

A Peppermint Hollow Christmas Romance

The Heart of Christmas *Cheer*



USA Today Bestselling Author

RACHAEL ELIKER

THE HEART OF CHRISTMAS CHEER

A PEPPERMINT HOLLOW CHRISTMAS ROMAN
BOOK 2

RACHAEL ELIKER

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ISBN 978-1-959007-21-0 (e-book)

ISBN 978-1-959007-22-7 (print)

Library of Congress Reference Number 1-13409042511

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FROM THE BACK COVER

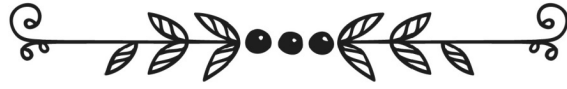
This Christmas, a second chance could kindle a love truly worth the fight.

Everything Jetta Carter has worked and expected for her life should be coming together. Instead, in one especially unfortunate evening, her career as a budding artist skids to a halt, her boyfriend betrays her, and the rumors start to fly. Needing a break from the disappointment, Jetta keeps her head high as she packs up her things and lugs her guilt with her to Peppermint Hollow.

A lone wolf doesn't need anyone, and that's exactly who Maverick Blackwell is. Even when he's reintroduced to the newly arrived Jetta, he tries to maintain his stony demeanor as a safety precaution for his bruised and battered heart. It's futile. Jetta is captivating from her headstrong demeanor to her teasing smirk. It doesn't take long for Maverick to wish he could meet her under the mistletoe.

Maverick is determined to show Jetta how fiercely he can love a woman, but she has a secret that makes her balk. Unless he can get her to open her heart and give love a second chance, both of them might be in for a lonely Christmas.

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Christmas isn't a season. It's a feeling.

~Edna Ferber

CHAPTER ONE



JETTA

“This place is gorgeous.” Jetta’s gaze trailed across the room, careful to keep her jaw firmly closed. She could gawk, but only if she didn’t *look* like she was in awe. It’d give away that she wasn’t one to eat at fine dining establishments frequently, and in a place like this, it was important to keep up appearances. She leaned close to Chuck, her boyfriend who was treating her to the special evening, and whispered, “How’d you get on the reservation list so quickly? I heard it takes six months, even for a table for two.”

Chuck laughed softly at Jetta’s amazement. “It’s like the art world. All about knowing the right people.”

She looped her hand through his arm and pressed herself against his side. “And who do you know?”

“I happen to have played lacrosse with the brother of the manager in college. We got to talking, and one thing led to another, and here we are. A simple conversation can change the trajectory of a lot of things.”

“Even something as insignificant as dinner?”

“I think you’re mistaking this opportunity. Who knows? This dinner might change our destiny. If we’re in the right

place at the right time, and network with the right people... I have a good feeling about tonight.”

Jetta couldn't help herself. She stared at him in amazement. How she'd snagged such an incredible man when the rest of her life was operating on subpar, if sufficient, levels never ceased to thrill her. Chuck gave Jetta hope that if it was possible to secure his affections, other dreams might be attainable, too. What she envisioned for her life was hardly what anyone would consider excessive. She wasn't shooting to be the next van Gogh or Frida Kahlo—Jetta was realistic about her ambitions. Professionally, all she hoped for was an ascending, successful and enduring career as an artist. As for her personal affairs, a Brownstone home in Brooklyn Heights with a perfect family naturally flowed with her plans. Ideally, two twin girls, then a baby boy. Chuck fit easily into her dreams as her handsome, equally successful husband, who loved doting on her and their children.

She stole a quick glance at his profile as he scrolled on his phone and grinned to herself. Winning the lottery came in many ways, and for Jetta, it had brown eyes, strong cheekbones, and a gift for noticing trends in fine artwork. All of it gave him an advantage as an art dealer.

“Mr. Jones, party of two?” the hostess announced.

Chuck looked up, nodding to the hostess and slipping his phone into the pocket of his tailored navy suit. Raising Jetta from the crushed velvet cushioned bench where they had been seated, she kept close to him as they were ushered to their table. She focused on gliding with the poise of a runway model, and smiling as graciously as nobility surveying their kingdom.

Appearances. Perception. Success.

It all meant good business for Chuck, and by association, Jetta. If Chuck was worthy of head nods as people swiveled their eyes to him, acknowledging that he was someone important, then, as his girlfriend, Jetta needed to be exemplary, too.

“Thank you,” Jetta said as Chuck helped her slide into her seat. He sat down across from her, and Jetta leaned in to whisper conspiratorially at him again. “I only had a banana for breakfast and nothing else all day so I’d be able to appreciate the food here. I want to eat every last bite.”

Her confession made him laugh. “Order anything you’d like. Tonight, we’re celebrating.”

They perused the menu and with swift service, gave their order to their waiter for more food than either of them could reasonably expect to finish. Brie mushroom pastries. Pan seared duck breast, smothered in huckleberry sauce. Prime rib and chive scalloped potatoes. Dark chocolate mousse cake. Jetta’s mouth was watering merely reading the menu. After they’d sorted everything with their waiter, he took their menus with a slight bow and hurried off toward the kitchen.

Snapping open her napkin, Jetta draped it daintily across her lap. Her mind was sprinting and chaotic, trying to remember the bits of etiquette she’d picked up along the way. “If you keep up your incredible commissions record, we’ll have a reason to celebrate every night. Can you imagine?”

She closed her eyes, trying to manifest that reality by focusing on the details of her future self. In her reverie, she looked so content she almost glowed. As she swallowed, she could taste the prime rib on her tongue.

Chuck ran a preening hand over his blond hair, not that it needed it. Every strand was exactly where it should be, as usual. “I’ve been getting lucky, finding the right artists for my clients’ taste. Sometimes, it all happens the way it should.”

Ice water coursed through Jetta’s veins while her face grew contradictorily hotter. Talking about Chuck’s success shouldn’t have made her squirm. She was happy for him. Truly. All Jetta wanted was to insert herself in there—somewhere in Chuck’s world, beyond her coveted spot as his girlfriend, which she had only earned because she had been lucky enough to catch his eye. Maybe it was shallow of her, but Jetta wanted a taste of success for herself. To be the reason, for once, that they were going out to celebrate.

Jetta was an artist. At least, in theory. Could she actually claim it as her profession when she struggled to find people who were willing to part with their hard-earned money for her paintings? She poured her soul into every one of them and critically, she'd received excellent feedback. It just stung every time she unlocked the door of her studio apartment and was greeted by rows of canvases lined up, leaning like weary soldiers against the brick walls. They were stark reminders of her failure. The crowning insult to her artwork taking up unwanted space in her apartment rather than being prized and given places of honor in a hundred other homes, Jetta had taken up working at an arts and crafts store to stay afloat, a secret she kept from everyone, even Chuck. Restocking paid her bills, not her paintings.

Not yet.

Hope compelled her to get out her brushes and paints night after night, keeping her creativity and imagination fresh.

Jetta did what she did best and buried her feelings behind a cheerful smile. Tonight was not the time to dwell on her struggles. Raising her glass, she offered a toast. "To your continued success."

Chuck laughed. "I can drink to that."

"You should. You deserve every good thing."

He set his glass down and reached across the table. His hand found hers, and the reassurance of his touch Jetta was as welcome as a warm blanket. "So do you."

"You think so?"

She knew the question was as pathetic as a mangy dog begging for scraps, but Jetta recognized it for what it was—validation. Everyone needed reassurance once in a while. What was so wrong with that? Chuck was that golden thread of hope that someday, things would look up. If she kept at it, it'd be her artwork flying off the gallery walls. Even better if Chuck was the one who helped her achieve her dreams. Plenty of couples helped in one another's success.

Chuck wove his fingers between hers and squeezed softly. “I know so. You’re so talented. It’s only a matter of time before you’re all the rage.”

If there was one thing that Jetta hated worse than anything, it was crying. The puffy red eyes, the headaches... it wasn’t a good look for her. Still, the tears threatened a mutiny by stinging her eyes and cinching her throat.

“I hope so,” she murmured, rubbing her thumb along the peaks and valleys of his knuckles. With tears pushing precariously against her lashes, Jetta changed the subject to something happier. Weddings were always a cause for celebration, and she knew one was on the horizon. “Did I tell you my friend Darby will be engaged soon?”

“Is that the one who moved to... what was the town? Spearmint Springs?”

Jetta’s laughter effervesced from her the way soda fizzed when the can was cracked, and her mood was instantly lifted. “Peppermint Hollow.”

“Right.” Chuck sat back in his seat, folding his arms as his eyes shifted around the room. He was always on, looking for a connection to someone he might know, or someone he might want to know. In his eyes, everyone was a prospective sale. Nodding at a man in a gray Armani suit, accented with a burgundy tie, the two of them exchanged an unobtrusive greeting. “That’s great news. I’m assuming you’ll be making another trip out there for her wedding?”

“She’s talked about getting married in November.”

“This November?” Jetta nodded as she downed a sip from her water glass, while Chuck grinned wryly and shook his head. “They’re not even engaged yet, and she wants to get married this year? What’s the rush? Surprise pregnancy?”

His cavalier comment caused a rash of irritation to prickle Jetta’s skin. “No. They’re in love. That’s all. Why do they have to wait when they know what they want?”

“I’m teasing,” Chuck said reassuringly. “Everyone seems to be in such a hurry to make commitments to each other when

they could just enjoy the relationship without the paperwork.”

Jetta ignored his unromantic assessment of marriage and continued with her plans. “I might hop on a flight to see her over the summer. She said she could use my artist’s eye for some of the planning. Once they’re actually engaged, of course. It should be any day now.”

“That’s great. You should go. Enjoy yourself. You were so re-energized after your first trip.” Chuck took a quick sip of his water, then amended, “Except for that cowboy who was rude to you. I’d love to give him a piece of my mind. Nobody plows into my girlfriend without an apology and gets away with it.”

Jetta would have preferred to stay in the present, but inadvertently, Chuck’s comment compelled her mind to sift through her memories, recalling that day. It was spring when Jetta had taken Darby up on her offer to visit, and the entire weekend, everything was perfect. The only snafu in the experience was Maverick. She’d been minding her own business in the barn when this big oaf came rushing in, nearly knocking her to the ground like she was a wobbly bowling pin he was aiming for. Ironically, it was also him who saved her from bruised knees and scraped palms with his quick reflexes.

Then, he was gruff and dashing all in one, giving an unsuspecting Jetta the chills. She resented Maverick for that.

If she could, Jetta wished she could erase the entire experience altogether. Instead, her memory was vivid. Along with his brawny arms and stellar reaction time, she also could recall the clean smell of his freshly laundered shirt, like sunshine warming a blooming meadow, and the richness of his eyes. Brown didn’t do them justice. They were more like the color of freshly baked pumpnickel bread... dark and hearty and delicious. They’d been tangled so close together as he held her in his arms that Darby could see there was an unmistakable depth to them.

Then he had to be rude, which made it *much* easier to brush him off.

“I’d pay to see that.” Jetta lifted her water glass in a hearty toast, then took a drink. “That gives me an idea. Why don’t you come with me?”

“To the wedding?”

“No, this summer. Before everything is busy and chaotic at the ranch. I bet the wedding will be a huge event since they’ll probably invite the entire town, and on top of it, the whole area celebrates Christmas for two solid months with festivals and parades and vendors’ markets...”

Chuck laughed, leaning back in his seat and regarding Jetta in a way that annoyed her ever so slightly. There was a hint of patronizing to his gaze. A faint reminder that he thought Jetta’s idealistic nature was quaint and adorable, though not at all practical.

Jetta wasn’t a quitter. She kept championing her suggestion by firing off admirable qualities of Peppermint Hollow Ranch. “You’d love the place. The lodge is stunning, the food was spectacular, and there’s so much wide open space you could wander for hours and hardly see another soul.”

“I thought you told me you’re creeped out when you’re outside a city because you might get lost.”

“No, that’s cornfields because I’ve seen enough scary movies to know that’s where the aliens and possessed scarecrows hide.”

Chuck laughed louder, except this time there was nothing belittling about it. Jetta considered it a slam dunk when she could chip away at his usual stoic professionalism, especially if her dignity remained intact. “Have I told you today that I love you?”

“Maybe once or twice, though I’m not opposed to hearing it again.”

He leaned forward and took both of her hands in his. Without breaking eye contact, he lifted her hand to his mouth and kissed her knuckles. A delicious shiver moved erratically through her and it upped the wattage of her already glowing

smile. Her life might not be absolutely perfect—yet—but it was dangerously close.

“You’re amazing, Jetta. Truly, one of a kind.”

“So you’ll go with me? I was serious about wanting to see you put any ornery cowboys in their place. They could use a lesson in manners by a man who’s the definition of refinement.”

“Can’t.” Chuck’s eyes flicked away from her and he nodded at a severe woman dripping with enough diamonds to sink a small ship. Always scouting. “You know how busy I am. It’s so hard to get away when things are on a roll. If I leave, I lose that momentum, and would have to pick it up all over again when we got back.”

Pressing her lips together, Jetta tried not to let the plummeting weight of disappointment drown the rest of a superb evening. Spotting their server gliding effortlessly from the kitchen with their soups in hand, Jetta dismissed the momentary setback and focused on what was good about life.

“Here comes our food.” She danced in her seat a little. “I’m famished. Everything here smells so good I could eat all night!”

