them go, shaking her head slightly as her friends linked arms and walked down the sidewalk, giggling as they went.

She adored them for many reasons, including the fact that they were willing to suspend all of their previous reservations about Noah and still be excited for her to be going out with a guy she liked. Although she knew they were all still concerned about what he had come to Snowy Pine Ridge to do, they were giving him a chance because they knew he was important to her.

“So they know that it’s a date?” Noah asked, stooping down to give Gus a scratch on the head.

“They absolutely do,” Mindy responded, still smiling fondly after her friends.

“And you aren’t worried that everyone knows our business?”

She fell into step beside him, stepping delicately over the packed snow as they crossed the front yard to where his car was parked in her driveway.

Mindy shrugged. “You get used to it pretty quickly.”

Noah laughed, shaking his head as he rushed forward, pausing just long enough to pull the passenger side door open for her and give her time to slide in. Once she was tucked safely inside, he didn’t close the door right away, and she turned her head to give him a curious glance.

“You look lovely, by the way,” he said with a wide grin, which Mindy happily returned.

“So do you,” she answered. “Handsome, I mean.”

She blushed a little, making Noah smile as he closed the door and strode around to the driver's side of the car.

When Noah was settled in his seat and navigating his way out of the driveway and onto the road, she glanced at him sideways. She focused on the way his green eyes glinted as they stared out at the road, noticed the sharp edge of his jaw, and the way his dark hair shone in the fading light.

Mindy's heart fluttered, and she wondered if it would be possible to keep spending this much time with him without doing something she definitely shouldn't.

Something like falling for Noah Henderson all over again.

\* \* \*

Noah tried his hardest to keep his gaze focused on the road as he made his way toward the Rustic Hearth Café. According to Derek and Clark, who Noah had run into earlier that afternoon, it was Mindy's favorite restaurant. And while typically Noah would take a woman out to somewhere a little bit fancier, opting for someplace with at least one Michelin Star, he'd known that Mindy wouldn't be swayed by something like that.

Mindy had always liked the idea of someone knowing her. And to prove that he still did, even after all this time, he'd decided to take her to a place she loved.

He pulled into the parking lot, and Mindy gave him a grateful smile as they both climbed out of the car. Noah took it all in as they approached the wood and stone building, noticing the antique sconces on the sides of it that had lights that flickered like firelight, giving the entire place a warm, welcoming feel.

When they walked inside, the decadent smell of the food washed over him, and his mouth began to water. A waitress walked by in the distance, holding aloft a tray of food, and Noah had to admit it all looked quite a bit better than he had been anticipating.

He and Mindy walked side by side to the hostess stand, and he gave the girl that was standing there his name for their reservation.

“Follow me,” she said with a smile after checking them off her list.

She led them through the restaurant toward the back. There were huge windows there that afforded them a stunning view of the mountains in the distance and would also give them an unobstructed look at the stars that would be dancing in the sky before long. He pulled Mindy’s chair out for her before taking his own.

“So,” she said, giving him a knowing look once they had both placed an order for a glass of wine. “Who told you that this was my favorite place?”

Noah cocked his head to the side. “Who says anyone did?” When she raised one eyebrow pointedly, he chuckled. “Clark and Derek. I ran into them earlier and asked if they had ideas. Since their wife and fiancée both know you pretty well, I figured they might be able to give me a good tip on where to take you.”

“Well, for what it’s worth, it was a great choice.”

Her smile widened, and Noah’s heart swelled with a kind of pride he hadn’t felt in a long time. It wasn’t the pride of closing an important business deal or coming in under budget on a renovation project. It was something deeper and more profound than that—the pride in making someone he cared about smile.

“I’m glad you like it. I’m actually a little nervous,” he admitted. “Even more nervous than I was on our very first date.”

Mindy laughed. “Really? You were nervous on our first date? But you seemed so cool and confident.”

“Only on the outside.” He held his hands up, grinning. “My palms were sweating the whole time.”

The waiter came to take their drink order, then returned a short while later with their wine, setting the stemmed glasses

on the table in front of them. He took their food order as well before disappearing again.

As Noah and Mindy sipped their wine, the awkward silence that had sometimes fallen over them when she had first started showing him around Snowy Pine Ridge was completely absent. It was as if the years between them all but fell away, leaving room for the old, familiar comfort of each other's presence to take its place.

They talked and laughed easily as Mindy told him about her very first Christmas in Snowy Pine Ridge, about a spot in the mountains near the town where she loved to go during the summer, and about her plans for the bakery.

The more she talked, the more that Noah found he loved hearing about her life here. He could see it all in his mind's eye as she explained it to him, and he felt a pang of regret that he hadn't been there to witness it.

They were interrupted a short while later when the waiter delivered their food. Noah had ordered the steak frites, while Mindy had opted for an oyster mushroom risotto, and when he bit into his meal, flavor exploded across his tongue. He hadn't known what to expect when bringing Mindy here, and he had to admit that this was the best food he had eaten in a long time.

"Mm." He shook his head, dabbing at his mouth with his napkin. "This is amazing."

"See?" Mindy beamed. "Snowy Pine Ridge may not be a big place, but it doesn't need to be. Because it's got everything I need."

He made a sound of agreement, and they ate in silence for a few minutes, the hallmark of a great meal. Once the edge of hunger was sated, they ate more slowly, falling into easy conversation again. They talked about the upcoming holiday and debated about whether shopping online or in stores for gifts was more fun, then got into a hearty discussion of their favorite Christmas movies.

The evening flew by in a pleasant blur. Noah felt as though one moment they were just sitting down for dinner, and the

next, the two of them were filled to bursting, having consumed both dinner and dessert. Mindy let out a yawn, although he could tell she tried to stifle it. But the sound won out as she covered her mouth, giving him a sheepish, embarrassed smile when she was done.

“I’m so sorry,” she said. “I was up super early for the bakery. And now I think all the carbs are getting to me.”

“Let’s get you home then,” he responded fondly, flagging down the waiter for the check.

Once the bill had been paid, they walked out of the restaurant side by side. His fingertips brushed against hers, and almost unconsciously, he linked their hands. She grinned up at him and didn’t pull away until they were at the car and she needed to slide into her seat.

The drive back to her place felt way too short, and it was the only time when Noah found himself regretting how easy and quick it was to get from place to place in Snowy Pine Ridge. He wanted more time with Mindy, any extra seconds he could get.

He asked her a bit more about Gus as they drove, and she told him what it was like when she got the little guy as a puppy, and how she trained him. Noah laughed out loud as she described some of her favorite outfits she’d dressed the small dog up in.

When he pulled into her driveway, his stomach hurt from laughing so hard over a story that she was telling where Gus, in his rowdy teenage dog years, had found his way onto the counter and tried to steal an entire roast. But it had been so much bigger than him that he hadn’t been able to get it down.

“He was always a ridiculous little thing,” Mindy said softly as she climbed out of the car. “But I’ve loved him from the very first day I brought him home.”

Noah insisted on walking her to her door, and once more, he took her hand as he led the way. He relished the solid feeling of her hand in his, lacing their fingers together as they approached her front porch step.

They stopped before the door, and Noah's heart pounded as he turned to look at her. He knew that she had an early day tomorrow, and she was likely exhausted after the one that she'd already had. But he found himself not wanting the night to end.

"Thank you for coming out with me tonight," he told her. "I had an amazing time."

Her smile beamed up at him in the darkness. "I did too."

"I would say it felt like old times, but..." He trailed off, not quite sure how to articulate what he wanted to say.

Fortunately, Mindy seemed to read the thoughts in his head, and she nodded, her expression softening.

"But that's not quite right," she finished for him. "It doesn't feel like old times. It feels like something new."

He nodded, his heart racing at the implication of her words.

"Will I get to see you tomorrow?" he asked in a low voice.

"If you want to."

His answer came immediately. "I do."

Her smile widened, and before he could second-guess what he was doing or talk himself out of it, Noah reached up to brush back one of Mindy's curls that had fallen across her forehead.

She leaned into his touch, her eyelashes fluttering slightly as he cupped her cheek.

"Mindy," he breathed. "Can I kiss you?"

"You'd better," she whispered.

Noah bent his head to hers, their frosty breaths mingling in the space between them. Then, slowly, he pressed his lips to hers. Releasing her hands, he wrapped his arms around her, and she went up onto her tiptoes to deepen the kiss a little. He could feel his heart racing and something like butterflies flapping in his stomach, but there was also something more. Something deeper and even more intense, an emotion he

wasn't quite ready to name, but it soared through him and made him want the kiss to last forever.

Finally, Noah pulled back from her, looking down into the face that made his heart ache and his stomach flip. Mindy smiled up at him, the kind of smile that lit up her features.

And suddenly, Noah had a new definition of happiness.

*This*, he thought. *This* was what he had been missing for years.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

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Valerie took a few steps back from the staircase banister she had been decorating, eyeing the way the tinsel, garland, and Christmas ornaments all came together with satisfaction. Somewhere within the many rooms of St. Nick's Place, someone had started up the old record player, allowing the scratchy sound of vintage Christmas carols to fill the air.

She and Lacy had spent a long time discussing decorations and plans for the combined party and wedding, and she was pleased at how excited Lacy had been. Everything was coming together nicely, and she couldn't be happier with it. She swiveled her head, taking in the entryway of the manor house that she'd been decorating that day.

Typically, during the annual holiday party, the place was alive with every color under the sun, a vibrant showcase of true Christmas cheer. But since Valerie was getting married at the event this year, she had wanted to go for something a little bit different than the usual décor.