A steaming bowl of butternut squash bisque, swirled with cream and topped with pepitas, was placed in front of Jetta. She picked up her spoon, hesitating. “It’s almost too pretty to eat.”

“All part of the experience, babe.” Chuck cut through the cheese of his French onion soup and held up a spoonful. “Bon appétit.”

With his utensil halfway to his mouth, Chuck paused. His eyes were glued on something behind Jetta, and the color in his cheeks slowly drained until his face was ashen. Glancing over her shoulder, Jetta tried to discern what had startled him. Nothing appeared out of the ordinary.

“What is it?” Jetta asked, worried as she searched Chuck’s features.

His mouth flopped open and shut like a hooked fish gasping for air. No words came out. A moment of confusion later, a gorgeous woman in a dress the color of sun-ripened strawberries with lips to match stopped at their table, her hands decidedly on the curves of her hips. In every sense, she was Jetta's social superior, and Jetta was keenly aware of it. Her discount store cocktail dress suddenly felt itchy and a size too small, and she played nervously with her faux pearl drop earring.

“Charles.” The woman's mouth curled into a sneering smile. “Fancy seeing you tonight.”

CHAPTER TWO



JETTA

Chuck's eyes were wide, and he stammered. "Victoria. What are you doing here? I thought you were going out with your girlfriends."

"I was. We'd just had dinner at this adorable bistro and were headed to get a few drinks afterward when I got a text telling me you were here with..." Victoria paused as her eyes appraised Jetta, finding her wanting. "*Her*. You didn't say you were going out with your girlfriend, too."

The intensity of each heartbeat hit Jetta like a jackhammer. "Chuck? What's she talking about? Who is she?"

Chuck—*Charles*—whatever he preferred to be called, didn't give Jetta the courtesy of even a glance in her direction. His eyes were fastened on Victoria in all of her terrible glory. She commanded respect. One silencing glare from her was all that was needed to wire Jetta's jaw shut. The uncomfortable sensation of her stomach dropping clean out of her body was a stark reminder that she was not welcome in their conversation.

"Someone told you?" Chuck was in such a state of shock that his brain needed a simplified summary of what was happening. His eyes searched the room, and Jetta's followed, to the elderly woman who glimmered like freshly fallen snow

from her collection of diamonds. With a wicked smile, her previously tight scowl had been replaced, and she held up her cell phone, wiggling it slightly. “How—?”

Victoria cut him off, looking almost bored as she examined her manicured nails. “It was all so serendipitous. If I hadn’t been driving by right as I’d gotten my Great-Aunt Sally’s text, I might have missed you two on your date. Maybe you could have even convinced me it wasn’t you, or that you were here on business. Of course, it goes without saying how pathetic it is that you broke your marital vows for someone so basic. I mean, an affair isn’t even worth risking if it’s not helping *you* climb the ladder.”

The words sunk into Jetta slowly, each inch of the knife slicing and shredding as it tore her apart. What should have been an evening of celebration had become a nightmare Jetta wasn’t sure she’d ever wake from.

Jetta’s voice was microscopic when she recovered enough to speak. “Chuck? You’re married?”

For the first time since Victoria stopped at their table, Chuck looked at Jetta. “It’s complicated.”

Victoria interjected her ring finger. The largest diamond Jetta had ever seen in person sparkled conspicuously on her hand. “What’s so complicated about it? We dated, you proposed with this, I said yes, we wed, and have been living that way for almost five years.”

“I don’t think I love you anymore,” Chuck said coldly. He’d regained his wherewithal and decided to stand up to Victoria. She wished he wouldn’t. Not here. Not with so many interested eyes on them. Jetta wanted to shrink into a tiny blip—a mote of dust in the air—and float inconspicuously away. “People make mistakes.”

His words were cruel and briefly had the effect Chuck was aiming to have. Victoria blinked, then swallowed. “That seems like something we should have discussed in private *without* involving other people.”

Victoria's hard eyes flicked over Jetta once more, and the same hot humiliation made her face blister.

"I'm so sorry," Jetta offered. "I had no idea. If I'd known—"

"Oh, please." Victoria's scoff was scathing. "You think anyone's going to buy that sob story in this day and age? Nobody's that naïve, honey. Even if you didn't notice the mark on his ring finger when he yanked off his wedding band before your dates, you never did any social media reconnaissance? Didn't notice the whispers behind hands and finger pointing when other people saw you two together? It's the twenty-first century. It's encouraged for women to use their brains nowadays."

Tears of a different nature clouded Jetta's vision and her eyes darted around the room. Everyone within earshot was looking and whispering. Judging. Vilifying her when she hadn't even known she was doing something wrong.

Maybe Victoria was right. Jetta should have seen the signs. The phone calls that ended abruptly or the occasionally standoffish way Chuck treated her. How he discouraged her from stopping by his gallery during business hours, and that she'd never been invited to his apartment. Jetta had thought he was trying to maintain a respectful and platonic relationship when they were out in public together as a professional business tactic, not trying to hide from her he was a married man.

The realization made Jetta's stomach revolt. What was left of the single banana she'd eaten threatened to come back up.

"I'd love to stay and chat, but, as you know, I'm in the middle of a girls' night out, which I fully intend on enjoying." With great effort, Victoria wrenched her wedding ring off her finger and threw it at Chuck's chest. It bounced off and landed on the table, next to his water glass. "Guess I won't be needing this anymore."

A moment of dark humor almost made Jetta smile. If she was in Victoria's place, she would have held onto the ring of her unfaithful spouse and sold it, using the money for a trip to a tropical beach. If appearances were accurate, Victoria

probably didn't need to sell the ring. She could fund her own getaways.

"We can be adults about this, Victoria," Chuck said.

"Adults? Says the man who's sneaking around with another woman like an absolute coward." Victoria masterfully tossed her hair. "Now you want to be an adult?"

Impulsively, she grabbed Chuck's soup and dumped the contents over his head. The broth streamed over his face and she shook the bread and cheese out. It landed on his formerly impeccable coif with a squishy thud. Where people were trying to observe discreetly before, now there was overt gaping. Jetta would have given her right arm not to be embroidered in their breakup. This wouldn't bode well. Not for her conscience, her career, or her social status.

"A word of advice, sweetie?" Victoria's words dripped with sugary sweet sarcasm as she turned to Jetta. "Aim higher. If you're going to be the other woman, at least hold out for someone who's already made it big. That way, you might get something out of your deception. When I'm done with him, there won't be a gallery on the eastern coast that'll touch him."

There wasn't enough air in the room, and the whole restaurant spun and wobbled. Jetta was the other woman. The home wrecker. The secret and shameful mistress. Her breathing increased to the verge of hyperventilating. Unexpectedly, a tiny, hiccuping giggle popped out of her. The timing of it was totally inappropriate, and she knew it, but it just... happened. Everything about this evening was unprecedented, including her reaction.

"Hope you have a wonderful rest of your evening." Using the tablecloth as an oversized napkin to wipe her fingers, Victoria offered a condescending smile to them both. "People like you deserve each other." She strutted away, head held high, and finished her assault with a final threat. "You'll be hearing from my lawyer in the morning. I'm going to make you wish you'd never let your lusting eyes wander."

Victoria strutted out of the restaurant, carrying herself with a confidence that pierced Jetta with jealousy. Of all things to be

feeling when she found out her boyfriend was a cheating, lying scumbag, envy wasn't what Jetta had expected.

The restaurant buzzed with gossip about the scandal. Chuck cursed under his breath and used his napkin to sop up the French onion still dribbling from his hairline. "Victoria!"

She was long gone. That didn't prevent Chuck from pursuing her. Of course he would. She was his wife. The choice had already been made. Whether it was to save himself an ugly divorce or to win Victoria back, he had gone after her. Jetta had lost him the second she agreed to their first date. Scratch that—she'd been disqualified before she'd ever played the game.

Eyes from every corner of the restaurant were turned on her, and Jetta fidgeted. She couldn't stay there. With as much dignity as she could muster, she stood and collected her things. One step after another took her out of the restaurant, out into a perfectly pleasant evening, and she headed toward her apartment.

The blindsiding blow made her question everything. Had she known, deep down, as Victoria suggested, that Chuck was off the market? Why had Chuck pursued Jetta at all? Had he ever even loved her at all, or was she merely a diversion for his unhappy marriage? Was she worthy of love from anyone? Or would she forever be tainted?

Jetta shoved the questions aside to keep from crumpling into a heap on the sidewalk and focused on the few things she knew. The most uncomfortable truth was that willingly or not, she was the other woman. It was a bitter truth she had to swallow. Ignorance wouldn't allow her a pass in this instance. The other infallible truth was that there was no way Jetta would stick around to see if things would work out with Chuck.

Fishing her phone out of her clutch, Jetta dialed the only person she could think about who was far removed from any of the potential fallout. Her phone rang, and Jetta obstinately set her jaw. She would not shed a single tear for Chuck Jones, no matter if he'd pulverized her heart with his selfishness.

A familiar voice picked up on the other end. “Hello?”

“Darby? It’s Jetta. I was thinking about coming to visit you again.” She swallowed hard, wondering if anyone would miss her if she up and left. “How’s this weekend?”

CHAPTER THREE



MAVERICK

A dribble of sweat trickled down Maverick's temple. He wiped it away with his wrist and squinted against the sun lowering in the west. Putting up the first cutting of hay was almost done, and though the equipment was doing most of the work, his shirt was soaked clean through. It was just that kind of day in Indiana. One where the heat was oppressive, multiplied by humidity so dense it made the air feel thick. The lack of breeze was a deflated cherry on top of a melting ice cream sundae. His discomfort didn't stop him. When Maverick was charged with a task, he'd see it through, no matter how uncomfortable or tiresome. It's how his momma had raised him and how he honored her now, by being a man of his word.

Swiveling in the seat of his tractor, he glanced over his shoulder to make sure the hay bales were staying put on the flatbed trailer he was towing. About fifty yards back, a small square bale had tumbled off and split open. Throwing the tractor into park, Maverick jumped down and jogged back to the straggler. If there was one thing Maverick couldn't abide, it was waste.

Halfway to the heap of hay, Amelia came zooming over the hill, waving to get his attention. He'd known Amelia since he

first arrived as a ranch hand in Peppermint Hollow, which was a unique combination of a working farm and tourist attraction. She was the ranch's event manager and though their jobs shouldn't have overlapped as much as they did, Amelia always seemed to find a way to nose around into what everyone else was doing. What wedding reception arrangements or high school reunions had to do with putting up hay, Maverick couldn't guess.

"Maverick!" She hollered at him. He kept working, pretending he didn't hear her. Though he'd grown up an only child, he'd discovered the joy of a little sister in Amelia, especially in giving her a hard time. "*Maverick!*"

He stopped short as she pulled up next to him, squinting under the brim of his baseball cap. "Yeah?"

"Well, hello to you, too." Amelia tipped her head back and laughed. Adjusting her face into a scowl, she mimicked his greeting in a gruff voice. "*Yeah?*"

He cleared his throat. "Sorry."

"Do you have a ladder? Like one of those old wooden ones?"

"Nope." Maverick scooped up as much of the hay as he could and toted it to the flatbed.

Amelia u-turned her golf cart and pattered along beside him. "Are you sure?"

"Yep."

She rolled her eyes. With a burst of speed, she cut him off with her golf cart. He wouldn't put it above her to roll over his toes if that's what would make him stop and talk. "Would you quit being such a grump and help me out here?"

"I am."

"No, you aren't. You sound like a caveman, with all those one-word responses. And the grunting."

"I didn't grunt."

Amelia tilted her head and narrowed her eyes. “Yes, you did. It’s kind of your thing.”

“What is?”

“Being all gruff and growly. Some women might like it, but I’m going to need you to engage me in more thorough conversation. In fact, you know I don’t tend to care for generalizations, but in this case, I’m going to make one.”

Maverick turned his gaze to his tractor, wishing he could hop on and speed away from Amelia’s sisterly pep talk. It would be a futile escape attempt. The golf cart was just as fast, and he knew from personal experience Amelia could shout louder than a tractor. He’d take whatever she had to say and hope then she’d be on her way.

Amelia took in a breath so big Maverick knew she was going to give him an entire spiel. “*Most* women like men who say what’s on their mind. Communication helps the rest of the world know how to relate to you and where you see yourself fitting into it. We want to know what you’re thinking, what you’re feeling.”

Maverick bit the inside of his cheek, hoping she wouldn’t say anything about him sharing his hopes and dreams. If she did, he knew he’d bust up laughing and it’d be cause for her to get mad. It was typically smart to stay on Amelia’s good side, even if he had nearly a decade on her. Her capacity for revenge was strong. Just last year, she’d been part of a scheme to fill a man’s trunk with cow manure. Granted, he deserved it, but still. That was the level of payback she was capable of.

“Is it so intimidating to express yourself that you feel the need to reduce yourself to grunting like a caveman most of the time?” Amelia asked. Her inquiry was sincere, which made it even more difficult to keep a straight face.

Maverick took his time answering. “I feel like...”

Amelia’s countenance brightened as she perked up. “Yes?”

“I feel like I should tell you there’s an old ladder in the horse barn. I don’t know what you need it for, but it’s not being used anymore.”

Amelia's expression soured and her cheeks went redder than her hair. "I see how it is. Being snide to deflect my heartfelt and concerned suggestion."

Her feigned wound was what broke Maverick's resolve, and he laughed loudly. "Has anyone ever told you that you ought to audition for a soap opera? I mean, the level of drama you're capable of is impressive."

"That doesn't sound like a compliment." Amelia pouted. "I was offering help because I'm your friend. You know, sometimes I wonder if I'm even that. It's so hard always being the one who has to take the initiative to crack open the hard shell you live in."

"That's a bit unfair, don't you think?" Maverick shifted the mangled hay bale in his arms. "You have to admit your little pep talk came out of nowhere."

"No, it didn't. People notice, you know."

"Notice what?"

"That you're a crank. That's a state of being that's supposed to be reserved for old men and eccentric, handsome billionaires."

"Cowboys can't get a slice of that?"

"No." Amelia huffed and folded her arms. "Can you even technically call yourself a cowboy? We're in Peppermint Hollow, Indiana, not Texas. You're so few and far between, it's like cowboys have all died off here, if they ever existed at all."

The grin on Maverick's mouth almost split his face. "My job is to take care of cattle and I generally do it on horseback. I repair fences, help with calving, and eat a late dinner because I'm busy feeding the cattle first. We might have a niche lifestyle here, but I assure you, cowboys still exist in Indiana. Unless you'd rather refer to me as a bovine specialist. That has an interesting ring to it. Maybe you ought to call me Dr. Maverick Blackwell. I've probably earned an honorary doctorate by now."

With a dismissive wave of her hand, Amelia grumbled something inaudible.

Maverick ignored the bits of hay poking through his sweat-soaked shirt. “Who’s the surly cowboy, now?”

“*Cowgirl.*” Amelia flicked her hair to make a point. “In case you’ve forgotten I’m not one of the guys.”

“I know. You’re the best little sister a guy could ask for.” Maverick reached over to ruffle her hair. She dodged him.

“You’re all lucky to know me.” Her knuckles turned white as she clenched the steering wheel. “Mark my words, you’re going to thank me for encouraging you to be more personable. There’s nothing wrong with making it easy for people to like you.”

“Is this a conversation you’re going to end with ‘*or else*’?”

“What?”

“Like, I have to be friendlier or else you’re going to fill the cab of my truck with cow patties to teach me my lesson?”

Amelia’s embarrassment further reddened her face, knowing she’d never live down her hand in the manure-in-the-trunk fiasco. “For the thousandth time, Mary’s the one who actually shoveled the cow crap in there. I only gave her the idea, and even then, I wasn’t serious. It was said in the heat of the moment.”

“Likely story.” Maverick dodged around her golf cart and easily tossed the errant hay bale on top of the rest, then climbed onto the tractor. Another dribble of sweat trickled between his shoulder blades. “An accomplice is an accomplice.”

“Just get me that ladder, will you?” Amelia aimed her pointer finger at him.

“Or what?”

“Or else.”

She pattered away on her golf cart as fast as it could manage over the terrain, leaving Maverick to laugh at how flustered

he'd gotten her. Though he knew Amelia's heart was in the right place, Maverick wasn't convinced adding a flourish of words was a necessary adjustment to how he presented himself. He'd known a few sweet talkers in his life—his dad being the biggest. If there was anyone in the world who Maverick didn't want to emulate, it was his silver-tongued, two-faced father.

If someone couldn't accept Maverick as he was, it was their loss.

Putting the tractor back in gear, Maverick hauled the sweet clover hay to the shed. It was mostly empty since it'd been cleaned out, and all of last year's hay fed to the livestock to make room for the new, so he wouldn't have to unload it today. The job was nearly finished, and he wanted nothing other than a thorough shower and a big meat and potatoes meal. Afterward, he'd sip lemonade on his back porch and watch the sun go down as his favorite horse, Queenie, noshed on the grass in his backyard.

Parking the tractor and trailer far enough in the hay barn so he could shut the garage door, he retrieved the busted hay bale in one arm and walked it over to the horse barn. Next to fresh grass, fresh cut hay was one of a horse's simple pleasures.

"Who's hungry?" Maverick sectioned the hay into flakes as ten eager horses poked their heads out of their stalls.

Only Cobalt nickered, his upper lip wiggling excitedly as he anticipated the hay. The rest of the horses showed their appreciation in their own ways. Dancer waved her head back and forth, and Crash, one of Queenie's babies that Maverick kept around, ripped a chunk of hay off before Maverick even dropped it in his stall. Big Ben flattened his ears to his skull and looked like he was going to take a chunk out of Maverick's forearm if he didn't deliver the goods.

"Relax, pal." Maverick chuckled as he dumped the hay into Big Ben's feeder. "You can't scare me. I know it's all an act."

If Amelia was there, she probably would have told Maverick it was because he and Big Ben weren't all that different.

Brushing the hay off his arms, Maverick's skin prickled and itched. He always kept a spare shirt in the office, and between the sticky sweat and scratchy hay, Maverick needed a change of clothing for even a temporary relief before he showered.

The fabric of his shirt clung to his skin, and he had to fight to get it off. With his shirt halfway over his head, and noting his underperforming deodorant, Maverick hurried to rip it the rest of the way off. He mopped his face with a dry corner, put his cap back on, and tossed his pungent shirt aside. After he was done getting the ladder, he'd grab it on his way out.

"What on earth?" Maverick jerked his head around to see a woman hurriedly yanking his shirt off her head. She pinched it between her fingers before dropping it on the ground. "Ew!"

It wasn't going shirtless that made him feel like the temperature had plummeted by twenty degrees, as goosebumps ran wild across Maverick's exposed skin. It was her withering glare.

There were a million things Maverick could or should have said to the brown-eyed beauty to apologize for his carelessness, except he couldn't.

This was worse than Amelia's accusations that he wasn't friendly. His mind was a blank cosmos of nothingness.

The woman indignantly raised her chin a degree and folded her arms. If a person could be adorable and scary, that was her. But who was she?

The woman swayed her head like she was flicking longer hair aside, though her coif swung at her jawline. Had she cut it recently, and wasn't used to how short it was yet? "I see the way you welcome people into the horse barn hasn't changed."

That was the clue he needed. A spark of recognition that jogged his memory. She'd scowled at him before. And in the same barn. A few months prior, he had rushed in when another ranch hand, Porter, had radioed to him that a cow was on the loose. Maverick had barreled into the woman who stood across from him. It was an accident. He wasn't expecting anyone to be in the barn when he went to retrieve a horse to

chase down the errant cow, and though he'd managed a devilish smile, he hadn't stuck around long to apologize.

"Darby's friend?" he asked.

"Jetta."

He grunted his acknowledgement.

Amelia might have a point about his conversational skills.

He licked his lips, trying to wet them. It was in vain. There wasn't an ounce of moisture in his mouth. Jetta and her vengeance had made everything go haywire.

"You cut your hair." Stupidly, Maverick gestured to her head, like she might have forgotten where her hair grew.

Jetta instinctively touched it, and Maverick noticed a flash of emotion cross her features. Regret? He had no idea why. Short hair suited her. "Yes, well... I needed change. Lots of it."

Maverick hooked a thumb in his pocket, and the two of them stared, unsure of where the clunky and clipped conversation was going. They weren't mortal enemies, nor were they much more than brief acquaintances. Beyond her name, the fact that she'd cut her hair, and that she had an intimidating glower, Maverick knew next to nothing about Jetta.

Jetta's insecurity prompted Maverick to reassure her. "It's a big one."

Not exactly the confidence booster he was going for.

She looked away, watching Big Ben as he demolished his hay. Enough of it was scattered into the aisle that it'd be another serving. Maverick would sweep it up and put it back in Big Ben's stall when the gelding calmed down and realized he wasn't starving to death.

"I'm still getting used to it," Jetta said. She touched it again, and what appeared to be sadness cinched her eyebrows together as she battled something within. Suddenly, Jetta raised a finger and sharply aimed it at Maverick, stopping

short of actually touching his bare chest. “And if you don’t like it, you can keep your thoughts to yourself, alright?”

Why Jetta would care what he thought, Maverick couldn’t figure. “I like it.”

His second attempt at complimenting Jetta disarmed her. Rushing her fingers through her hair, she deflated with a sigh. “Thanks.”

Whatever story was behind her mood swing, Maverick would never pry it out of her. Secrets weren’t meant to be dragged from a person. If they were relevant or otherwise meant to be shared, they’d come to light.

Inhaling a deep breath to replace the one she’d let out, Jetta shook her head, refusing to fall victim to whatever troubled her. “I’m sorry.”

“For what?”

“For snapping at you. It’s not like me.” She swallowed. “Forgive me?”

“Can’t say there’s anything to forgive.”

“I was rude.”

“And I threw a sweaty shirt on your head.”

A snort of laughter made Big Ben stop chewing and prick his ears toward her. “That was an unexpected part of my day.”

“I’m sorry.” Maverick shifted on his feet. “Didn’t know anyone else was in here.”

“There’s something you should know...” Jetta bounced her hands off her legs. “There’s something you’ll have to get used to.”

“What’s that?”

A small smile lifted her pillowy, rosy lips. Maverick stared a moment too long before he tore his eyes away, looking anywhere for something to anchor his attention. Big Ben’s pile of hay wasn’t interesting enough. Neither was the pine door to the office that had a permanent Christmas wreath attached. It

was futile, knowing Jetta was smiling at him. His gaze circled back to her face.

Jetta's grin shriveled until all traces of it were gone. "Me."

There were a million questions that went along with that single syllable. Maverick started with one. "You're staying?"

"Dunno. I need to figure some things out, so I took Darby up on a visit while I get my ducks in a row. Can't beat the rent out here compared to where I was."

Darby hadn't mentioned Jetta was coming, much less for an extended period that she'd comment about the potential rent. Usually, Maverick was on top of the news going on in and around Peppermint Hollow. It was a natural byproduct of listening and not interrupting. That pro to Maverick's usual silence went unnoticed by people like Amelia. The next time he saw her, he'd mention it.

"I see," Maverick said, keeping his expression equally unreadable.

"Can I ask you something?"

"Sure."

"Are you going to put a shirt on?" Her question was out of the blue. Like her mouth, Maverick's bare chest seemed to distract Jetta.

That produced a grin Maverick couldn't restrain. "Am I bothering you?"

He flexed ever so subtly, and the primal part of Jetta's brain took notice. Her eyes dilated, and Maverick would have sworn in a court of law that he heard the tiniest gasp.

"Why put on a fresh shirt when it'll just get dirty, too?" he asked.

Defiantly, Jetta regained control of herself. "The beauty of clothes is that they're readily available *and* washable."

"I'm on my way to shower. Thought I'd save myself some time."

“A suggestion?” Bending down to pick up his shirt, Jetta tossed it to him. “Two showers might be in order.”

CHAPTER FOUR



JETTA

Jetta shut the front door of the Peppermint Hollow Lodge, hoping the click of the latch wouldn't wake anyone. Leaving her room before sunrise, she hedged her bets that the change of scenery would get her out of her painting funk. Since finding out she was Chuck's dirty little secret, Jetta had struggled to create. Art had been an enormous part of what glued her and Chuck together, and the few times she'd been brave enough to get out her supplies since, it'd been like trying to paint with her hands bound behind her back, while wearing a blindfold. Her hands froze, and her mind couldn't imagine anything springing to life on her blank canvas. Eventually, after staring for varying durations, she'd give up every time. It was impossible to visualize what was beautiful about the world when hers was so ugly.

Slowly, the fleshy wounds in her heart were healing enough for her to appreciate what had been so attractive about Peppermint Hollow Ranch during her initial visit. There was hope that a sunrise with nothing but birdsong accompanying it might turn the key, once again unlocking her creativity.

Jetta's flip flops cadenced against the crunch of her footsteps over the gravel drive. She picked up the pace, heading west, away from the small village of cabins that

hugged close to Peppermint Hollow Lodge. The owners, Nick and Mary, had been gracious to her, and having Darby, her childhood friend, there, was an enormous blessing. If Chuck hadn't left such a sour taste in her mouth, the whole relocation would have been a new adventure Jetta was excited about. As it was, she had fled the city and had battled the feeling of worthlessness ever since. The more she thought about Chuck's betrayal, the more tangled she became in her sadness. Not only had Chuck intentionally concealed their relationship to keep certain people from finding out, his status as a married man also meant Jetta had been his second choice. That knowledge had detonated her heart and turned it to shrapnel, embedding a permanent pain where her joy used to reside. That gave root to other fears, that he'd only been using her for his own purposes. To stroke his ego? To keep her as a backup in case he needed an artist on hand? To remind himself he was superior by associating with someone like her? It was impossible to say. And she'd never ask. She hadn't told Chuck she was leaving, and promised herself she'd never debase herself by asking for his justifications.

This was no adventure. She'd left the city because she was ashamed and scared. There was no way around it.

Jetta made it to her designated spot before dawn. Choosing an elevated location where the open pastures allowed her to see the tightly packed tree canopy sloping into the valley, Jetta set up her things. The canvas she'd brought was larger than what she typically worked with, and she hoped it'd give her enough space to capture the scope of what she wanted to create. By the time she was ready to paint, the sky was a swirl of mauve and periwinkle blue, and the wispy, plum strands of clouds hung lazily in the sky. A spark of interest hurried Jetta along. She might be irrevocably broken, but the world was still turning. Sunrise after sunset, every day.

Twenty minutes into her painting, Darby came strolling up the hill. "How's it going?"

Stepping back and pinching her chin, Jetta critically eyed what she'd done, and found it lacking. "I don't know. I'm not really feeling it."