Lacy, thankfully, had been incredibly enthusiastic at the idea of keeping all the typical greenery, the mistletoe, the holly berries, and the evergreen garland. But the usual multi-colored ornaments had been replaced with colors of only silver, gold, and red. And as the vision was coming to life, Valerie found the entire thing absolutely breathtaking.

She'd footed the bill for all of the new decorations, of course, although Lacy had insisted she didn't have to, and Valerie couldn't help but think that it was all turning out to be perfect.

The sound of someone singing along with the music caught her attention, and a smile tugged up her lips as she set down the last bit of tinsel in her hands and walked through the winding hallways toward the largest room of the house, which served as the main gathering space and ballroom.

She stepped into the large open room, grinning as she watched Clark singing and dancing to the beat as he and Derek hung up more of the decorations. He was wearing an oversized Santa hat, so big that the puffball of white on the end fell down between his shoulders, and it swayed back and forth merrily with his movements.

Her heart swelled with joy as she watched him, working happily to bring both of their dreams about their wedding to life. A burst of laughter rose up from the other side of the room, catching her attention, and Valerie turned to see Mindy and Noah standing in a corner.

Mindy was perched on a tall ladder, her blonde curls glinting in the soft, warm light of the room while Noah stood at the foot of the ladder, holding it steady while she put ornaments on the large Christmas tree.

It had been all hands on deck for the past few days as they rushed to get everything ready in time for the wedding and Christmas party, and Mindy and Noah had both been helping out a lot. They showed up every day whenever Mindy wasn't at the bakery, helping out with random tasks as needed.

Valerie watched the two of them speak to each other in low voices, noting the happy glow in Mindy's face. She wasn't quite sure what was going on there, but it had been a while since she had seen Mindy smile quite like that. She liked seeing her friend so relaxed and joyful, although it still worried Valerie a bit when she thought of the reason that Noah had come to town.

She had no idea if he would end up moving forward with his plans for the industrial complex, and what that would end up meaning for the town, or for her friend, if they did. But she was trying not to worry about it.

From what she understood, the time that Noah was required to spend in Snowy Pine Ridge before being allowed to take full control of his inherited property was dwindling. But if the look he was currently giving Mindy—the one filled with admiration and something that looked a lot like love—meant anything, Valerie wondered if Noah might find himself staying longer than anticipated.

With a grin, Valerie finally stepped into the room, the sound of her footsteps grabbing the attention of those in the room. Mindy gave her a quick wave, careful not to disrupt her balance, and Clark whirled to beam at her as she approached.

He hung up the last bit of garland he had been draping around the mantel above the big stone fireplace, then turned to face her fully. When he extended his arms out to her, she stepped into them gratefully, pressing her face into his chest and inhaling the familiar scent of him. The one that now meant ‘home.’

“It’s looking great, isn’t it?” he asked excitedly.

“It really is.”

Valerie squeezed her fiancé tightly, love swelling in her chest when he squeezed her back. Her wedding day was fast approaching, and she decided to push any worries about Noah’s intentions and plans for the town out of her mind for the moment, holding on to hope that it would all work out.

Because if there was one thing that Valerie Bernard knew well, it was the way that this town and all of the people in it could wrap themselves around your heart unexpectedly.

And maybe, just maybe, that was exactly what was happening to Noah.

\* \* \*

The Christmas music continued to play in the large ballroom as Noah held the ladder for Mindy. Across the room, Valerie and Clark were dancing, swaying together to the music, but

Noah's attention was firmly on the woman with wild blonde curls—and more specifically, on what she'd just told him.

"What do you mean, I'm not dressing like a yuppie anymore?" he asked with a frown, throwing a glance down at the jeans and sweater that he'd put on earlier that morning.

"It isn't a bad thing!" Mindy insisted with a grin, playfully tossing a fake, decorative snowball down at him before she stepped off the ladder.

"I just don't understand what you mean," he insisted, but he couldn't stop the laugh that escaped him at the amused look on her face.

"You're usually so buttoned up," she answered with a shrug. "But you've started dressing a bit more casually since you've been here, and I like it."

"I'm not buttoned up."

Mindy shot him a pointed look. "The entire time you've been here, you've worn a suit every single day except for one."

"I'm not wearing one now," he argued, and when one of her eyebrows quirked up even higher, he chuckled sheepishly. "Oh. That's what you meant."

"Yup. But I like this side of you. It makes you look like a rugged mountain man."

He rolled his eyes at that, playfully tossing back the snowball she'd thrown at him just moments before, eliciting a laughing yelp from her as her hands shot up in front of her face to block it from hitting her. Noah liked this side of Mindy too—the one that was relaxed and joking and so full of life that it made his heart feel like it might burst.

When they had been together previously, there had been playful moments, certainly. But nothing compared to the carefree nature she'd seemed to develop while living in Snowy Pine Ridge. This place, the bakery, the people—it had all seemed to lighten her somehow. Like she had become more *herself* while living here. And Noah found the person she had become irresistible.

The music shifted to a new song, and Mindy glanced over to where Valerie and Clark were standing in the center of the room, dancing slowly underneath the large bundle of mistletoe they'd hung from the chandelier as Nat King Cole played over the record player.

"They're so in love," she murmured wistfully, and all Noah could do was nod.

He had loved getting to know Mindy's life here, had adored every single moment he'd spent over the last few days getting everything ready for Valerie and Clark's wedding.

He had never been a part of a community before, or at least, nothing like what he had experienced while in Snowy Pine Ridge. And he was experiencing it all as an outsider. Someone who had come into town with an agenda of their own that was in opposition with the people who lived here. He could only imagine how much the community would welcome him in if he truly became a part of it.

That thought brought Noah up short, and he blinked, freezing in place. There had been a wistfulness attached to the thought, a sense of longing behind it that made him feel suddenly off-kilter. Did he *want* to become a part of the Snowy Pine Ridge community?

Mindy had turned her attention back to Noah and was eyeing him with curiosity. She could clearly read something in his face that gave away a hint of what he was thinking, but before he could shake the strange sensation rocketing through him and assure her that everything was fine, his phone began ringing loudly.

The noise cut over the soothing sound of the Christmas music, and Noah picked up his cell from where he'd left it on a nearby table. He half expected it to be his father calling again, demanding another update, but instead, Hugh's name popped up on the screen.

"Sorry. I should take this," he informed Mindy, and she nodded before he turned and began walking through the house.

He clicked accept and then brought his phone to his ear, telling Hugh to hold on for just a moment so that he could find someplace quiet. Knowing that if the lawyer handling his aunt's will was calling him, it was probably important, Noah decided to walk outside to get a little privacy.

He didn't pause to pull on his coat, stepping out onto the front step of the large stairway that led to St. Nick's Place. Noah wrapped one arm around himself as best he could, shrugging his shoulders up to his ears to try to conserve a bit of his warmth as he began to speak to Hugh.

"All right, go ahead," he said into the phone. "What's going on?"

"Well, I think I have good news," the lawyer said on the other end of the line. "You didn't seem particularly thrilled with the stipulation of having to spend three weeks in Snowy Pine Ridge, which is understandable, since I'm sure you're a busy man. But after reviewing her will again, I believe you can take full control of the property now."

Noah's heart and stomach did a somersault. "Really? Now? But I still have a week left before I've put in the time designated in the will."

"Not technically," Hugh answered, his voice sounding muffled, and Noah could hear him rifling through papers. "In Theresa's will, it says that to inherit the property you had to have spent three consecutive weeks in Snowy Pine Ridge. But it didn't say *when*."

The lawyer emphasized the last word and then paused, like Noah should be able to sort out for himself exactly what he was getting at. Unfortunately, Noah had absolutely no idea.

"Okay," he said slowly. "But I don't understand how that allows me to take control of the property early. We knew that I had to spend the time here, and that's what I'm doing. Postponing it won't help when I'm already smackdab in the middle of it."

"You misunderstand me," Hugh answered, his deep voice rumbling in Noah's ear. "You stayed here as a kid, right?"

“Right,” Noah said with a nod, still unsure of what the other man was getting at.

“And you stayed here for multiple weeks in a row back in the day, right?”

Just like that, it all clicked. Noah had *already* spent more than three consecutive weeks in Snowy Pine Ridge. He had already met that stipulation when his aunt had passed.

“What does this mean?” Noah asked, his heart racing, although he wasn’t sure with what emotion.

“It means the property is yours to do what you want with,” Hugh said. “I could meet you at my office tomorrow to finalize everything. And then you can have someone come out and appraise—”

“No,” Noah interjected, cutting off Hugh’s words.

He had taken a few steps along the front of the house, his boots crunching in the snow as he approached the massive window at the front of the house that looked into the ballroom. The lights were still blazing brightly, illuminating the people inside.

Clark, Valerie, Lacy, and Derek were all now dancing in the middle of the room, laughing and having a ball. Mindy was in the corner, pretending like the record player was a DJ booth, calling out commands for them to do the macarena to “Baby, It’s Cold Outside.”

The scene before him looked so inviting, like something that he truly, deep down in his soul wanted to be a part of. He couldn’t bear to ruin it all by thinking of the building plans for the industrial complex now.

“No?” Hugh repeated, snapping Noah out of his reverie.

“I don’t want to start just yet,” he answered hastily. “I need a little bit more time.”

“Okay. You’re welcome to take as much time as you want, but you really should—”

“I have to go,” he said, interrupting the man again. Then he softened his tone and added, “But thank you for calling

with the update. I appreciate it.”

Noah hung up the phone, then slipped it into his pocket. He stayed on the large front step for only a moment longer, allowing the cold to bite into his skin for a second before he turned and headed back toward the large door, opening it and striding in.