Darby stood behind her. “What are you talking about? It looks amazing.”

“You don’t have to be nice about it. Criticism is part of what helps me grow as an artist.”

“And compliments don’t?”

Jetta’s teeth clenched as she thought about how thick Chuck used to schmooze her with kind words and over-the-top lauding. All of it had made her feel all warm and fuzzy inside, like his opinion was the only thing she was striving for. Jetta had spent countless hours picking apart every good thing he had said, trying to figure out his motivations for his flattery. Was it because she was truly an astute and talented painter? Or was it because he was just trying to woo her? The thought made her stomach roll because she wasn’t sure he was above that.

Then where did that leave her painting abilities? Maybe Chuck had singled her out, not only because he was attracted to her, but because he knew she’d never make it big. If she never achieved success, then maybe he could keep her concealed from his wife, who was baked into the upper crust of society. Their relationship might have continued indefinitely if he hadn’t slipped up.

The conspiracy theory made the bits of Jetta’s tattered soul wither to black ash.

Darby held two glasses of orange juice, and not wanting to talk about anything that even remotely reminded her of Chuck, Jetta pointed her brush at the beverages. “Is one of those for me? Or have you picked up drinking excessive amounts of fruit juice since I’ve seen you last?”

Laughing softly, Darby offered one to Jetta. “Here. It’s getting warm out already. I thought this would cool you down. Mary squeezed it fresh this morning.”

Gratefully, Jetta accepted Darby’s offering. The orange juice went down smooth and chilled, and was an appreciative contrast to the stiflingly muggy weather in Peppermint Hollow.

Setting down her glass on the grass next to her, Jetta ran her wrist across her forehead. “Is it always this hot here?”

Darby shrugged. “I’ve only been here since last November. Sterling keeps telling me the weather in Indiana is moody, and no one ever knows what it’s going to do. One day it’s scorching and the next, there’ll be snow falling.”

“I could use a blizzard right about now. Maybe I could hibernate for a couple of months, and wake up when everything’s blown past.”

Darby regarded Jetta with a perceptive eye, and she shifted under the scrutiny. “What happened in New York, Jetta? You know you can tell me, right?”

No, she couldn’t. Jetta’s heartbeat was weak and erratic. It was one thing to have a restaurant full of strangers witness the most horrifying moment of her life. It was another thing to admit to a friend that she’d been the other woman in a relationship. Try as she might to justify her ignorance, Victoria might’ve had a point when she accused Jetta of knowing Chuck wasn’t being completely honest with her. His shifts in demeanor, and the unpredictable schedule for seeing him had never sat right with her. Once Jetta had found out he was already married, all of it made sense. Anyone outside of the situation would have been able to put two and two together in a matter of minutes.

The fact that it had taken so long for Jetta to see the truth must have meant that she didn’t *want* to see the truth. No matter which way she examined it, Jetta couldn’t extricate herself from guilt and shame. She had been part of breaking up a man’s marital vows. As far as she was concerned, there was no forgiveness for that.

“Jetta?” Darby set her cup down and put her hands on Jetta’s shoulders, turning Jetta to face her. “You’re making me worried. What happened? Was it something to do with Chuck?”

The only defense she had against Darby’s persistence was nonchalance. A smile and batting her hand at Darby’s concern

would throw her off the trail. “You’re blowing things out of proportion. There’s nothing wrong.”

“Jetta, I’ve known you since we were in elementary school. Can I get a little credit for recognizing when you’re worried and stressed?”

Awkwardly waving her hand again, Jetta tripped over her words. “Seriously, it’s not what you’re thinking. I’m not worried, and I’m not stressed. I’m just... stuck.”

As Darby’s mouth descended into a concerned frown, Jetta countered it with a smile. Darby wouldn’t find out about Jetta’s transgression.

No one would.

“Well,” Darby sighed, “I just want you to know how happy I am that you’re here, for however long you decide to stay.”

That made tears pool in Jetta’s eyes and she turned away to conceal them, pretending she was fussing with mixing a new shade of blue on her palette. “Now all we need is Jack here, and it’d be like the good old days.”

“How is your baby brother doing?”

“He’s good. Tired, sometimes. He gets so invested in his work. I suppose any New York City deputy sheriff is. It’s hard for him to want to help people, but to feel like he’s always pitted against them because he has a badge on.”

“I can’t blame him. I wasn’t exactly thrilled to have him show up on my doorstep when I was being evicted.”

That was an opportunity for Jetta to snort outright. “I still can’t believe that happened. When he told me he’d been called in to escort out a possibly hostile eviction, and it turned out to be you, I laughed my head off. I mean, it sucked for you, I’m sure, but there’s no way you would be anything but civil. No matter how bad it was, you’ve always been the one to meet the challenge with poise.”

“You’re giving me too much credit. I’m as disheveled and messed up as the next person.”

For the next five minutes, the two of them joked and laughed, helping Jetta forget about the darkened mood that had tainted her world since she'd found out she was a certifiable home wrecker. When Darby checked her watch, she turned her glance toward the lodge.

"I'd better get going," Darby said. "Mary and I have a lot of bedrooms to tidy today. Always people coming and going around here."

"I'll be down in a few minutes to help when I get to a stopping point."

"Don't worry about it. You're a guest. No one expects you to clean your own bathroom when you're on vacation."

Another slow stab of guilt sank into Jetta's belly. Darby still thought Jetta was on an extended holiday. She hadn't told her friend that she'd terminated her lease on her apartment and sold everything she could, including her stacks of paintings, to a vendor who had a spot at a local flea market for whatever she could get for them. It'd been humiliating watching the woman rummage through her canvases like they had been pulled out of a dusty attic, and weren't Jetta's creations. There was solace in knowing Jetta had reserved her best work until she found a way to get them into the hands of people who'd appreciate it, and the money from the sales had helped pad her savings account until she got back on her feet. Renting a room at the lodge, even long term, was cheaper than her overpriced apartment, though Jetta had a feeling Mary had given her a discount for being Darby's friend. Jetta had decided she wouldn't go back to the city until she was sure the drama around Chuck had blown over. Then, she planned on returning to make a big splash on the art scene.

That wouldn't happen unless she figured out a way to escape her creative rut and paint in a way that would turn heads.

Giving Darby a quick hug goodbye, Jetta waited until she was alone again to return her attention to her painting. Technically, the painting was correct. Her brush strokes were controlled and her shading and blending was decent. Still, the

painting looked limp and lifeless. A mirror of how Jetta felt inside.

The rumble of a truck engine coming from the west interrupted Jetta's wallowing. Up and over a hill and popping out of the road between a cluster of trees at the head of an expansive grove, Maverick was at the wheel of a hulking, dual-wheeled monstrous vehicle. He drove slowly, and he rolled down his passenger window as he approached.

"Mornin'." He nodded his head like he was tipping a wide-brimmed cowboy hat he wasn't wearing. Jetta still wasn't entirely certain how she felt about him. Maybe it was men in general that rankled her.

Her greeting was clipped. "Hi."

"Whatcha painting?"

Jetta gestured to her canvas. "Is it not obvious?"

She didn't expect him to get out of his truck to get a closer look. That's exactly what he did. Grabbing a tired old cowboy hat off the dash, he walked around his truck and squinted, like he was scrutinizing the painting with an adept eye. Even competing with the freshness of summer, with cut grass and late blooming wildflowers, Jetta could smell his cleanness. It was a mixture of several things. Clove? Leather? Soap? The unexpected melange of scents worked well together, especially on a man like Maverick. There was something intoxicating about a guy who could work hard, but also knew how to clean up. Jetta hated that her lungs betrayed her and held on to his aroma until the buzz faded.

For her own safety, Jetta took a step away, pretending she was giving him light to observe her work, not clearing her head of any sort of temptation. After the debacle with Chuck, she seriously was considering remaining as unattached as a nun the rest of her life. Matters of the heart were too complicated, entirely too dangerous, and hadn't been worth the pain.

"You're painting the landscape?" When Maverick looked at her, Jetta cursed the rest of her body for responding so eagerly.

She straightened her shoulders, reminding herself of her new mantra that being single was better than being heartbroken. “Ding, ding, ding! We have a winner!”

Her enthusiastic sarcasm cracked a smile in Maverick’s stony expression. “Care for any feedback?”

“If it’s honest and knowledgeable. Are you honest and knowledgeable?”

Her false assumption that he would remember he was a cowboy and not an art aficionado backfired when he nodded.

Yes, what? Yes, he agreed that feedback should be helpful? Or yes, he was qualified to offer it? Jetta would have asked if her teeth weren’t firmly holding onto her lower lip.

Maverick was silent for a moment as he mulled over his thoughts. “Your blending technique is excellent. I’m not sure I’ve seen a better sky anywhere.”

The acrobatic routine Jetta’s heart performed was worthy of a gold medal. “Thank you.”

“However...” The same organ that had briefly soared in her chest quickly plummeted. Her defenses immediately went up. Cannons, razor wire, catapults, the works. Who did this guy think he was? So what if he knew how to shower and shave, and had seen this view of Peppermint Hollow Ranch a hundred times more than Jetta? That didn’t certify him to give her artistic advice. “The green you used in this grove of beech trees...”

“What about it?”

“Ever heard of Goose Poop Green?”

Jetta’s spine went ramrod straight. “That’s... No... You’re saying...?”

“It’s an actual color with an interesting history behind it. Feel free to look it up.”

Jetta gazed at her painting again, trying to be objective while wrestling with feelings of annoyance aimed one hundred percent at Maverick. He was probably the last person on earth who could objectively critique art beyond the civilian answers

of yes, it was good, or no, it wasn't. Still, the longer she stared, the more she feared Maverick might be right.

In a childish fit of frustration, Jetta grabbed a fan brush from her stash, smeared it in a glob of black, and moved to strike the trees to oblivion. Maverick caught her wrist before she landed the blow.

Maverick was completely unruffled, while Jetta's entire body quaked and red spilled into the corners of her vision. If Maverick's touch wasn't keeping her standing, she might have crumpled to the ground and sobbed until her eyes were swollen and her nose was clogged. She couldn't keep living like this—torn between two states of being. Her natural optimism and effervescence had a fissure opened up in it by Chuck's betrayal and Jetta's part in it. It had introduced a darkness to her life that she couldn't escape. She was losing hope that there was any way she could claw her way out of the pit she'd dug for herself, and she'd rather go to her grave than ask anyone to help.

"What are you doing?" She tried to wrestle away, but his grip was decided. It didn't hurt. He just wouldn't let her throw the tantrum she wanted.

"I'm preventing you from making a mistake that you'll regret."

"No, you're not. You're keeping me from quitting on a painting that's better off in the garbage."

"Quitting's the easy way out."

Twisting her arm, Jetta broke Maverick's grip on her. "Easy? How do you figure? I'm seriously considering the validity of my dream of being an artist. There's nothing easy about letting go of something I thought I wanted my whole life."

"Because," Maverick backed up and leaned against his truck, casually crossing one ankle over the other, "quitting is satisfactory in the moment. You might feel good about giving up—"

"Thank you. I think I will."

Jetta moved to attack her landscape painting again, and would have exacted her revenge if Maverick didn't rush between her and her canvas. No matter which way she moved, his muscled torso dodged to block her. “—*but* sacrificing your tenacity means you'll miss out on the truly beautiful successes that only come from slogging through the hard times.”

Jetta punched her fists at the sky, wanting to argue with his logic. She couldn't. He was as good as a walking motivational poster. If Maverick were a kitten, he'd hang on to the bitter end. “Maybe the problem isn't my painting, then. Maybe it's the landscape. It needs some mountains off in the distance to make it more interesting.”

Maverick chuckled, and the flutter in her insides was dangerously close to the feeling of butterfly wings. Jetta squashed them decisively. She had taken a vow of spinsterhood, and that applied especially to cowboys who were gruff, with brown eyes as rich as hot chocolate prior to being diluted with cream. His penchant for the finer things of life didn't give him any extra credit, either.

“Anyone can love the mountains,” Maverick said, “but it takes a soul to love the prairie.”

Jetta snorted. “You're a poet, too?”

“Not exactly. I borrowed the line from Willa Cather. You know, the celebrated Nebraskan author?” Maverick gazed past Jetta at the very land she was trying to recreate. Jetta had never heard of the author, though there was no way she would admit that Maverick was better read than her. “There are some patches of open space out here to call prairie. Close enough, anyway. As for my appreciation of fine arts, you can thank my mother for any of that sort of culture.”

“Did she buy cheap prints online to cover the walls of your childhood home?” It was mean, but Jetta didn't apologize.

A faint smile lifted Maverick's mouth. “Actually, she was an art curator at a midwestern museum.”

A reply was stuck on Jetta's tongue. She wasn't sure what had gotten into her—diatribes weren't usual for her, and her

attack on Maverick was unfair. She'd made assumptions about him while Maverick had proven he was a man of depth, an observation she wouldn't have readily given him upon their first encounter. Where she saw a crude and dusty cowboy, he'd given her a glimpse of refinement. Like her, there was some contradiction in his existence.

Brushing her hair out of her face, Jetta wished for the thousandth time that she could put it in a ponytail. She couldn't. Not as short as she'd chopped it off in a moment of weakness and rage after Chuck's betrayal. The assumption that change of that magnitude would make her feel better had proven false. In her mind, if Chuck liked her hair long, then she'd get it cropped. Except, Jetta hadn't considered that she liked her tresses flowing, too. It had been another part of her identity that had been sacrificed. Just one more regret.