He could hear Mindy’s laugh filling the halls the moment he stepped inside, and Noah couldn’t entirely tell if it was the heaters in the house or the sound of her laughter that seemed to warm him and chase all of his worries away.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

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A few days later, Mindy looked out the window of Noah's car, absentmindedly humming along with the music on the radio as he drove them once more out to St. Nick's House. They'd been working on it non-stop over the course of the last week and a half, and now it was the day before the party, and they were set to put on the finishing touches to the decorations and do the big reveal of the lights.

"What will we do if when they go to turn the lights on, nothing happens?" Noah asked from where he sat in the driver's seat, expertly navigating the narrow road that led to the massive mansion.

"What do you mean?" Mindy asked, turning to gaze at his face in the passing streetlights.

Her heart fluttered at the sight of him. Granted, it did that all the time now. It was a little fact that was getting harder and harder for her to ignore.

"What if they plug everything in and go to press the button or flip the switch or whatever it is that they're doing and just... nothing happens? Or what if some of them light up and some of them don't?"

Mindy considered this for a second before answering. "Derek and Lacy checked all the strands for burnt out bulbs or faulty wires before we even got started on everything. I'm sure it'll be fine."

"But what if?" Noah insisted, and when the corner of his mouth curved up in a grin, she realized that he was just being a

contrarian and trying to get a rise out of her.

She rolled her eyes. "Then we'll cross that bridge when we get to it. Have a little faith!"

"If you say so," he said, still grinning as they turned off the main road and onto the driveway that led to the large house.

The lights were on inside, the warmth of them spilling out through the windows and making the snow glisten on the lawn.

"It's going to be beautiful," Noah commented as he parked next to Clark's truck.

"Yeah." Mindy tilted her head to get a better view of the place. "It really is."

As always, he told her to stay put as he climbed out of the driver's seat and walked around the front of the car to pull her door open for her. They had been inseparable over the last week and a half. Every single night after the bakery closed down, Noah showed up to go on a walk with Gus and then take her out to St. Nick's Place to help with the preparations.

When he had first offered, Mindy had been a bit skeptical. But now, this many days into it, she couldn't deny the fact that he seemed to be really enjoying it. Noah seemed to be fitting in well with Derek and Clark, and on the few occasions where Zach had been able to slip away from the gallery, the two of them seemed to have gotten along very well too.

And the more time Mindy was spending with Noah, the muddier it was all becoming for her.

She grinned at him as she slid out of the passenger seat, loving the way the warm glow from inside the house cast shadows across his sharp jawline. He closed the door behind her, and just as she was about to walk past him toward the house, Noah grabbed her hand.

She felt him give it a tug, turning her to face him. Her heart began fluttering even harder as he pulled her into his arms, wrapping them around her in a tight embrace.

“I haven’t gotten to hug you all day,” he said, his voice muffled as he pressed his face into her hair.

Mindy snuggled her face into his chest, the smell of cinnamon, clove, and sandalwood enveloping her as she squeezed him tighter.

“Yeah, I missed that too,” she responded truthfully.

When they separated, she felt his fingertips on her chin, guiding her gaze up so that she was looking at him. With a smile, his lips came down to meet hers. She sighed as she kissed him, loving the familiar way his mouth moved against hers.

It had been crazy to her how quickly they had been able to find their way back to each other despite the years that had separated them. And while so much of Noah was familiar—the way he smelled, the way his thoughts raced and she had to work to keep up with them, the way he made her laugh—there was also so much about him that seemed entirely new as well.

And it was those new parts that Mindy was finding to be the most dangerous, because they were the most enticing. She had to keep reminding herself that this wasn’t going to last. That his wants were working directly against what she wanted for herself and for the town and the people that she loved.

But when he kissed her like he was doing right then, she found she wasn’t quite strong enough to stop it. She had long since accepted the fact that it was going to crush her when he left, so she would just have to soak up every bit of time with him that she could before then.

Their lips broke apart, both of them smiling in the aftermath as Noah nodded toward the house.

“You ready?” he asked, intertwining their fingers as they started walking toward the front door.

“Always,” Mindy answered with a grin.

As they pushed open the door, they could hear everyone’s voices coming from the study about halfway down the long hallway that served as an entryway. Mindy and Noah kicked

the snow off their boots and hung their coats up before heading toward the noise.

They turned the corner, finding Derek and Clark piling up the last of the boxes in the center of the study.

“What’s going on?” Mindy asked, her brows knitting together in confusion as they stepped through the threshold.

“We’re all done!” Clark announced, adding the last empty box to the pile. “We’re going to leave the boxes in here and close up this room during the party. That way we don’t have to lug everything back out when it’s all over.”

“Good call,” Noah said with a grin. “Does that mean it’s lights time?”

Derek nodded, looking even more excited than Clark, Zach, and Noah, if that were possible.

“Lights time!” Derek called.

“If everyone wants to go out front, I’ll turn the switch on so you can see it when they light up,” Clark offered, and everyone else nodded, making their way to the front of the house.

“We just got out of our coats,” Noah commented, humor lacing his tone as he shrugged back into the puffer coat he’d taken off just moments before.

“It’ll be worth it.” Mindy gave him a quick smile as she shrugged on her own coat and followed everyone out the door.

They all stood shoulder to shoulder, and there were more people there that night than Mindy had seen at one time throughout the week they’d been working on the place. People had been popping in and out whenever they saw fit, some during the day, some during the evening, and pitching in whenever they could.

Sarah and William were there, as were Colette and Zach, and Shelley and Matthew. Her friends gave her a quick hug of welcome as everyone continued to file into place and turn to face the house.

Mindy knew that Valerie and Clark had chosen white icicle lights for the exterior of the house this year, as opposed to the multi-colored round bulbs that usually decorated it. She was excited to see how it all turned out.

"How long will it take? I'm dying to see them!" Noah whispered to her out of the side of his mouth, and she gave him a playful jab in the ribs with her elbow.

"Be patient," she admonished.

As if Clark had heard him, the front yard was suddenly filled with light as they all flickered on at once. She heard a small intake of breath from Noah, and she glanced sideways to find him staring at the house with awe.

The lights were bright enough that she could see his face clearly, noticing the way his grin was tugging up his cheeks, making his eyes crinkle. She turned to face the house herself, wanting to steal a little bit of that joy as well, and as her eyes raked over the lit facade of the manor, she had to admit that it looked stunning.

The white icicle lights hung low across the eaves of the building, and the reflection of them glinted off the windows.

She felt a tug on her hand and looked down to see Noah lacing his fingers with hers. Once again, her heart seemed to flutter up into her throat, and Mindy had to work to stamp down the giddiness that welled up inside of her.

*Be smart, she thought to herself. Remember that he's the one that wants to hurt the spirit of your town. It doesn't matter how much you love spending time with him. He wants to ruin everything.*

But as she stood there, staring at the house she loved alongside the people she loved, the words rang hollow, even to herself. Because the truth was, while she may have thought that Noah was the enemy when he'd first arrived at town, she no longer thought that was the case.

She had seen a change in him over the last couple of weeks, and it was such a departure from the man she had once known that it often left her breathless when she thought about

it. He squeezed her hand, and heat flooded her body at the reminder of that touch, the reminder of the connection that they were sharing as everyone around them chatted amongst themselves.

“Thank you,” Noah murmured under his breath, and Mindy turned to look at him. His eyes were soft, his expression open and vulnerable as he gazed down at her.

“For what?” she asked quietly.

“For allowing me to see this part of your life, even if it’s only for a little while.”

Mindy gave him a little smile and leaned her shoulder against his in answer before turning her attention back to the house. She didn’t want him to notice the fact that his words had hit her like a physical blow.

*If only for a little while.*

Those had been his words. A reminder and a confirmation that their time together, while amazing in so many ways, would soon be drawing to a close. She had let him into her world, and soon he would go back to his big city life.

She had thought she would be okay with that, constantly telling herself that she’d take what she could get for the moments that she was having with him. And Mindy still felt certain that it was true—she would much rather have these few weeks with him than not have anything at all.

But now there was a small voice in her mind wondering if maybe there was also room amongst all that acceptance for a little bit of something else.

Perhaps, Mindy thought, there was room for hope as well.

\* \* \*

Lacy closed the door of Piper’s room softly so that she wouldn’t wake the little girl before tiptoeing down the hallway. As she made her way into the living room, she saw Derek shutting the front door after paying the babysitter. He

glanced up as she came into the room, a smile lighting up his face the moment he laid eyes on her.

“Is she still sleeping?” Derek asked, keeping his voice low so that it wouldn’t travel too far.

Lacy nodded before pointing toward the kitchen. “Want to make hot chocolate?”

“Do you even have to ask? Of course I want hot chocolate.”

She smirked at her husband as they made their way through the house, stopping when they entered the kitchen. They worked side by side, Derek getting out the kettle while Lacy pulled the milk from the fridge and opened the cocoa mix.

“Tonight went well,” her husband commented, and Lacy nodded as she began to prepare everything for their drinks. “The lights looked amazing.”

“I can’t believe we’re getting the chance to host the wedding at St. Nick’s Place,” she said happily, closing her eyes and recalling exactly how everything had looked when they’d locked the mansion up for tonight. “The history of that place just continues to grow each year. I mean, it was the place where Mindy and Sarah became friends a few years ago. It was the place my father and grandfather loved.”

“And the place where all of the people we love are brought together by you each year,” Derek pointed out, and she grinned at him before nodding.

While the water in the kettle started to heat up, she turned to pull down mugs from the cupboard and set them on the counter. She felt Derek’s arms wrap around her from behind, crossing over themselves as his hands came to rest on her belly.

“You need to take it easy though,” he said, and she could feel the warmth of his breath tickling against the nape of her neck. “You don’t have to do it all.”

“You say that all the time.” She chuckled, turning in his arms so that she was facing him.

“And I mean it all the time,” he responded, bending down to plant a quick, soft kiss to her lips.

They were quiet for a moment, happy to simply bask in the kitchen of the house they shared while they waited for their hot cocoa makings to be ready. Just before the kettle could start whistling, Lacy stepped out of her husband’s arms and pulled it from the burner, not wanting the noise to wake up their daughter.

“You know,” Derek said as he extended his hand for the kettle so he could pour the hot water into their mugs, “it’s really an amazing thing you’re doing for your friends.”

“I’m honored they thought of having the wedding there, to be honest.”

“Can you imagine when word gets out that *the Valerie Bernard* got married at St. Nick’s Place?” Derek asked, and he waggled his eyebrows at her as he stirred the cocoa mix into their drinks. “I’m sure you’ll have requests for dozens more weddings within the month. People will come from all over, wanting to host events at St. Nick’s Place.”

Lacy took the hot chocolate he offered her, wrapping her hands around the ceramic and letting its warmth seep into her. She inhaled the steam deeply, loving the way the rich chocolate scent put all of her senses at ease.

“Yeah, you might be right about that,” she answered, grinning at her husband.

“Which means there will be even more for you to do.”

Derek gave her a pointed look, but her smile only widened, thrilled at the prospect of St. Nick’s Place possibly becoming a premiere wedding destination.

“Maybe I’ll switch to managing the house full-time. I’ve loved the consulting work I’ve done in St. Louis, but I feel like it’s time to let that go completely. Snowy Pine Ridge is where my family is, and it’s where I want to be all the time now. And I could even hire some staff to help me run things at the mansion.”

She grinned at Derek over the rim of her mug before bringing it to her lips and taking a quick drink. She sighed happily as the flavor exploded across her tongue, the velvety texture of it reminding her of Christmases in her youth.

“I love that idea, sweetheart,” Derek said. “But you know I’ll support you no matter what you do.”

He held his mug up for a toast, and Lacy raised hers to meet his, the sound of them clinking together barely able to be heard as they quickly brought their mugs back to their lips and drank again.

As they headed into the living room to snuggle on the couch for a bit as they finished their drinks, Lacy’s thoughts turned to the future. She’d meant what she said. Her home and her entire heart were here in Snowy Pine Ridge. Running St. Nick’s Place and putting on the party every year were a lot, but she never felt alone with the support of her husband and friends.

The wedding was tomorrow, which meant everything she had been preparing for was going to come to a head in only twenty-four hours, and a small thrill ran through her at the thought. Because even though she was busy and was about to get much busier, Lacy couldn’t deny that she truly did love everything about her life.

All of its busy, chaotic moments included.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

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Noah exhaled and blew out a breath before bringing his hand up to rap on the door of Mindy's house. Immediately, a riot of barking started up on the other side, and he could imagine the small pup running down the hallway, excited to greet the new friend at the door.

He had been skeptical of the pooch when he'd first met him, but over time, Noah had started to become quite fond of Gus. As he thought about his time in Snowy Pine Ridge possibly coming to an end soon, he realized with a start that he would miss a whole lot more than just Mindy when he went.

A familiar muffled voice spoke on the other side of the door, and he smiled as he realized it was Mindy trying to get Gus to calm down. A moment later, she pulled open the door, and all of the work that Noah had done to prepare himself for seeing her all dressed up for the party ended up being for nothing.

His breath left him in a whoosh as his eyes raked over her, taking in the emerald green, floor length dress she was wearing. It complemented her coloring, making her skin seem to glow and her brown eyes dance as she smiled at him.

“You look beautiful,” Noah breathed and was rewarded by the widening of her grin.

“You look rather dapper yourself,” she said happily, waving him inside. “I just need to do one final thing and then grab my coat.”

Noah nodded, stepping into the house and bending down to start petting Gus. She disappeared toward the back of the house, where Noah knew her bedroom was located, and he could hear her humming to herself as she finished up getting ready.

“Oh, Gus,” Noah muttered, keeping his voice low as he stroked the pup’s soft white fur. “What are we going to do?”

Gus just sat back on his haunches, panting excitedly as he soaked up all the attention that Noah was willing to give him. The dog blinked up at him, his dark eyes patient, and Noah sighed, not sure if the pup’s attentiveness was making him feel better or worse.

The sound of heels clicking against the hardwood floor grabbed Noah’s attention, and his eyes darted up, catching sight of Mindy walking toward him. She had put shoes on, bringing her height up a couple of inches and making the fabric of the gown swish beautifully around her feet as she walked.

“You won’t be able to make fun of me for my suit this time,” he said with a grin, and Mindy rolled her eyes.

“Try me,” she joked as she closed the distance between them.

He stooped down, brushing a quick kiss across her cheek, and she leaned into it, sighing a bit as she did so.

“How are you going to walk in the snow in those?” Noah asked dubiously, glancing down at the heels she was wearing.

“Simple,” Mindy answered with a quick shrug, stepping away from him and pulling her coat down from one of the hooks in the entryway. “I’m not.” She pointed to a pair of boots by the door. “I’m going to slip those on and then just put my heels on when we get to the house.”

“Why do you have them on now then?” he asked.

“So you could see me in them.”

She grinned at him, and Noah chuckled. She was being more playful than usual, and he liked it quite a lot. But there

was also something off about her, as if she were covering up some hidden emotion. He watched as she shrugged into her long, red wool coat and buttoned herself up. The red of her coat and the green of her gown combined to turn her into a radiant Christmas symbol.

But although she looked truly stunning, her shoulders seemed tight with tension, and each time she smiled at him, he hadn't missed the fact that the expression hadn't fully reached her eyes. Noah wondered for a moment if he should ask if she was all right, but in the end, he decided not to.

He knew they were both thinking and feeling a lot right now. Knew that they both had more than enough on their mind. And the last thing either of them needed was for him to pressure her to talk about something she wasn't ready to discuss.

*She'll talk to me when she's ready*, he told himself as Mindy finished with her coat and turned to look at him.

"All set?" she asked as she put on her boots, and he nodded.

He placed his hand on the small of her back as they walked out the door, making sure she wouldn't slip on any ice. He reached down and plucked the shoes she was carrying from her grip, holding them for her so she could hoist up the hem of her dress so it wouldn't trail in the snow.

"Is the Christmas party this fancy every year?" Noah asked as he stepped forward to open the car door for her.

"No." Mindy shook her head. "Usually, it's pretty casual. And, honestly, Valerie and Clark didn't have a dress code for the wedding. So some people will likely still be dressed pretty casually. It'll be a very mixed bag."

"Isn't that the best kind?" he asked, taking his turn to waggle his eyebrows at her, and she laughed as he shut the door.

Once Noah was in the car, he gave her the shoes he'd been carrying for her, then backed out of the driveway. They chatted comfortably on their way to St. Nick's Place, telling each other

all about what they'd gotten into earlier that day and discussing how excited they were for the night's events.

It felt like no time at all had passed when they reached the turnoff from the larger road to the long, pine tree lined drive that led to the house. As they approached, he noticed that there were already a plethora of cars parked near the mansion. Even though they were technically arriving a little bit early, it seemed like most of the invitees had been just as excited as they were to get the show on the road.

The house looked as beautiful as it had the night before. But now that he could see the people passing in front of the illuminated windows and hear the sounds of their laughter and the Christmas music floating through the air, he couldn't deny that things seemed even more magical than they had just twenty-four hours ago.

He and Mindy walked up to the house side by side, him holding out his arm so she could use it to steady herself on the front step as she kicked off her boots and switched over to her heels.

"I'll just stash them in the coat closet," she said with a grin and a shrug. "No one will notice."

"Your secret is safe with me."

Noah mimed locking his lips and she bumped her hip against his as they walked through the front door.

The moment they stepped past the threshold, the jolly atmosphere rushed up to greet them. The music and the laughter that they'd been able to hear from outside was all around them now that they were within the same four walls, and Noah found himself bursting with excitement for everything that was about to unfold.

They took off their coats, hanging them in one of the massive closets just off the entryway, and Mindy dropped her boots inside. Noah noticed that there was a small pile of boots on the floor, some of them still containing traces of snow, and he realized that Mindy hadn't been the only one with that idea.

"Mindy! Noah!"

The sound of someone calling their names caught their attention, and they both turned to see Shelley beaming at them as she walked their way. She was in a dress cut much like Mindy's, and a man that he hadn't met yet was walking beside her. Noah racked his brain, trying his best to remember what Mindy had said the man's name was.

He'd heard them talk about Shelley's husband quite a few times. Mark? Mike? Matt? And just like that, it clicked. Matthew!

It was just in time too, as the other pair reached them, and Matthew extended his hand.

"You must be Noah," he said, shaking Noah's hand firmly.

"I am, indeed. And you must be Matthew. I've heard a lot about you. I'm glad we can finally meet."

Mindy and Shelley were standing off to the side, heads bowed together as they spoke quickly with one another before Mindy turned and gave him an apologetic smile.

"I'm sorry," she said, giving his arm a quick squeeze. "But Valerie needs us while she's getting ready. Do you think you'll be all right if I disappear for a bit?"

"I'll be fine. Go take care of your friend," Noah assured her.

Mindy gave him a grateful smile before she and Shelley turned and disappeared farther in the house.