Maverick might have a smidgen of a point about not making rash decisions in the heat of the moment.

"That's... not how I envisioned your childhood," Jetta confessed.

That made Maverick laugh, and a second wave of butterflies dive-bombed her insides. They were relentless. If she couldn't get rid of them, then she'd ignore them by crossing her arms, careful not to swipe herself with her loaded paint brush.

Maverick countered her protective posture by opening up with a smile and propping his hands on his svelte waist. "You assumed I was born with a lasso in my hand?"

"Well, yeah. I'm having a hard time picturing you in any sort of art museum."

"If it makes any more sense, my mom curated a cowboy and western heritage museum. Most of the patrons came in with belt buckles the size of license plates and spurs rolling on their polished cowboy boots. It was an interesting juxtaposition of two very different worlds, that's for sure."

"Your mother sounds like a fascinating woman."

Maverick didn't answer, instead getting another far-off look as he again surveyed the horizon. The subject was changed

when he turned around and lifted Jetta's painting off the easel. Jetta watched him slide it gently into the backseat of his truck, wondering what he was doing. "You should come back to this painting when you've had time to cool off. It has potential."

"Not the goose turd green trees," Jetta grumbled.

"You'll figure it out." After setting her easel and the rest of her supplies in the truck bed, Maverick opened the passenger door of his truck. "Let me give you a ride to the lodge."

Jetta balked. Red flags shot up and waved violently in her face, next to her otherwise abandoned weapons. She knew where gestures like this went. A car ride led to an amiable conversation, which would lead to seeds of friendship being planted. Seeds that would prompt him to ask her on a date. It wasn't a far stretch beyond that to her heart being affected, too. When relationships blossomed, they might appear beautiful until they sprouted thorns.

Jetta took a step back. "No, thanks. I'll walk. It's not far."

"You're going to want to come with me."

His self-assuredness that time with him was *so* tempting irked Jetta. "Oh, really? Why's that?"

"Because," his grin was boyish and disarmed Jetta without even trying, "I'm helping with something important in about fifteen minutes."

"Good for you," Jetta said in monotone. "Don't let me keep you."

"You're going to be stubborn, aren't you? I promise, this is something you'll want to see."

"Unless you're planning on throwing me over your shoulder, I think we're at an impasse."

A full smile crossed Maverick's face, and it totally transformed his demeanor. It was alluring, the way a bug mindlessly flew into a glowing bug zapper. She simply couldn't help but stare. "I suppose I could carry you. I won't, though."

"I don't think there's anything you can tempt me with."

“You don’t care for surprises, do you?” Maverick let out a sigh, though his patience didn’t appear to be running out. “I happen to know that Sterling’s going to propose to Darby this morning and I’d bet my favorite hat you want to see it go down.”

CHAPTER FIVE



MAVERICK

“Are you sure this is where they’ll be?” Jetta peeked around the fringes of an evergreen tree she and Maverick were hiding behind. “I don’t see anybody.”

“*Shh.*” It was as hard for Maverick to keep a straight face at Jetta’s restlessness as it was not to lean over and inhale her perfume. Bringing her along to witness Sterling’s proposal might have been a mistake. Jetta was too distracting, and not only because she was getting louder the longer they had to wait. “They’re coming. Sterling told me his plans, and this is definitely where we’re supposed to be.”

Gently taking her elbow, he eased Jetta back into place. She sighed and turned to gnawing on the nail of her pointer finger. “How did this happen so fast?”

“What?”

“This.” Jetta splayed her hands. “She told me the first time I visited she thought Sterling might propose soon, but this is almost shotgun-wedding quick.”

Flanking her, Maverick went ahead and grinned freely. What Jetta couldn’t see wouldn’t hurt her. “When you’re in love, you’re in love. At least that’s what Sterling and Darby keep telling all the naysayers.”

“I’m not a naysayer. I’m just...”

“Disgruntled?”

Jetta whipped around. “I am not. I’m thrilled for Darby. She deserves all the happiness in the world, especially after her dreadful first husband.”

“Who deserves to be happy?” Porter and Cooper, two of Maverick’s coworkers, appeared out of nowhere. They rushed to huddle close to Maverick and Jetta, with Amelia close on their heels.

Maverick tightened his fist. *Great.* What was supposed to be a covert operation was turning into an exhibition.

“Be quiet!” Amelia hissed. “They’ll hear you if you don’t pipe down.”

“They’re going to see you. This tree isn’t wide enough.” Cooper jostled Porter for a spot. “I can’t see anything.”

Amelia rolled her eyes. “They aren’t here yet, dummy. Let me in front. I’m the shortest.”

“We can’t help that.” Porter patted Amelia’s red hair, and she swatted at him with a glare that communicated unmistakably how she would rip his arm off if he touched her ever again.

“Hold on a minute,” Cooper said, staring straight at Jetta. “Who’s this, Maverick? You sneaking in some one-on-one time with the guests?”

“No!” Maverick and Jetta piped up in unison. They glanced at each other, but their gazes ricocheted off each other, though not before Maverick noticed the apples of Jetta’s cheeks warming with an unmistakable blush. No one needed to be getting any ideas about him and Jetta. There was nothing between them. He had been polite to her as a courtesy to Amelia.

Good for business and all.

“This is Jetta,” Maverick whispered, straining to see past the evergreen needles if Sterling had led Darby over yet. The sooner he could exit Jetta’s proximity, the better.

“I’m sure Maverick is a great guy, but don’t even think about trying to pair us off,” Jetta said with a straight face that warned everyone to take her seriously. “The first thing you should know about me is that I’ve sworn off men. Romantic relationships are a no-go for me.”

Cooper raised an eyebrow. “Every single one of us? We aren’t all bad.”

Amelia scoffed playfully. “Says you.”

“Wow. Who hurt you, Jetta?” Flashing a grin, Porter winced when Amelia accidentally elbowed him in the stomach as she tried to find a better spot for peeping.

“My expectations.” Jetta smirked as Porter and Cooper sniggered at her quip. “Not too proud to admit it, either. What really interests me though, is why you two are so concerned about my love life when I don’t even know who you are.”

Maverick pointed to everyone in turn. “Cooper, Porter, Amelia.”

“I know Jetta,” Amelia chimed in. “She said two, not three.”

“Yeah?” Maverick grunted.

“Yeah. She and I are besties after her last visit. Darby arranged a girls’ night that’s been hard to top.” Amelia pushed through the mass of people and squeezed Darby in a quick hug. “It therefore goes without saying that I, for one, have a vested interest in your love life. You know that. I can’t speak for these clowns though.”

Jetta’s mouth was open, ready to defend herself, but she was cut short by Porter.

“I think I hear them!” Porter hissed.

Just as well. It wasn’t like Maverick was interested in discussing Jetta’s love life.

As a mass, they pressed against the tree to conceal themselves. Even with Porter and Cooper jockeying on either side of him, he was keenly aware that Jetta’s back was pressed into his chest. Instinctively, she held her breath and stiffened. From his touch or the anticipation of Sterling’s proposal,

Maverick couldn't decide. For a few tense seconds, they listened. Other than the buzz on grasshoppers and the distant lowing of cattle out on the pasture, there was no sign of Sterling and Darby.

"I think that was a false alarm," Porter said, wiping at the perspiration on his forehead with his shirt sleeve.

"Thanks a lot." Amelia looked over her shoulder and scowled at him. "You shoved me straight into the tree. My face is sliced up from the pine needles for nothing."

"You're the one who wanted to be in front," Cooper pointed out. "And technically, it's a Serbian Spruce, not a pine."

Amelia didn't dignify him with a comment.

Tipping her head back, Jetta took in all twenty-five feet of the magnificent tree. "Is that a Christmas ornament at the top?"

Everyone followed her line of sight. Sure enough, a shimmering blue ornament was nestled into the branches.

"Looks like we missed one," Maverick said.

"You decorate this tree with ornaments?" Jetta glanced from tree to tree in the vicinity. "What's special about this one?"

Amelia clung to her arm. "Didn't Darby tell you?"

Squinting, Jetta tilted her head and wrinkled her nose. Her confusion was so adorable that Maverick had to force himself to look away. He counted heartbeats and threatened his jumpy insides to knock it off. Jetta and however cute she was and how nice she smelled and whoever had rankled her in the past was none of his concern. Especially considering how many times she'd reiterated in the short time she'd been in Peppermint Hollow that she wasn't interested in relationships. Good. Neither was he. He was too busy to entertain thoughts of pairing off with a woman, no matter how tempting she was.

"Tell me what?" Jetta asked.

"How Peppermint Hollow Ranch goes all out for Christmas." Amelia used her hands to demonstrate what she was envisioning. "We're talking ornaments on every tree,

miles of Christmas light strands on every roof, Christmas music for weeks... in town it's no different. There are festivals, parades, and dances. By the time mid-January rolls around, we've squeezed every last drop of joy to be had out of the holidays."

"Wow." Jetta blinked. "Darby mentioned the holidays were pretty spectacular here, but I guess I didn't realize it was that grandiose. I'm having a hard time conceptualizing it right now, though. Between the heat and humidity, I might melt before December rolls around."

"Everyone should experience a Peppermint Hollow Christmas once in their life," Porter said.

"Definitely." Maverick spoke before he really considered what his agreement might mean to Jetta. "If you're still around and haven't gotten sick of country living."

Jetta looked at him, and in the sunlight, Maverick could distinguish the amber and green tones that were layered in her brown eyes. There was an entire forest of colors embedded in there. Without trying, she could completely disarm Maverick with a look. It was as scary as much as it was thrilling to recognize she had that effect on him.

Amelia pursed her lips. "Why are you trying to get her to leave? Don't you know how nice it is to have another woman close to my age here? I'm finally not surrounded by a cloud of testosterone. Let's all agree we *want* Jetta to stay."

"You could always take the route Sterling took," Porter suggested.

"What do you mean?" Amelia asked.

"He wooed Darby, and now look at them." Closing his eyes and mimicking a slow, romantic dance with an invisible partner, Porter descended into unrestrained laughter. "He's gonna make sure Darby sticks around when he puts a ring on it."

Maverick swallowed. He couldn't tell what Jetta was thinking, but he sincerely hoped she didn't take any of the

three drop-ins seriously. Talking about marriage when they weren't even friends was preposterous.

“*Shh!*” Cooper waved his hands at Porter. “I see them.”

Sure enough, this alert was the real thing. Maverick could make out two forms strolling leisurely through a miniscule opening in the spruce needles.

Finally.

In his head, all of this had turned out differently. Unlike Porter and Cooper might have implied, Maverick hadn't invited Jetta to hide behind a tree with him for ulterior motives. He wasn't oblivious to Jetta's friendship with Darby, and assumed she'd want to be present, too. There was nothing in his invitation beyond being thoughtful and cordial to Jetta. Maverick hoped she didn't put any stock into what had been suggested.

It didn't require a perfect view of the couple to tell how truly in love Sterling and Darby were. For a second, Maverick had to look away when they slowed for an on-the-go kiss. His skepticism about love and how long it could truly last when tempted by infatuation was put to the test every time he saw a happy couple. Sure, there were the outliers, like Nick and Mary, who were as devoted as the day they married. Then there were people like his parents, who had only basked in a brief season of bliss before his father grew tired of the monotony of monogamy. Maverick again swore he would never be like his father.

The only way to ensure a whole and complete heart, that was never fractured by unrequited longing, was to never fall in love.

Fishing his phone out of his pocket, Maverick swiped it onto video mode. It was impossible to get a decent recording behind the tree, so he stepped to the left, holding his phone out just far enough to get a clear shot.

Jetta followed. Standing on her tiptoes, she whispered a question in his ear. “What are you doing?”

Her breath caressed his neck and signaled to his brain that a shiver of delight was a normal response to such stimulation. Maverick sternly refused to indulge his undisciplined body. He forbid himself the pleasure, instead warding off the tingle with clamped teeth. There would be no physical reactions to Jetta's presence. End of discussion.

He silently mouthed what Sterling had asked him to do. Jetta squinted, confusedly staring at his lips, and he repeated his goal more slowly. More staring. Then, her eyes fluttered like she was waking from a trance, and a creeping blush overtook her. Maverick cocked a curious eyebrow and Jetta turned away, abandoning the answer to his question.

He thought about leaning over to let Jetta know Sterling had asked him to record the proposal. He wasn't stepping outside his bounds as one of Sterling's best friends to capture it for him. Of course, telling all that to Jetta without Darby overhearing him talking would require him to be geographically very close to Jetta. He'd already noticed how lovely she smelled. No need to push his luck and become addicted to the scent of her skin.

"I can't hear what they're saying," Porter whispered.

"Me neither." Trying to get a better view, Cooper tipped against Maverick, who was already squashed against Jetta.

Amelia yelped when Cooper stepped on her, and she struggled to move her sandaled foot out from under his steel-toed work boot. In a cascading effect, everyone tumbled into a heap of arms and legs onto the unforgiving ground. In the fall, Jetta landed on Maverick, who took the brunt of the tumble. She stared at him with wide eyes, and a quick apology.

"I'm sorry." Her voice was breathy. "Are you hurt?"

His shoulder throbbed and his tailbone was going to be tender, but having Jetta fall on top of him with her bony elbows was hardly the worst thing that'd ever landed on him. His resolve not to enjoy her proximity faltered. Her hands were on his abs, and there wasn't a shred of him that protested.

“No.” Maverick’s answer came out more gruff than he intended.

He blamed it a bit on the wind that’d been knocked out of him, though the reason didn’t make any difference to Jetta. She bolted to her feet, smoothing down her mussed hair and brushing dirt off her knees.

“What on earth?” Darby gaped as the dust settled. “What are you guys doing?”

“Uh, don’t mind us.” Porter slapped his hat against his thigh, sending a poof of dirt into the air. “We were just out... uh...”

“Enjoying a stroll,” Cooper rushed to add.

Amelia put a hand on her brow and laughed. “Is there a Jane Austen novel going on in your head? Enjoying a stroll?”

Sterling hung his face, grinning as he stared at his boots. “You might as well all come on out.”

Darby looked more confused than ever as everyone lined up, watching her and Sterling with face-splitting grins. “What’s going on?”

“Maverick?” Sterling pointed at him. “You ready?”

He used his shirt to wipe the grime off his phone camera. “You’re getting a bonus, unedited version of this when you’re done.”

One of Darby’s finger’s hooked Sterling’s, and she shook his hand to remind him she was still in the dark. “Unedited version of what?”

“Of this.” Reaching into his pocket, Sterling pulled out a ring box and flipped it open as he dropped to his knee.

With a shrill gasp, Darby covered her mouth. Her eyes were wide and shiny with immediate tears that countered the sudden giggling fit that overtook her. Maverick kept his camera trained on them, while his eyes darted over to Jetta. Her nail had found its way between her teeth again, and a wisp of a smile remained as her chin wobbled and a single tear darted down her cheek. What little he knew about Jetta, he surmised

these were all joyous reactions to witnessing her friend's wedding proposal.

Or was he mistaken? That tear could just as easily signal sadness. The question was why?

Sterling recited a nervous and shaky proposal that Maverick had to admit was still incredibly suave. It had to do with all the reading he did.

His hands were trembling as he held the open ring box. "Darby, would you make me the happiest man alive, and be my—"

"Yes!" Darby pounced on Sterling before he even officially finished asking. It was all a formality, anyway. Anyone who had half a brain knew they were going to end up together once they'd gotten over their hang-ups about a relationship. "Yes, yes, *yes!*"

Sterling and Darby fused together in a long and passionate kiss. It wasn't at all uncommon to catch them lip-locked, but after about ten seconds of watching them, and all the cheers and clapping dying down, it quickly became awkward to witness.

Jetta toed at a pebble with her Birkenstock while Maverick stared into the hazy blue sky, trying to scrub his brain of *another* picture of Darby and Sterling all over each other.

"Alright, you two." Cooper clapped to get their attention. "If you don't break it up, I'm not above turning the hose on you."

"Sorry." Sheepishly, Darby tucked her hair behind her ear.

"No, you're not," Amelia said, accompanied by a lighthearted laugh. "Now that you've made it official, that means we can finally start making plans. I want your vision for your cake, reception theme, photos, live music or DJ, traditions—"

"Whoa, whoa, whoa." Sterling got to his feet. "Relax, Amelia. You don't have to go into wedding planning mode already. First things first. We need to get our wedding party on board."

“So you can turn the work over to them while you two sneak off to make out?” Cooper asked.

“Pretty much,” Sterling agreed.

Darby ignored Cooper’s good-natured teasing and smiled at Jetta. “I know I already mentioned it earlier this year, but I want to make it official. Jetta, are you willing to be my Maid of Honor? It’d mean so much to me.”

Jetta sniffed and hurriedly swiped at her face to dry it. “I’d be delighted to.”

“And Amelia?” Darby looked tentative. “You wouldn’t mind being a bridesmaid, even if you’re also our wedding planner? I don’t want you to not enjoy celebrating with us.”

“You know I love my job, right? Of course I want to be there for you in both capacities. They overlap, anyway.” Amelia shoved her low-hanging ponytail over the crown of her head, trying to get air flow to the back of her neck. “I’m assuming you’ll have one of your brothers be your Best Man, right Sterling?”

“Actually, I’ve already talked to them,” Sterling explained. “It’s not that any of them don’t *want* to be my Best Man, but because they won’t be close by until the wedding is imminent, they suggested I pick someone from around here to help me out.”

Cooper and Porter looked at each other, unsure of how to react. If they solicited for the spot, responsibility would inevitably follow.

“Maverick?” Sterling asked. “Any chance you’d be up for it?”

He could feel the burn of all eyes on him. There were reasons he might oppose Sterling’s request, although he knew Maverick was so driven by duty he’d hardly turn down something that was asked of him.

Keeping his thoughts to himself, Maverick nodded once.

With the beginnings of a wedding in place, everyone erupted into another round of raucous congratulating of the happy

couple. All except Maverick and Jetta.

She smiled, watching Amelia hug Darby while they both squealed and jumped. Porter and Cooper slapped Sterling on the back and shook his hand, genuinely excited for their boss. The longer Jetta stared, the more distant the look in her eye. Wherever her thoughts had taken her, she was miles away from Peppermint Hollow.

“You know what this means, don’t you?” Maverick leaned toward her and asked in a low voice.

“What?”

“We’ll be spending time together.”

Her eyes flashed up to his, and without trying, she hooked him. He couldn’t look away. Didn’t want to. “Yep. A *lot* more time.”

CHAPTER SIX



JETTA

Jetta had walked the same stretch of Peppermint Hollow no less than eighteen times and there was no rest in sight. Not when she couldn't decide. The balls of her feet were tiring, the straps of her oversized bag were cutting into her shoulder, and she was glowing with perspiration. Her indecision by far was the worst part of her unending pacing. If she could just summon the courage to go and do what she'd come to town to do, she'd be put out of her misery. Even if she chickened out and retreated to her room at Peppermint Hollow Lodge, eating her weight in sea salt and caramel chocolates while binging on home renovation shows, it at least would have been a decision.

"Come on, Jetta," she murmured to herself. "This is hardly the most difficult thing you've ever done."

No one had noticed her worried and hesitant ambulating. It was a Saturday and between the farmers' market set up in an open park off Main Street and the small shops and boutiques filling every renovated Victorian edifice facing the road, there were plenty of people to hide behind.

There was one shop Jetta had her eye on. The art gallery. At any other time of her life, she would have breezed through the door without a second's hesitation. In her current predicament

and in her state of mind, there was an invisible barrier that prevented her from stepping across the threshold.

It was another battle, justifying her self-worth, and it was one she was sorely losing.

Jetta whirled around to start another march in front of the art gallery, and came face to face with Maverick. Or, more accurately, his chest.

“Mornin’.” If he was as startled as she, he was hiding it well.

Jetta smoothed her features to match.

Without a retort for his drawled greeting, Jetta focused on what was at eye level while she regrouped. Maverick wore a simple gray t-shirt with a Ford Mustang logo printed on the fabric. It did nothing to conceal the impressive breadth of his muscled chest. If anything, the shirt enhanced it. The thin layer of cotton hardly obscured what was right in front of Jetta, and it took her a second too long to drag her eyes away from Maverick’s pectorals to his unsmiling lips and laughing eyes. The man sent Jetta on a loop whenever she was near him. She wasn’t entirely positive how that made her feel.

Jetta’s fingers slid around her ear, tucking back her cropped hair. “What are you doing here?”

He held up a jug. “Needed more dewormer.”

“For Porter or for Cooper?”

Jetta’s joke made Maverick chuckle quietly. “They probably could use a douse of this.”

“I’m guessing it has to do with the cattle then.” She pursed her lips and pretended to size him up. “You really are a cowboy, aren’t you? Like a regular John Wayne.”

“I rarely have to chase bandits, and I tend to prefer ball caps to cowboy hats, though both serve their purpose.”

“You wear boots.”

“Because it’s safer when riding. The heel keeps a person’s foot from slipping through the stirrup. Plus, they’re handy

when a half-ton animal tries to step on my foot. I happen to like my toes attached.”

He wasn't going to simply agree and be done with it. That spurred her insistence on even more. She would win this debate or run out of breath trying. “I saw you lasso an escaped calf last week. Tell me that anyone else in their profession could do that.”

“Maybe a circus performer?”

The teasing smirk curling his lips evoked an eye roll in Jetta. Now he was just being childish.

Maverick continued, “I grew up around cowboys. The grizzled, old ones that had tough, weathered hands and creased faces. When they spoke, they were gruff, but they also had wry senses of humor, with a mischievous twinkle of the eye.”

“You can check off gruff and wry and mischievous.”

“How about wise? Those cowboys were chock full of wisdom.”

Jetta stubbornly folded her arms. “You can't add more desirable characteristics and assume I agreed to them, too.”

“I see your point.”

“That you're not wise?” She lifted her eyebrows, and Maverick dropped his head, chuckling as he admitted she'd outwitted him.

It was too much fun giving Maverick a hard time. He wasn't intimidated by her teasing. That he could humbly accept when he'd been caught was a bonus, like a big old swirl of homemade whipped cream drizzled with caramel over a steaming mug of hot chocolate. Maybe it wasn't an appropriate analogy. She billowed the front of her shirt to get air flowing. She'd give her right arm for the weather to cool off enough that hot chocolate sounded appealing. As it was, even imagining sipping hot cocoa made her sweat.

Or perhaps it was thinking about Maverick that was getting her all hot and bothered.

“Alright, alright. Yes, I wouldn’t hesitate to call myself a cowboy, even if someone else would.” Maverick said with a tantalizing smirk. “Have you and Amelia been talking about me?”

The rims of Jetta’s ears scorched with a suppressed blush. Maverick *had* come up when they’d had an impromptu girls’ night last weekend. In all fairness, Maverick and Cooper and Porter and probably every other eligible bachelor in a twenty-mile radius came up, too. Amelia and Darby were on a mission to set her up with someone, no matter how many times she insisted just because she was single, she didn’t need to mingle.

Instead of admitting the thorough discussion they had about Maverick—or rather, all the virtues Darby and Amelia had tried to extol—Jetta played dumb. They didn’t know about her indiscretion and why it had made her extremely cautious, especially around attractive men like Maverick.

“Why would you think Amelia’s been talking about you?” Jetta asked, careful to rephrase the question so the burden of conversation was offloaded to Amelia.

“This feels very similar to a conversation I had with Amelia not too long ago, only in reverse.”

“You were accusing her of being a cowgirl? She might not wear the hat or chaps, but she’s hardcore. Anyone who deals with raging brides for a living has to have thick skin.”

“No.” Maverick rubbed one of his big hands down his face and laughed. “I wasn’t implying she was a cowgirl. She kept trying to tell *me* I wasn’t a genuine cowboy.”

“Sure, you are. Look at you. A regular Lone Ranger.”

“I don’t have a revolver in my holster.”

Jetta grinned. “You have to admit there’s some overlap.”

“The same way there’s overlap between you and Picasso. Well, maybe more like Gustave Courbet. Or Norman Rockwell would be a better comparison. I never had much of an eye for the abstract, and I can definitely see some photorealism in your work, though there’s definitely a touch of whimsy. Your work is like what the real world would be if it was added upon

by a children's book illustrator. And I mean that in a good way. We need more magic and cheer in the world."

Jetta's heart was temporarily paralyzed. She doubted he was trying to make her feel self-conscious or uncomfortable in his comparisons, but that's exactly what hatched within her. A ball of slimy, wriggly worms grappled for space in her gut. She hid the gross feeling from Maverick by pasting on a smile.

"Are you admitting to me you're an art snob?" Jetta asked.

Maverick shrugged nonchalantly. "Isn't that a requirement for anyone who's discerning of artwork? I have to feel something to truly appreciate art. Abstract is too nebulous for me to grasp. Art needs to have some basis in reality for my simple tastes."

"Touché." Jetta adjusted the strap of her leather messenger bag. "Let's not get ahead of ourselves, though. All of those people you mentioned were *successful* artists. That's where the comparison between me and them smashes into a brick wall."

Maverick didn't retract his previous statement. Instead, he stared, his eyes never wavering from hers. If he was trying to get access to her deep, dark secrets, he could forget about it. They weren't on a silver platter for him to waltz in and commandeer. So what if they had both been roped into working together on Darby and Sterling's wedding? It didn't even matter that they wanted to wed in less than four months. Jetta wouldn't allow anything more than a superficial partnership to form between her and Maverick, for his sake as much as hers.

No one wanted damaged goods, and that's precisely what she was.

When Jetta looked away from Maverick, her eyes betrayed her predicament as they roved over the glass front of the art gallery where they stood. She tore her gaze away, but not fast enough. It was too late. Maverick had figured out her scheme.

Maverick hitched his thumb at the building. "Were you thinking of going inside?"

“Me? No!” Clearing her throat did nothing to sound less frantic, so she forced a slow breath and an increasingly wide grin. “Of course not. Why would I go in there?”

“Because, you’ve demonstrated on multiple occasions that you’re an artist. You walking into an art gallery would be about as shocking as me strutting into a feed store.”

Jetta arched an eyebrow at him while keeping her mouth immobile. It was harder to deadpan than she thought it might be. “You do a lot of strutting?”

“Amelia tells me I do it all the time. I think she might be exaggerating.”

The tight pinch in Jetta’s shoulders eased when she allowed herself to laugh. It was a gift, being able to evoke such happiness out of others. Even though most of the time, Maverick looked like he might yell at someone, he would just as easily throw himself under the bus if it would brighten someone’s day. Jetta appreciated his willingness to do so.