Matthew and Noah chatted for a few minutes, finding common ground in the fact that Matthew was a real estate agent in Snowy Pine Ridge. After a bit of real estate shop talk, Matthew was called away to help with something wedding related, and just like that, Noah was left alone inside a house filled with people that he hardly knew.

Blowing out a breath and hoping that the townspeople had mostly gotten over their early dislike of him, Noah began walking through the hallway toward the ballroom. The chairs that they'd set out two nights ago sat in rows ahead of a giant, evergreen arch before the mantelpiece. The warm lighting of the room caused the silver, gold, and red baubles to glisten as

he walked past them. And he had to admit that it was the perfect setup for a Christmas wedding.

Although some people eyed him with a bit of suspicion, most of them nodded and gave him friendly waves as he made his way through the crowd, and he spotted a bar that had been set up in the far corner of the massive room and made his way over to it.

The bartender greeted him the moment he walked up, and he ordered a bourbon, neat. It didn't take long before the drink was in his hand, and he swirled the amber liquid in the glass, turning to face the crowd around him.

More people arrived, all of them funneling into the main room as they waited for the wedding to begin. He looked around him, wondering if there was a corner that he could escape to while he waited for Mindy to return, one that would allow him to fade into the background and not feel like the crowd was pressing in on him.

Spotting a gap in the people, Noah made his way toward it. Leaning his back against the wall, he sipped his drink, trying not to feel like an outsider. He could tell the people of Snowy Pine Ridge still didn't totally trust him—at least, not the ones who didn't know him—and he couldn't entirely blame them.

The very first impression that anyone had had of him was him pitching an idea that would change their entire town. Which was something he had been entirely convinced of when he'd first arrived but was now something he wasn't so sure of.

“Not a fan of crowds?”

A voice broke through his thoughts, and he glanced to one side to find Rudolph standing next to him. The old man had been in and out of St. Nick's Place to help decorate over the last week and a half, and he and Noah had interacted a handful of times.

He found that he liked the old man's gruff personality, and the way that he always told the truth, even when it might not be what everyone wanted to hear.

“Not really,” Noah answered honestly, shaking his head as he gave the old man a wry smile. “Plus, I think pretty much everyone in town is still wary around me.”

“Can’t really blame ’em though, can you?” Rudolph asked, giving him a pointed look, and Noah shrugged his confirmation. “Where’s Mindy?”

“She and some of her friends are in the back helping Valerie get ready.”

At the mention of the movie star’s name, something in the old man’s expression shifted. His eyes went softer, and some of the hardness in his lined face ebbed away.

“I’m glad they’re back there with her,” he said, and Noah could hear the wistfulness in the old man’s voice.

“Mindy seems to have carved out a good group of friends for herself,” he said. “And I know it means a lot to her to be involved in Valerie’s big day.”

“Means a lot to all of us.” The other man harrumphed, a small smile tugging up the corner of his lips. “Want some advice from an old grump of a man?”

He turned to look at Noah, who wasn’t entirely sure what to say. Rudolph ended up taking his silence as confirmation that it was okay to move forward, and he began speaking again a moment later.

“Don’t let this time get away from you,” Rudolph said, and Noah couldn’t help but notice that his voice cracked a little as he spoke. “Don’t let your own fear make you close yourself off from the things you want. And especially don’t let it close you off from love. Because one day you’ll blink, and it’ll all be gone. You’ll be in your seventies, alone, and with no idea how you got there.”

Noah watched the old man’s face, noting the heaviness in his expression and the regret that lingered in the depths of his eyes. He nodded, not sure what to say but feeling the impact of Rudolph’s statement nonetheless.

Rudolph gave a satisfied grunt, and the two of them fell into silence, gazing out at the crowd together.

But Noah wasn't really seeing it. He gripped his glass in his hand, turning Rudolph's advice over in his head again and again.

How long had he allowed fear to hold him back?

And would he let it keep him from what he wanted most this time?

\* \* \*

A short while later, Mindy walked out of the room where Valerie had been getting ready with Shelley, Colette, and Sarah. They returned to the massive room where the wedding would take place, all of them searching the faces around them for the men that they'd arrived with. The wedding was due to start within the next few minutes, and she wanted to make sure that she and Noah had plenty of time to get themselves seated.

Her friends found their partners and gave Mindy a wave goodbye, and just as she began to worry that maybe something had happened and Noah had left, the crowd parted and she spotted him near the wall by the bar.

He was holding a glass of amber liquid in his hand, leaning against the wall and staring out into the crowd with a somber expression, clearly lost in thought. She wondered what he could possibly be thinking about that had him looking so serious as she began walking toward him.

Her movements must have caught his attention, because as she got closer, his eyes flicked up to hers. The moment their gazes met, his face broke into a wide, heart stopping grin.

“There she is,” he said, and he looked so happy to see her that it made her heart hurt.

A vision danced in Mindy's mind, one where they greeted each other like this for years to come, where they were always each other's date to functions, where they would spend the night dancing, laughing, hanging out with their friends, and then drive home together while holding hands. A lump of

emotion formed in her throat, and she tried hard to swallow past it as she returned Noah's smile.

"The wedding is about to start," she said, hoping that he couldn't hear that her tone sounded a little too falsely bright.

"Let's go take our seats then," he answered, extending his arm to her in offer.

Mindy looped her arm through his, allowing him to lead her toward a pair of seats. She couldn't help but notice that Noah kept throwing her sidelong glances, and as they sat down, she turned to look at him.

"What's up?" she asked, narrowing her eyes at him.

"You just look so beautiful," he answered, something intense gleaming in the depths of his eyes.

Mindy's cheeks flushed, but before she could answer, the last person in the crowd took their seat and the music began to play. Clark walked up the aisle, taking his spot before the mantel along with the minister who had been called in to perform the ceremony.

The music changed, and the crowd turned, everyone craning their necks toward the entrance to the ballroom so they could get the first look at Valerie when she emerged. It happened a moment later, and the music coming through the speakers swelled as she appeared in the doorway with her arm looped through Rudolph's.

Mindy's breath left her in a rush as she took in her friend. Of course, she had seen her only a few moments before, but somehow she looked different now. Valerie stared at Clark at the opposite end of the aisle, her entire face filled with happiness and yearning as she made her way toward the man that was about to be her husband. Energy and excitement radiated from her, and Mindy watched as she and Rudolph stopped before the altar.

Rudolph gave her away, passing her hand from his to Clark's and giving her a peck on the cheek before turning and walking to his seat in the front row. The minister gave a small speech, talking about how much of a pleasure it was to have

witnessed the two of them fall in love, and how the entire town had welcomed Valerie in as one of them.

Mindy felt a hand come down on top of hers where it rested on her lap, and she looked down to find Noah lacing his fingers with hers. He squeezed her hand, and she looked over at him, her heart lurching with emotion. He made to pull his hand away a moment later, but she tightened her grip, not wanting to let go, and she felt his shoulders shake beside her with a chuckle.

By the time that Valerie and Clark exchanged vows, Mindy was holding on to her emotions by a thread. Tears shimmered in her eyes, and she was trying her hardest not to blink so that they wouldn't begin falling down her cheeks. She watched as Valerie and Clark promised to love each other for the rest of their lives, promised to take care of one another, to cherish and respect each other, to be partners.

And all the while, she held Noah's hand.

She couldn't help but focus on the solidness of his grip in hers, or the warmth rolling off his body, and the visions that had filled her mind moments before the wedding struck up anew. She wanted it to be real, wished that Noah could stay and that this could all amount to something.

But she also knew that it just wasn't in the cards for them right now.

The crowd around her began clapping as the couple were finally pronounced husband and wife, and Mindy lost her battle against her tears as Clark and Valerie shared their first kiss.

She let go of Noah's hand so that they could both applaud for the newlywed couple. They pushed themselves up to stand as Valerie and Clark walked back down the aisle, both of them beaming so hard that it looked like their cheeks might split from the force of their smiles.

Once they disappeared out the door, Lacy walked up to the front of the room, letting everyone know that it was now time for the cocktail hour and appetizer portion of the evening to

begin. Pushing all other thoughts out of her mind, Mindy stuck by Noah's side as they weaved their way toward Lacy to get instructions to begin helping to clear the ballroom.

Even though her heart felt like it was cracking inside her chest, she knew there was still plenty of celebration to come.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

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Valerie and Clark slipped into the library of St. Nick's Place, breathless and laughing as he spun her around.

"How does it feel to be married, Mrs. Mitchell?" he asked, pulling her into his arms.

Valerie grinned up at her husband. "It feels spectacular, Mr. Mitchell."

Clark cupped her face in his hands and leaned down to kiss her. She reveled in it, loving the fact that she would be able to kiss him every single day for the rest of her life. That the next stage of their lives together had started tonight.

She could hear the sounds of people celebrating in the main part of the house, but she was glad to have a small moment alone with her new husband before they rejoined the others. They gazed into each other's eyes for a long moment, sharing whispered words of love that felt just as precious as the vows they had just exchanged.

Then they finally separated, and Clark trailed his fingers along the line of her jaw. "I feel like the luckiest man in the world right now," he admitted.

"Good." She beamed at him. "Because I'm definitely the luckiest woman, which makes us the perfect pair."

Clark kissed her once more before the pair walked back out of the library and toward the ballroom. She was grateful all over again for the help of her friends as she saw that the chairs had already been cleared away, and the music had begun to play. There was a line at the bar, and people were walking

around with plates full of food as they headed toward the tables that were scattered along the edges of the space.

When she spotted her friends among the crowd, she gave Clark's arm a tug, steering her husband toward them. At their approach, Shelley gave a squeal of delight, while Colette immediately burst into cheers.

"Congratulations!" Mindy yelled, not waiting for a response before she launched herself at Valerie, pulling her into a tight embrace.

Valerie returned the hug, squeezing Mindy's slender shoulders tightly. Noah stood behind the blonde baker, his eyes dancing with joy as he watched the two of them hug.

"Thank you for your help this week," Valerie said honestly, taking a step back and looking at Mindy before swinging her gaze to Noah. "And you too. I know that can't have been easy for you, coming into a town as close-knit as this and trying to carve out a space for yourself, even if it's temporary. But Clark and I will always consider you a friend, and we're grateful for all the work you did to pitch in."

"You don't have to thank me, honestly," Noah answered, and Valerie could hear the sincerity in his tone. "I was more than happy to do it, and I enjoyed myself a lot."

Valerie opened her mouth to respond, but before she could, she was cut off by Rudolph, who appeared out of nowhere and pulled her into a tight, fierce hug. Valerie felt her eyes go wide as she hugged the old man back, surprised by such an overt display of emotion from him—although perhaps she shouldn't have been. He was becoming more and more open with his feelings, and tonight of all nights was full of emotion.

"I'm so proud of you," he said in her ear, his gruff voice thick.

At the sound of his words, Valerie suddenly felt herself on the brink of tears. As she pulled away from Rudolph, she blinked rapidly to clear the tears from her vision.

"Thank you," she said, giving the man a soft smile. "I know I've said it a thousand times, but I don't think you

understand how much today has meant to me.”

“I do,” Rudolph answered, his usually gruff tone completely gone, replaced by something softer and more emotional. “I understand because that’s how much it meant to me.”

Clark cleared his throat, looking just as emotional as Valerie felt, and Rudolph hugged him too, murmuring something in his ear about how he’d better take good care of her, which Clark promised to do.

“Noah!”

A woman’s voice called out from nearby, and Valerie turned to see a beautiful older woman striding their way. Edith Brinkley.

“I’m so glad you made it to the party,” Edith said, resting a hand on Noah’s arm. “This was always one of Theresa’s favorite events.”

“I’m glad I could be here too,” Noah said, smiling fondly at the woman.

An idea sparked in Valerie’s mind, and she turned back to Rudolph.

“Rudolph, why don’t you ask Edith to dance?” she suggested, gesturing to the couples who were moving about on the dance floor as holiday music played.

Rudolph’s eyes went wide. “Oh, uh... I don’t think she wants to...”

“I’d love to dance,” Edith said, turning to look at him with a shy smile. “If you’ll ask me.”

“Go on, then.” Noah gave Rudolph a quick, playful elbow to his side. “Remember what you told me earlier? That advice meant a lot to me. And I have a piece of advice for you too. It’s never too late.”

Rudolph blushed, and Valerie had to work to hide her smile. She had never seen the old man look flustered before.

“I suppose a dance wouldn’t hurt,” Rudolph said, looking at Edith and extending his hand. “May I?”

“Of course.”

Edith took his proffered hand, and the two of them started to walk away. Rudolph stopped a few feet from the dance floor, casting a glance at Valerie over his shoulder, and she waved him on encouragingly. Happiness flared within her as he and Edith stepped out onto the dance floor.

“How did you know what to say to convince him?” Valerie asked, unable to keep the astonishment from leaking into her voice as she turned and looked at Noah. “I felt like suggesting he ask her to dance was a long shot at best, but you actually got him to do it!”

He shrugged one shoulder while Clark shook his head in amazement.

“Rudolph said something to me just before the wedding,” Noah explained. “Something that made me think he might be willing to step out of his comfort zone, to face his fear and take a leap.”

Emotion bubbled up in Valerie again as she thought of the man who had become like a father to her over the course of the last year, and how much she had wanted him to find love. She had no way of knowing what would happen between him and Edith, but she had a good feeling about it, based on the smile they were sharing as they spun slowly on the dance floor.

“Thank you,” she murmured with gratitude. “Thank you.”

Noah tried to wave off her thanks, but she wasn’t hearing any of it. However, before she could get too far into her protestations, the DJ they’d hired for the event came over the speakers and announced that it was time for the bride and groom’s first dance.

She looked at Clark, grinning at the man she loved as he pulled her toward the center of the dance floor.

\* \* \*

An hour later, Mindy stepped into the kitchen at St. Nick's Place, stopping for a moment to fan herself and cool down. The party was in full swing, and she'd been running around doing a few tasks for Lacy to make sure that her friend had a chance to enjoy the party as well. She peered through the doorway of the kitchen into the main room, spotting Noah exactly where she'd left him after checking in on him twenty minutes ago.

She sighed, shaking her head at herself. She was avoiding him. She knew it. And she had a feeling that he did too.

When she'd witnessed him stepping in for Rudolph, getting the old man to come out of his shell and ask Edith to dance, she had realized something that had made her heart sink.

Her job with Noah was done. His tour was over. After the Christmas party, there was really nothing else that she could show him in Snowy Pine Ridge that would top this. And their three weeks would be up in just a couple days anyway.

With all the thoughts she'd had throughout the day, all the pining for things to be different, it was only now truly hitting her that he was going to leave soon. And she wasn't sure she could face it.

She grabbed one of the trays of treats from the oven, then took them out to the snacks table, beginning to unload the appetizers onto platters. A moment later, she felt someone walk up next to her, and a whiff of familiar cologne let her know exactly who it was.

She turned to look at Noah, holding the pan from the oven tightly as she did so. He was watching her, his green eyes confused and slightly hurt.

"Why are you avoiding me?" he asked, his dark brow knitted together.

Mindy's heartbeat sped up and she winced internally at being so easy to read. She let out a shaky laugh that rang false even to her own ears, hustling toward the snack table to unload the remainder of the pan as Noah followed after her.

“I’m not avoiding you,” she protested, careful not to look at him so he couldn’t read the lie that she was certain would be written plainly across her face.

“Mindy,” Noah said, his tone barely concealing his exasperation. “You’re clearly ignoring me. And you have been since right after everything with Rudolph and Edith. Something is going on, and I want to know what it is. We’ve been so honest with each other up to now. Please, don’t hide something from me. Tell me what’s going on with you.”

She finished loading the mini cinnamon rolls onto a platter and then turned to face him, her heart thumping a wild beat in her ears as she saw the open vulnerability written across his features. With a sinking feeling, she realized she couldn’t do this anymore.

She couldn’t continue to lie to him, couldn’t continue to avoid him. And she also couldn’t continue to lie to herself and pretend that everything was okay and wasn’t heading for swift and certain disaster. She sighed as she turned and walked back toward the kitchen with Noah trailing in her wake.

The massive kitchen was attached to the main room of the lodge, and through the open doorway, they could see the party continuing on without them.

Mindy placed the pan she’d been holding in the sink and began spraying it off, hoping to keep her hands busy while she did what she needed to do.

“My job is done,” she said, surprised when her voice came out sounding more steady than she had thought it would. “There’s nothing left for me to show you around town. And we both know that I haven’t changed your mind. I don’t want to pretend anymore that we aren’t playing with fire doing what we’re doing. And I don’t want to end up hurt. So it’s better if we call this now.”

“What are you talking about?” Noah asked. “How are we playing with fire? How are we going to get hurt?”

“It’s inevitable,” she said softly, finishing rinsing the tray and setting it aside to dry. “And you can’t tell me it isn’t.”

Noah blinked at her, something she couldn't identify churning behind his eyes as she grabbed a towel to dry her hands.

"Listen," she began again, working to keep her voice level and even. "We both know what's about to happen. I've done all I can do. And yes, it's been amazing spending time with you again. This has been the best Christmas season I've ever had. But we both know this will only end in disaster if we continue to pretend our past doesn't matter, and that the reason you came to Snowy Pine Ridge doesn't matter."

She looked up to meet his gaze, her heart lurching when she saw the hurt lingering in the depths of his green eyes. A lump formed in her throat, but she quickly swallowed past it. There would be time for her to fall apart later.

"Mindy," Noah said. He took a step toward her, but she retreated to keep the distance between them. She knew that if he touched her, if she allowed him to try to comfort her in any way, her willpower would fold like a used napkin. "So much has changed since I got here. I'm not the same man I was, and that's because of you. I don't want to let this go. You haven't even asked me if—"

"Where is my son?"

A voice boomed out on the other side of the house, and Mindy watched as shock rippled across Noah's face a split second before they both turned their attention in the direction the voice had come from.

Since the kitchen door was open, they could see clearly into the main room of the house as Brett Henderson strode into it, looking furious.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

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Noah's pulse jumped, shock resonating through him at the sight of his father. He and Mindy hurried out of the kitchen as Brett scanned the crowd, his tall, imposing stature making the man seem larger than life.

"What are you doing here?" Noah asked as soon as they reached him. "This is a party."

"I see that. This must be why you've been too busy to return my calls," his father ground out through gritted teeth, not even acknowledging any of the other people around him. "Your time here is almost up, and now I find out that you've just been wasting it. What about our plans? What about our business?"

People were staring at the two of them with wariness and muted curiosity as they watched the scene unfolding before them. Noah planted his feet more firmly on the floor, eyeing his father as he folded his arms across his chest.

He didn't want to hash this out with him here. Not now. Not when Mindy was standing just a few feet away from him, and he'd been on the verge of admitting everything to her. But his father's sudden arrival had left him no choice.