The gruff cowboy thing was pretty sexy and was a secret she’d keep to herself. Not even one peep to Darby, who’d probably blow her observation to atomic bomb proportions.

“How’s your landscape painting coming along?” Maverick’s deviation from whether or not Jetta intended on entering the art gallery was a welcome distraction. “The one you nearly annihilated before I saved it.”

“Oh.” Jetta blew out a breath, which caught the edges of her hair and sent them flitting over her forehead. “I haven’t done much with it since the day you critiqued me.”

“Why not? I didn’t discourage you with what I thought, did I?”

Yes. “No. I just need to marinate on it for a while.”

“Good. I don’t want you to give up on something on my account. I meant what I said, that there was real potential in it. I only meant my suggestion as a thoughtful observation, and I’ve been concerned that my timing was wrong. We hardly knew each other. It could have come off all wrong.”

“Don’t worry.” The messenger bag on Jetta’s shoulder slipped down to her elbow. “You’d be giving yourself too much credit. I wouldn’t quit because of what you did or didn’t say to me.”

Maverick’s gaze left Jetta’s face, and he stared at the contents of her bag. He pointed. “What’s that?”

Three canvases still on stretcher frames were crowded into the bag. Reflexively, Jetta hugged them close to her chest. The momentary lapse in judgment and her overreaction had to be what tipped him off. She was hiding something, and she’d confirmed it.

People swarmed around Maverick and Jetta the same way a brook made way for two unmoving boulders. She would have gladly been washed away with the throng if she was sure Maverick wouldn’t follow. With her heart hammering erratically somewhere high up in her throat, Jetta slid the straps back over her shoulder and elbowed the bag behind her.

“What’s what?” she asked innocently.

“The canvases in your bag.” The cogs in Maverick’s head worked remarkably quickly, and with one darting glance between Jetta and the gallery, he put together the puzzle. “You’re trying to work up the nerve to go in and consign some of your art.”

A fissure of lava oozed through Jetta, and she knew her skin was betraying her. Everything from her clavicle to her forehead had to be screaming red.

Leveling her chin with the ground, she stared across the street. If Maverick couldn’t look in her eyes, she might have a sliver of a chance to escape the mortification she was feeling. Who was she to think she could weasel her way into an art gallery, even in a small town, and expect anyone to want to sell her art?

“I...” That’s as far as Jetta got. The voice in her head chanted that she was an imposter of the worst sort. A fake. A fraud.

A cheat.

“Can I see them?” Maverick held out a hand expectantly.

Pursing her lips at his confidence, as if she would bat her eyes at his handsome face and hand them over without reservation, Jetta took a step backward. “Maybe I’m not ready for your brand of honesty again.”

“Alright.” Maverick dropped his hand.

Jetta nodded curtly. “Thank you.”

Right when she thought she’d won, a smirk hatched into an overflowing smile. “You know I’ll be able to look at your art the second you drop it off in there, right?”

Duh. Of course he could. Anxiety sent a familiar niggle into her throat. It constricted her breathing and made the air scraping past her esophagus raspy and desperate. It was the same feeling as listening to Victoria put her in her place, while Chuck did nothing to deflect his wife’s wrath. The same sentiment when she tried to envision herself as an artist with any kind of future. All the unpleasant memories were knit together by the same sickening emotions. If Victoria hadn’t already had Jetta blacklisted at every gallery in New York City, Jetta would be shocked. Isn’t that what she deserved? A small town gallery might be the best Jetta could ever hope for.

Jetta fiddled with the metal hoops on her earring. “Perhaps, except I won’t necessarily be there to hear every thought that descends from your brain and tumbles out of your mouth.”

“I thought you said you didn’t mind what I said before.”

He had entrapped Jetta. She’d already batted away his previous criticism, and now she was renegeing her previous nonchalance. It was all made worse by the twinkle in Maverick’s eye. He knew she was stuck and that he’d put her there.

Jetta deflated like a saggy, week-old birthday balloon. “Fine. Here. I don’t know what else I’d do with them, anyway. Use them as a doorstop or a hot pad. I don’t care.”

She snatched the paintings out of her bag and pushed them into Maverick’s hands, then spun on her heel to hurry away. A hand on her wrist tethered her there. It was a familiar touch.

One that sent scattering sparks dancing through her nervous system while awaking a dread in the deepest pit of her stomach. She shouldn't like the feeling, but she did.

Looking over her shoulder, she tried to glare at Maverick. It was futile. His expression had softened so tenderly that she couldn't be mad at him. He was penitent in a way she'd never known a man to be, especially one as self-assured as Maverick.

Though Maverick and Chuck were two completely different people, Jetta made a list of all the ways Chuck had sent her heart through the woodchipper. Maverick might seem great in theory, but he had just as much potential of hurting Jetta. Best to keep him at a distance. There was nothing wrong with admiring his virtues from a distance. And without touching. Touch was one of Jetta's weaknesses.

"I'm sorry," Maverick said quietly.

Jetta swallowed past the knot in her throat and slipped her arms out of his grasp. "For what?"

Maverick scooted aside for an elderly couple who were walking hand in hand, both trying to catch the dribbles from their ice cream cones. Dodging another group of giggly women who looked at Maverick as if he was the last slice of cake on a platter, he stepped closer toward Jetta. His voice was low and rumbled like gentle thunder. Goosebumps danced up Jetta's arms.

"For teasing you. I should know better than most that art is a deeply personal form of expression. It's not right for me to make you feel like your contribution is anything less than baring your soul on canvas."

Wow. Jetta's jaw was tempted to unhinge, but she kept her mouth screwed shut by pursing her lips. No matter how poetic Maverick was, he did not need to know how he made her want to swoon. That was something Chuck used to do. She'd fallen all over herself because he was so suave, and she wouldn't fall prey to any more men, no matter how charming.

“I think you’re being a touch dramatic.” Jetta folded her arms to conceal the bumps on her arms. “All I was going to take in were a couple of landscapes. They’re almost not worth keeping because they’re so... basic.”

Maverick turned the paintings over and studied them. A small crease formed between his brows as he concentrated. Even the scowl as he focused was tempting. He might act like a crotchety old man in a thirty-something-year-old’s body most of the time, but Jetta would bet her bottom dollar that inside, he was as soft as a teddy bear.

“I think you might be the first person to ever imply I’m dramatic,” Maverick muttered as he swapped canvases.

“Can’t help it if no one’s ever told you the truth.”

He grinned as he continued to study her art. For a long moment, he said nothing, and it drove Jetta toward the edge. Whatever he was thinking, she wished he’d come out and tell her already.

“Well.” He turned his gaze back to her, and immediately, Jetta knew her attempts to capture some of the essence of Peppermint Hollow Ranch hadn’t been in vain. “Now I have to help you.”

“Have to help me? Why?”

“To make sure you don’t sell these as a doorstep, for one. It would be a travesty.”

“I was joking to make a point, alright?”

Maverick’s lips twitched with a restrained smile. “Now who’s being dramatic?”

“Hush, you.” Jetta shoved his shoulder, though he barely budged.

Maverick let his smile shine through as he thoughtfully rubbed his hand across his face. “The lady who owns the gallery drives a hard bargain.”

Jetta groaned. “Why would you tell me that?”

“Honesty is the best policy, and all that. Another cowboy trait.”

With a laugh, Jetta shook her head at him. “Right.”

“Also, it sometimes helps to know what to expect. The owner puts on a front, but in the end, I think she’s fair. Now come on. Let’s go inside. I’m melting like a popsicle in this sun.”

Maverick took her hand as he headed for the art gallery. His fingers easily enveloped hers, and though the temperatures had to be pushing the upper nineties, his warmth was pleasant. She had never held hands with someone who used his for a living, and she discreetly explored the callused bumps on his palms, the thickness of his strong fingers. For a second, she felt safe with her hand in his, like nothing could ever go wrong again.

“Let’s go get this artwork commissioned,” he said, swinging open the door and towing Jetta inside with him.

So much for not touching. Worse, now that she had, Jetta wasn’t sure she’d ever be content not holding his hand again.

CHAPTER SEVEN



JETTA

“I’m melting.” Darby fanned her face, trying to dry the pinpricks of perspiration that bordered her hairline. “I’m literally melting.”

“You’re fine,” Amelia said, pulling a box of tissues out of the tote she’d dragged over to the Peppermint Hollow Lodge for Darby and Sterling’s wedding announcement photo session. “Besides, it’ll make you look like you’re glowing like the happy bride-to-be that you are.”

“Or I’ll look like the melting Wicked Witch of the West. I feel for her right now.” Darby drug the tissue across her forehead. “Look at this.”

Darby showed Amelia the spent tissue; it was crumpled with sweat and smeared makeup. Jetta had to turn away to keep from being overtaken with a giggling fit. Poor Darby’s hair was frazzled and parts of her were melting, faster as the sun climbed higher.

Mary and Nick appeared from the side of the lodge, toting a platter of muffins and a pitcher of lemonade. Bandit, Sterling’s sleek and crafty Border Collie, lifted his head and licked his chops. If a crumb tumbled to the ground, he was on it.

“How is everything going?” Mary asked brightly.

“Anyone need lemonade?” Nick hoisted the pitcher and a stack of cups.

“Yes.” Darby practically fell to her knees with relief.

“Only if you promise not to spill on yourself,” Amelia warned.

“I’m dying out here, Amelia.” Darby gulped her lemonade. “A visit to the surface of the sun might be more tolerable.”

“Look at the photos we’ve already gotten and tell me the suffering isn’t worth it.” Waving over the photographer, he showed her what he’d taken. “See?”

Begrudgingly, Darby agreed they were fantastic and would be cherished heirlooms of the special season in their life. “I still feel like a tub of liquified shortening.”

“Be nice to yourself,” Jetta reminded her. “This is supposed to be a happy occasion, isn’t it?”

“Fine.” Darby’s tone was terse and stubborn. “I’m a stick of softened butter. Is that better?”

Jetta laughed from her spot under the shade of a sycamore. “That’s fabulous imagery.”

“You look radiant,” Sterling reassured her, kissing her cheek. “If you want, we can change into our work clothes and I’ll snap a selfie of us on our favorite spot on the couch. Boom. Wedding announcement done.”

“No.” Amelia spoke in no uncertain terms, slicing her hands through the air for emphasis. “You won’t do anything rash while I am handling your wedding, understand?”

“No eloping then?” Sterling teased.

Amelia stopped arranging the folds of Darby’s soft peach-colored skirt and glared up at him. “So help me, I will strangle you if you even *think* about throwing away all of our hard work.”

“I don’t think your hands would even fit around my neck.” Though Sterling said it like it was a challenge, his eyes sparkled with mischief.

“Who said I’d use my hands?” Amelia shot back. “I know what end of a lasso goes where.”

Sterling and Darby belly laughed, and the photographer took a burst of photos, then made adjustments as he sorted through them. Jetta’s laughter was renewed, matched by Mary, who stooped down to offer her a muffin.

“Oh, Amelia.” Mary chuckled, shaking her head and making her silvery braid wiggle like a cat’s tail. “You don’t have to prove to him how tough you are. Everyone already knows.”

Selecting a pumpkin streusel muffin the width of her palm, Jetta thanked Mary. Then, Jetta whispered in a low voice to Mary, “Has anyone told you about the time Amelia filled Darby’s ex-husband’s car with manure?” Jetta clamped a hand over her mouth to keep crumbs from spewing out when she sputtered and snorted. “I think we’re all underestimating Amelia.”

Jetta noticed the inexplicable change in Mary’s demeanor. She looked paper white and her mouth stiffened into a straight line. “Don’t listen to the gossip you hear. Half of it isn’t even true.”

“Yeah,” Nick said, pouring a helping of chilled lemonade into the cup he handed Jetta. “It wasn’t Amelia who followed through with it. Mary was the one who shoveled it into his trunk.”

Mary tried to swat at his arm, but it was a futile attempt with her hands busy balancing muffins. “Nick! You rascal!”

“Come on, Mary. Everyone knows I married a passionate woman.” He ducked down to give her a quick peck on the lips. “That’s one of the things I love most about you. Own up to the wild and crazy things you’ve done in your life. It’s a piece of what makes you so incredible.”

Mary’s expression was a melange of annoyance and amusement. “You’re never going to let me live down that one ridiculous lapse in judgment, are you?”

“The world needs more women like you.” Nick grinned. “Besides, that guy deserved it. *Everyone* knew he had it

coming.”

Jetta watched Nick and Mary harmlessly bicker, laughing the whole time. They were a stereotypical married couple, yet through the years, they’d kept the spark alive. A sour taste filled Jetta’s mouth. It stemmed from jealousy of what she didn’t have, and bitterness for what she wasn’t sure she’d ever attain. How could she learn to trust again? Not after what Chuck did, and the bind it put her in. It was a hard thing to want something, while simultaneously being afraid of stumbling onto it. Love and relationships seemed so fragile. One crack and the whole egg would spoil.

From where Amelia stood next to the photographer, a small gasp escaped her, and she perked up. “I have an idea.”

“Go inside and stick my head in a freezer?” Darby asked hopefully. “August hasn’t gotten the memo that it’s time to make room for fall. Heck, I’d be okay with skipping all the way to Christmas. The only sweating I’d be doing then is if I get too close to the fireplace.”

Amelia ignored Darby’s theatrical complaining. “Sterling, do you have a lasso?”

“In the barn. Why?” he asked.