"You haven't answered my calls in almost a week," Brett repeated, drawing himself up to his full height. The suit that he wore was so starched and pressed to perfection that there wasn't a wrinkle in sight. "I called Hugh to find out what's been going on, but all he would say is that you're still here, dallying with that girl."

He pointed at Mindy, who shrank back from his father's attention. Noah's jaw clenched, and he stepped in between them.

"This has nothing to do with her," he argued, a protective instinct rising inside him.

His father snorted with disbelief, and Noah risked a glance toward the rest of the party. Everyone in the room was watching them now, and the DJ had even cut the music, making Noah and his father the main focus of attention.

"Is that so? I sent you here on business," Brett shot back, not bothering to lower his voice. "I sent you here so that you could handle what should have been a simple deal, but it seems that the faith I put in you was misplaced."

His father puffed up his chest, absentmindedly smoothing down the lapels of his suit jacket.

"Fine," he continued when Noah didn't speak. "I'll just take matters into my own hands. You're no longer needed in Snowy Pine Ridge. I'll drive out to my sister-in-law's property tonight and assess everything, and then contractors can be here as early as Monday morning."

His father gave him a smug look, as if he'd had to come in and clean up some mess that Noah had made. There were murmurs of dissent from the townspeople, cries of "we don't want your warehouse," or "what about the town" filling the space. But Noah could tell that his father wasn't hearing a bit of it.

A flash of anger and defiance bolted through him, and he took a step closer to his father. He clenched his jaw, his own gaze leveling out to stare at Brett just as the man began to turn to walk back toward the door.

"You will do no such thing," Noah said, his voice loud and clear as it rang out in the room.

It was so quiet he could almost hear the grinding of his father's molars as the older man set his jaw and turned slowly back around to face his son.

“What did you say?” Brett gritted out, and Noah lifted a brow in challenge.

“I said you aren’t starting development on anything.”

His father narrowed his eyes. “That land was left to our business to do with as we see fit, and I...”

“No,” Noah interrupted, shaking his head. “It wasn’t given to the business. It also wasn’t given to you. It was given to *me*. It’s up to me what happens to that property. And I stand with them.”

He gestured with one hand, indicating the people of Snowy Pine Ridge who stood all around them, looking shocked as they watched everything unfold. Noah could still feel Mindy’s presence, standing just behind him, the warmth of her body cascading off her and bringing him comfort as he stared at his father.

“All you’ve ever wanted was to push me into becoming just like you,” Noah continued. “You wanted me to think of nothing else but corporate profits, with no regard to what it did to everyone else around. And for a while, I was happy to do it. I thought that success was only measured in how much money you made, in how big your business was. But my time in Snowy Pine Ridge has taught me so much more. So no, you can’t have the property. You won’t be starting anything here. And I won’t be leaving. I’m staying here, at Aunt Theresa’s house.”

“I’d think twice about that,” his father growled, anger filling his features. “Don’t think I’ll allow you to pull a stunt like this and still keep your position at our family firm. If you go through with this, you can consider yourself fired.”

“You can’t fire someone who’s quit,” Noah answered with a triumphant grin, feeling almost lightheaded with relief at how *right* the words felt as they left his mouth. “In case you couldn’t tell, this was my resignation. I’m done.”

His father’s face turned beet red, and he gaped at him like a fish for a few moments. Noah could guess that he was trying to think of some way to wrest the property that had been left to

Noah out of his hands, but after a long moment, he must've realized it wasn't worth the fight.

There was nothing he could do. Theresa had left the land to Noah, and had spelled it out very clearly in her will.

Brett gave a final, low noise of disapproval before turning on his heel and stalking out of the room. A few seconds later, they heard a door slam loudly.

It was as if that sound snapped some tension that had been hanging in the air. Instantly, chaos broke out around Noah.

People rushed forward, extending their hands to him to shake, clapping him on the shoulders, and pouring out words of congratulations and appreciation. Noah tried as hard as he could to answer everyone who spoke to him, to accept their gratitude with grace—but in truth, there was only one person he wanted to see.

As the throng of people around him finally started to ebb away, he turned around, his gaze landing on Mindy. She was still lingering exactly where he'd last seen her, her arms crossed over her chest, and for a moment he was worried that she was still mad.

But then Noah took in the expression on her face. There was a tentative smile tugging up the corner of her lips, and when he looked into her eyes, he found that they were glistening with tears.

Unable to hold himself back any longer, Noah strode toward her.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

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Mindy didn't move as she watched Noah slip through the lingering crowd to get to her. Keeping her eyes fixed on him, she tried her best to steady her breathing and her clumsily beating heart in the seconds it took for him to cross the space.

She couldn't believe everything that she'd just seen and heard.

In her wildest dreams, she never thought she would have seen the day where Noah Henderson stood up to his father—especially not like that. He hadn't just told his father off. He had stood up for the town. Stood up for *her*.

And that meant more than she could ever express.

When he reached her, he took her hand, holding it gently as he looked into her eyes.

"Can we go talk?" he asked, his voice serious as he looked around and added, "Somewhere private?"

Mindy nodded, keeping her hand in his as she led him through the house. They made their way into the study where the boxes that had held all the decorations were being kept, knowing they'd be undisturbed in there. When the door shut behind them, the sound of the people in the rest of the house dimming to a dull background noise, she turned to face Noah.

"You're staying?" she asked, her tone hesitant.

She was afraid of his answer, terrified that she was about to find out everything that had just happened had been a dream or that she'd misinterpreted it somehow. That the standoff had

been a moment of madness, and now he might regret everything and tell her he'd be leaving tomorrow. But thankfully, Noah didn't make her wait long before he put her fears to rest.

"I'm staying," he said, nodding once.

"Why?" she whispered.

He took a step closer, releasing her hand so that he could cup her chin gently. "I thought it would have been obvious."

Her heart thudded so hard against her ribs that she feared they would crack, a giddy rush of joy rising up in her.

"I knew it," Mindy said, barely able to contain her laugh as butterflies took off in her stomach. "You've fallen in love with Rudolph and you're moving here so you can drive the Zamboni."

Noah's eyes shone as he laughed too, shaking his head at her.

"I think I would be quite happy at the ice rink," he joked back, and Mindy's heart soared at the lightness in his tone. "But alas, Rudolph will have to find someone else to be his Zamboni driver. Edith, perhaps. Because my heart is already spoken for."

His look grew serious as he stared deep into her eyes, and as he did, all the years that they spent together—all the arguments, the hurt, the love, the laughter, the good and the bad—fell away. Because in that moment, all Mindy could see was the green of his eyes and the brightness of the future that could be theirs for the taking.

"And who has spoken for it?" she asked, her voice cracking just a bit. "Who has claimed your heart?"

"You."

The word was so simple, and yet it made a million emotions surge up in her chest.

"In the past few weeks, I've experienced the joy of falling in love with you all over again," he explained, his voice sounding more open and honest than she'd ever heard it. "But

it isn't just you. It's also this town. I want to live here, in the place that meant so much to me growing up. I want to start a business here in town, doing whatever it is that brings my heart happiness. I want to finally work for myself, to do all the things that make me proud, instead of working myself to the bone trying to impress someone who was never going to be impressed in the first place."

Tears pooled in Mindy's eyes, and she tried to blink them back, but they refused to recede. They fell down her cheeks, and with a gentle hand, Noah brushed them away.

"I love you too," Mindy whispered, but she didn't need to speak any louder. She knew that Noah heard her. "I love you so much, Noah. I'm not sure I ever stopped."

He brought his lips to hers, and she felt like the only thing tethering her to the earth was the man standing in front of her. As their kiss deepened, she wrapped her arms around him, clinging to him like she would never let go—because now, she knew she wouldn't have to.

She had no idea how long they stayed like that, locked in each other's arms, lost in their kiss. But by the time they parted, both of their faces were flushed, and they were short of breath. Noah's green eyes flicked upward, and another grin lit up his face.

"Look," he said, nodding toward the ceiling.

When Mindy followed his line of sight, she was shocked to find a bundle of green affixed to the ceiling, dangling just above their heads.

"Mistletoe," she breathed. Then she met his gaze, lifting a brow. "I guess that means this is meant to be."

Noah's only response was to nod and kiss her again.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

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“Here, Piper,” Lacy said, pointing to the small rip in the wrapping paper that she’d just torn. “Grab this and pull.”

Piper looked up at her with wide brown eyes before doing exactly as she was instructed. It was Christmas morning, and Lacy, Derek, and their daughter were all seated on the floor around their Christmas tree.

A fire crackled in the hearth of their fireplace, while Christmas music played through their TV. And while Piper might be too young to really get the meaning of the whole Christmas thing, Lacy didn’t think she had ever been more excited.

She sat back, watching as Derek began helping their daughter figure out how to open the presents that had been laid out before her. While he was distracted, Lacy glanced behind her, making sure that the present she’d set aside was still there.

Sure enough, it sat right by the sofa, exactly where she’d left it.

After a few more tries, it was clear that Piper cared more about the wrapping paper itself than what it was concealing. So they decided to let her just play with the paper and worry about her presents later, and they began exchanging their own gifts.

One by one, alternating between the two of them, they passed out their own presents. Derek’s first gift was a new toolbox that she’d caught him eyeing at the hardware store a couple of months ago, and Lacy’s first present was a

personalized perfume that Derek had made for her. Sweaters, books, movies, and personalized wall signs were all unwrapped, until finally there were no presents left under the tree. Except for the ones that Piper was still playing with, of course.

“Well, should we open the rest of hers for her?” Derek asked, looking pointedly at the unwrapped pile their daughter was ignoring in lieu of sticking a bow on top of her head.

“You aren’t done yet,” she said with a grin, laughing at the confused look on her husband’s face as she scooted over to the sofa, grabbed the box beside it, and then handed it to him.

Derek took it, his eyes darting from the box to Lacy and then back again.

“I thought we agreed to no more than seven apiece?” he asked, giving the box a little cursory shake.

“Consider this one a special exception,” she said. “Go on. Open it.”

Lacy watched as Derek began to rip open the paper, peeling it back layer by layer. Underneath the paper was a long, rectangular box. Once again, he shook it curiously, and Lacy laughed.

“Just open it already!” she groaned in anticipation.

“Okay, Miss Impatient,” Derek joked, pulling the lid off the box.

He glanced into it and froze, and Lacy tried not to squirm while she waited for him to respond.

“Is this for real?” he asked, astonishment filling his voice as he reached into the box and pulled out its contents.

Lacy nodded. “It’s real.”

Derek held the pregnancy test reverently in his hand, and Lacy didn’t need to see it to know what the small screen on the front of it said. She had been suspecting the truth for weeks, ever since Shelley had shared the news that she was pregnant, and a test had finally confirmed it. Lacy was pregnant as well.

“We’re having another baby,” she said softly, and tears sprang up in her eyes when Derek looked up at her.

His face was filled with so much joy and love that she thought her heart might burst. Before she could react, Derek set down the test, lifted Piper off the floor, and then pulled Lacy to her feet, wrapping them both in a giant bear hug.

Piper squealed with excitement, throwing bits of wrapping paper into the air so that it rained down over them like confetti, and Lacy laughed. Caught up in that moment, with her husband and daughter both so close and so happy, and with new life growing inside of her, she couldn’t imagine how life could get any better than this.

\* \* \*

The doorbell rang, and Gus started barking and spinning in circles as Mindy tried to make her way to the door. She knew who would be on the other side of it, especially since he had just texted her a bit ago to let her know he was on his way. But that didn’t stop her heart from fluttering or a smile from spreading across her face when she pulled the door open to reveal Noah standing on her stoop holding a small mountain of presents.

“Look at you,” she said with a chuckle, stepping back to let him in the house. “You really pulled out all the stops.”

“Don’t get too excited,” he advised. “Most of these are for Gus.”

“Exactly as it should be.” Mindy laughed as she followed him into her living room, trying to keep the dog in question from tripping Noah as he made his way to the tree.

Once he’d set the presents down around the Christmas tree, he turned and pulled her into a warm, tight embrace. Mindy pressed her face against his chest, not caring that he was still wearing his coat. A puffer coat, this time, not the wool coat that he so frequently donned.

In the days since the wedding and Christmas party, she'd noticed a much more casual side of Noah. Gone was the time of the freshly pressed suits and tailored jackets, and they'd now been replaced by jeans and button ups or sweaters. She had to admit that she thought he looked incredibly handsome in both types of outfits, but she felt like he was finally allowing a part of himself that had been locked up tightly to breathe, and she loved that.

Noah kissed her on the top of her head, giving her one more squeeze before murmuring, "Merry Christmas," and letting his arms fall to his sides.

"Merry Christmas to you too," she said, plopping down on the floor next to the tree while Noah walked back to the entryway to take off his coat and boots.

By the time he came back into the living room, she and Gus had the gifts all separated and were waiting eagerly for him to join them. She watched happily as Noah made himself cozy on the floor next to her, and they began opening their presents.

Gus had a pile containing at least ten presents, while Noah and Mindy only had one apiece, which was what they'd agreed to. And to no one's surprise, almost every single box for Gus contained a new sweater.

She and Noah held each one up, allowing Gus to inspect them all. He barked happily at each one of them, but one sweater in particular—a brown one that was decorated to make Gus look like a little gingerbread man—had him spinning in circles, yapping like mad.

Mindy laughed. "I think he wants to wear this one."

Noah quickly agreed and began working to get Gus dressed in the cutest little sweater she'd ever seen. She watched as Gus lapped at Noah's face while he tried to pull Gus's front legs through the holes of the shirt, her heart swelling at how much they already seemed to love each other.

She had to admit that they'd come a very long way since when they'd first met.

Once Gus was dressed in his new sweater and the rest of his presents had been opened, she and Noah started on theirs. Noah persuaded Mindy to go first, despite the various protests that she threw out, and she reached forward to grab her box.

The wrapping paper was cute, with little Christmas trees wearing sassy leather boots, and she wondered if they could turn that print into fabric for an apron. There was a box underneath all the wrapping paper, and she opened that too, letting out a gasp when she realized what was inside.

“Noah,” she breathed, her hands grazing over the fabric as she slowly, reverently, lifted the apron out of the box. “How do you still have this?”

“Could never bring myself to throw it out,” he answered with a shrug, grinning at her with satisfaction as he drank in her reaction.

Mindy couldn’t believe her eyes as she stared at the very first apron she’d ever bought. It was a plain, pale pink, since Mindy hadn’t been confident enough to wear the crazy prints that she loved so much back then. And there was a stain over the bottom left pocket where she’d spilled a bit of cooking wine and forgot to clean it off in time.

As she held the thing in her hands, a flood of memories came rushing back to her. She had perfected her technique for croissants in this apron, had worn it for hours and hours as she practiced her cake decorating. She had cried in this apron when recipes hadn’t gone according to plan. And she had learned and grown as a baker in this apron.

Tears pricked at her eyes as she glanced up at Noah.

“Thank you,” she whispered, cradling the apron to her chest. “I can’t really tell you how much this means to me.”

“You don’t need to,” he said happily. “I already know.”

They shared a look, and Mindy was struck by how different things felt between them this time around. Things felt softer, surer, and she found a comfort in his presence that put her mind at ease. And the apron that she held in her hands felt like the perfect symbol of that feeling.

She nodded toward Noah's box. "Your turn."

He grinned, reaching down to pluck it off the floor and began unwrapping it. She watched his face closely as he did so, marking the moment when the paper fell away and he took in what the picture frame he was now holding contained.

"This is..."

His words trailed off as his face lit with awe.

He reached up with a reverent hand, touching the glass softly as he ran his fingertips over it. She knew exactly what was inside of it, had worked overtime to track it down and get it framed in the few days between the holiday party and Christmas Day. It was a picture of Theresa's house the day it had been built, with his aunt standing in front of it, beaming proudly at the camera.

"I know exactly where I'm going to hang it," he said proudly, pushing himself up off the floor and extending his hand to Mindy to pull her up as well.

He led her over to the couch, both of them laughing as Gus began to play with the wrapping paper still on the floor.

"We can clean that up later," Mindy said with the wave of her other hand as they settled on the sofa.

He kissed her, and Mindy curled her feet up under her, tucking her head against Noah's chest as he pulled up the Christmas movie they'd talked about watching.

"I have one more little surprise for you," he said, his chest rumbling with the gravel of his voice.

"What's that?" she asked, keeping her eyes fixed on the screen as he searched through the streaming service.

"I think I know what I want to do now that I'm going to be staying in Snowy Pine Ridge," he answered, and Mindy sat up a bit, turning her head so she could see his face.

"I thought you wanted to do some consulting."

"I'll do that eventually, I think. But I want to start my own thing first. I've spent the last few days looking into it, and I

don't think I'm going to move into Theresa's house right away." He looked a bit sheepish at the confused look on her face. "I found a place to rent for a little while, since there are some repairs that I want to do to the house that are going to take some time. Especially since there's part of it that I'll want to convert to a shop."

"A shop?" she repeated, her eyebrows flying up in surprise.

Noah nodded. "I'll need somewhere to check out my customers and house some of the creations of local artists, which I plan to sell around the holidays. I want to transform the rest of the property into a Christmas tree farm."

Mindy gasped, and Noah's face lit up in an open, proud grin.

"That'll be perfect," she breathed.

"I think so too," he said. "And Theresa would have loved it. There's all that open space behind her house, and there are already a ton of pine trees out there. I'll need to convert some of the land and bring in new trees, but I think it'll be possible."

Mindy was speechless for a moment, letting her imagination run wild with all the possibilities this new idea would hold. Finally, she was able to shake herself out of it enough to lean forward, pressing a gentle kiss to his lips.

"I'm so proud of you," she murmured before snuggling back into his chest. "And I can't wait to help you bring this idea to life."

"Thank you. I'm sure I'll need plenty of help. But I can't wait to get started."

Noah wrapped his arm around her shoulder as he found the movie and pressed play.

As the beginning credits started to fill the scene, Mindy snuggled even closer to him. In her mind's eye, she saw a thousand more evenings just like this. Ones where she, Noah, and Gus were curled up on the couch, watching movies or just talking about their days. Those nights would be filled with

laughter, with conversation, and with more love than she knew what to do with.

Mindy knew that to some people, her vision of the future might seem a little mundane, maybe even a little boring. But to her?

Well, she couldn't possibly think of anything she wanted more.

\* \* \*

Thank you so much for reading the *Snowy Pine Ridge* series! Want more sweet and uplifting women's fiction? Dive into my *Marigold Island* series, starting with [The Beachside Inn](#).

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Fiona writes sweet, feel-good contemporary women's fiction and family sagas with a bit of romance.

She hopes her characters will start to feel like old friends as you follow them on their journeys of love, family, friendship, and new beginnings. Her heartwarming storylines and charming small-town beach settings are a particular favorite of readers.

When she's not writing, she loves eating good meals with friends, trying out new recipes, and finding the perfect glass of wine to pair them with. She lives on the East Coast with her husband and their two trouble-making dogs.

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