Amelia glossed over his question. “Is it clean?”

“Not particularly.” Sterling shook his head. “If you’re wanting something that’s never been used on cattle, Maverick keeps one at his cabin to practice with.”

“Bingo! That’s what we need. A couple of props for this photo shoot will kick it up a notch. Bring out subtle hints about how and where you fell in love and all that.” Amelia looked around the yard until her gaze landed on Jetta leaning against the base of the sycamore. “Jetta, would you be able to swing by Maverick’s place to borrow his lasso?”

“Me?” Jetta’s pointer finger landed on her chest, right above her erratically beating heart. The mention of her and Maverick made Jetta worry people might get ideas about them, even if nothing had ever happened. “I don’t know where he lives.”

“That way.” Nick pointed. “He fixed up an old ranch home that was one of my great-aunt’s homes when she was still with us. Follow the gravel path, past Sterling’s house, all the way to the end. You can’t miss it.”

Standing on shaking legs, Jetta swiped the grass off the backside of her shorts. She tried to come up with a reason not to be alone with Maverick, but was regrettably empty handed. It wasn’t like she could admit how difficult it’d been to stamp out the growing attraction she’d been feeling toward him. That’d be opening herself up for all sorts of inferences about what she might hope for with Maverick. Amelia and Darby, and probably everyone else at Peppermint Hollow Ranch, would assume she was looking for love.

Couldn’t a woman find a man attractive and leave it at that?

“Sure. I don’t mind,” Jetta lied.

“You can’t make her walk there. It’s like, a mile away,” Darby said, sitting down on the top step to fan herself in the shade. “She might pass out with heat exhaustion before she even gets there.”

“It’s true.” Jetta used her most practiced deadpan. “All you’ll find will be a pile of my bones if I have to walk in this heat.”

Jetta couldn’t last long. First, a grin cracked her resolve, and soon, she and Darby were howling like hyenas over Jetta’s theoretically potential demise.

Sterling plunked down next to Darby. “You two and your crazy imaginations... Do you want to take my truck?”

“Nah.” Amelia dug into the pocket of her jeans, scuffed and ripped like they’d been her favorite pair she’d been wearing since middle school. “Take my golf cart. You can zip there and back before we’ve even gotten Darby’s face put back on.”

“Hey! You said I looked fine!” Darby protested.

“Well, that was five minutes ago. Now you *do* look like the Wicked Witch’s unfortunate sister.” Amelia tossed the keys to Jetta, who missed them on the initial throw. Retrieving them

out of the grass, she headed for the golf cart Amelia drove everywhere.

“Bandit?” Sterling whistled to get his dog’s attention. His tail immediately began thumping the floorboards of the porch. “Show Jetta where Maverick lives.”

Bandit’s tail wagging increased in intensity. He stood up and began trotting in the direction Nick had indicated.

“Does he really know where Maverick lives?” Jetta asked, starting up the golf cart.

“You’d be surprised how smart that dog is,” Sterling answered.

Jetta pattered a few feet away before Mary caught her. She had disappeared briefly before returning out of the mudroom entrance on the side of the house, holding four gargantuan muffins plastic-wrapped on a plate. “Would you mind delivering these to Maverick?”

“Sure. No problem,” Jetta said, setting them next to her on the seat.

“Thanks. Sometimes, I worry about him. I don’t know if he remembers to eat most of the time. He needs a nice girl to take care of him. One he can spoil rotten.” Jetta recognized the casual hints Mary was feeding her. If she wasn’t trying to secretly set her up with Maverick, Jetta would eat her foot. Her suspicions were confirmed when Mary winked and grinned deviously. “Have fun!”

Jetta would have vehemently denied that anything had, was, or would ever happen between her and Maverick except Bandit was already ahead of her on the road when he turned around to bark impatiently.

Easing her foot off the brake, Jetta left Mary to scheme on her own. It was almost a shame to disappoint everyone, especially when they’d been so kind to her. It was what it was. Jetta not only felt unlovable, thanks to Chuck, but she also wasn’t in the mood to even try to pick up the pieces and try again. What was the point when someone ended up hurting the other person, eventually? No, she’d keep what was left intact

of her tattered heart to herself. Maverick didn't need her brand of messy history.

Bandit kept up a steady trot ahead of Jetta. When she noticed his tongue hanging out, Jetta tried to speed up and catch him to coax Bandit onto the golf cart. The sun was beating down, and Bandit had to be sweltering with his luxurious, flowing coat. He would have none of it. Every time she pressed harder on the gas, Bandit would take it as a personal challenge to stay in front, and picked up the pace. He seemed to enjoy himself while doing it, too.

After passing Sterling's house, which was situated far enough away from the main lodge that no one would accidentally stumble upon it, Jetta passed the spot where she'd began painting the masterpiece that'd been on hold since Maverick had mentioned her unfortunate combination of green. Enough time had passed, and she'd learned more about Maverick and could discern his meaning. She truly believed he offered help out of encouragement, rather than an attempt to belittle her. Slowing momentarily on the sloping hill, Jetta promised that she'd give the painting another go.

Bandit paused on the gravel road, turned to look at Jetta, and lifted his head toward the sky to bark insistently at her.

"Alright, alright." She pressed on the gas. "I'm coming."

Ahead, the trees grew increasingly thick, pressing in on the gravel road, until she was traveling through a full-fledged forest. There was something magical about being in the woods, all alone. More than once, she daydreamed about the paintings she could create in here, rather than focusing on her task. At a section of densely growing junipers, Jetta swerved severely to avoid a pothole that would have made the golf cart bottom out. The snarled branches clawed her face, and she bit her lip at the searing pain to keep from letting out a string of fitting expletives.

"This lasso better be worth this hassle." Jetta touched her cheek, checking for blood. It stung, but was dry. "Over the river and through the words to Maverick's house I go."

Bandit disappeared down a hill, and Jetta cautiously followed. A slate-lined creek was traversed by a narrow strip of concrete covering two enormous culverts to let the trickle of water pass by. Easing herself slowly down the side, she zipped across the concrete, and was almost at the top when the tires of the golf cart skidded. Scared she might slide back down, Jetta gunned it to get over the hump and zoomed into an open meadow guarded by the forest.

“Where are you taking me, Bandit?” Jetta asked, wondering if she should just turn back and run into Peppermint Hollow to buy a new lasso. It would definitely solve her problem of being alone with Maverick.

At his house.

In the middle of nowhere.

Jetta reminded herself that this was simply one of her duties as Maid of Honor. She would get the lasso and go back. Easy. No chemistry between her and Maverick required.

Bandit broke into a lope and pulled ahead when Jetta finally saw it. An adorable single-story cottage was nestled inside the surrounding woods. Beds of wildflowers blanketed the front landscaping, impressively thick and tall as they swayed in the wind. Asters and dahlias and sunflowers all competed for space, and a metal bird bath attracted a pair of house finches. Bandit bounded up the stairs to the front porch and flopped down to the left of the door where the sun couldn't reach.

Jetta parked the golf cart next to the stone walkway and gaped at the place longer than she would have if she was in anyone else's company. She'd never seen anything so quaint and cozy in her life. If she could figure out a way to sneak here with her art supplies, she'd memorialize it on canvas.

Her fingertips brushed the flower petals as she walked to the front door. They were soft and fragrant, and for some reason, it astonished Jetta that they were there. If she had to guess, she would have thought Maverick would have been more practical in his landscaping approach. It wouldn't have shocked her to discover he lived on a dirt lot to save himself the trouble of growing flowers.

There were a lot of things Jetta was learning about Maverick. He certainly wasn't as one-dimensional as she'd made him out to be when she met him the first time. He had proven his affinity for art and poetic words, hadn't he? Flowers were the earth's manifestation of the same beauty.

The door to the house was open, and through the screen door, Jetta could hear the twang of country music on the radio. "Maverick?"

She shielded her eyes from the sun, careful to balance the muffins so as not to squish them, and pressed her nose against the screen to look inside. Other than the music, there was no sign that Maverick was there.

Her lower lip caught between her teeth. Either she wasted precious time, waiting for him to hear her knocking on his door and calling his name, or she let herself in to find him. It wasn't like she was a total stranger barging into his home. If she was lucky, she might even find the lasso, leave the plate of muffins in his kitchen, and escape to the lodge before he knew she was there.

The hinges protested with a high-pitched whine as she opened the door. Jetta cringed, but didn't stop. "Maverick? You in here?"

The radio went into a commercial break and despite the logical part of her mind telling her to get in and out as fast as possible, Jetta was struck by the contrast of the inside of Maverick's home with the outside. The riot of colors and beautiful chaos of the flowerbeds did not translate to his decor. Every wall was white, and the furniture was a mismatched hodgepodge of pieces that appeared to have been selected based on comfort above all other attributes. The only photo Jetta saw was next to the television. Picking it up, Jetta studied the younger face of Maverick as he grinned and wrapped his arms around a smiling woman who had to be his mother.

The commercials ended, and the radio DJ announced another song by an artist Jetta didn't recognize. The melody was upbeat, and the singer had a smooth baritone voice. It was

the man's voice singing along that made Jetta stop and take notice.

The sound of Maverick warbling along with the radio slid through the hallway from the kitchen at the back of the house. Entranced by the quality of his singing, Jetta followed it. She had never understood why moths flew so willingly to their demise in the flames of a fire until she experienced the pull of Maverick's song on her soul.

At the end of the hallway, Jetta peered around the corner and blinked at what she saw. A door from the kitchen leading to the backyard was normal enough. It was the horse sticking its head inside that surprised her. The mare once looked to be as black as coal, but now had white feathering along her temples and dainty muzzle. As Maverick sang along to the radio, he ran his hand down the horse's graying face. The unexpected moment of tenderness melted Jetta's heart into a puddle of mush. A guy who could sing and loved animals, who appreciated art and had hands like his? She was in trouble.

The horse's ears, which had been floppy as she basked in the attention Maverick showered on her, unexpectedly pricked toward Jetta. Instinctively, she gasped and stepped backward and out of sight as Maverick read the horse's body language and spun around.

"Who is it?" he growled, stomping toward Jetta.

Jetta scrambled backward, and there was no way she could escape out the front door, down the steps, and back to the golf cart before Maverick found her. The terror at being discovered, irrational as it was, overwhelmed her. She bumped off the corner of the hallway wall, tripped, and landed hard on her backside in the living room. A jarring pain raced through her body, and her heart had reformed from its previous squishiness, and was hammering against her ribs so hard she was sure it would crack her sternum.

"I said who's there?" Maverick demanded. "I don't take kindly to intruders."

With her escape options diminishing, Jetta did the only thing her body would do. She screamed.

She could have been screaming for an eternity, for how badly her throat hurt by the time she ran out of breath.

“Jetta?” Maverick peered down at her, his expression seesawing between amusement and confusion. “Why are you screaming?”

By some miracle, the plate of muffins Mary had sent her with were on her lap, completely unscathed. “You scared me.”

“Yeah... but why? It’s not like I was going to do anything to you.”

“You sure sounded like you were.” Rising gingerly to her feet, she let Maverick give her a hand. For as long as she’d lectured herself about not reading into a platonic touch from Maverick, it had literally gone in one ear and out the other. She liked his hands on her bare skin. “You sounded mad enough that I wouldn’t have been surprised if you’d cracked me over the head with a frying pan and knocked me out. You strike me as a hit first and ask questions later kind of guy.”

Maverick chuckled. “I would have stopped when I realized it was you. I just don’t take kindly to intruders. Not that I would think anyone would find me this far out here.”

“That’s fair. You are pretty remote.”

“Besides, frying pans aren’t really my style.”

“You get the point.” Embarrassed, with a throbbing tailbone and a cheek that still stung from the ornery juniper that’d scratched her, Jetta thrust the muffins at him, intending on getting in and out of Maverick’s house as soon as humanly possible. “Here. These are from Mary.”

“She sent you to break and enter so I could have some muffins?”

“Yes. No. I’m actually supposed to borrow a lasso from you. Darby and Sterling need it for their photo shoot, which is why I came inside. Well, it was Amelia who suggested it, and she sent me on a mission to get it and get back as fast as humanly possible. That’s why I’m in a hurry, you see.” Jetta brushed the hair out of her face and stared anywhere except Maverick’s

annoyingly handsome face. “That’s why I let myself in. I was hoping to get in and out without disrupting you.”

As Jetta rambled, Maverick’s brow creased with concern. Stepping closer, he bypassed the muffins she held out for him and his hands cupped her jaw and laced around the back of her neck. Forget about holding hands—Maverick’s fingertips so tenderly on her face made her shiver with delight.

Sure he was going to kiss her, her mind was a raging typhoon of conflicting emotions. Desire, distress, excitement, and fear pummeled her. They barely knew each other. Maverick had shifted gears so quickly. He had no reason to *want* to kiss her.

One glance at his lips, and everything was silenced. One kiss wouldn’t hurt.

Tilting her head back to make her mouth readily accessible, Maverick stared deeply into her eyes, like he was trying to memorize every detail of them. She did the same. It’d been a while since she’d stared so intently at someone, and the gesture was exceptionally intimate. Almost more so than the actual embrace.

Slowly turning her face away from him, Jetta’s pulse pounded. Maverick had to know the effect he was having on her. Was he going to start with her neck? She bit her lip, keeping a groan of anticipation from escaping.

Handling her with the utmost care, he ran a thumb over the scratch on her cheekbone. It all made so much more sense when the sting of her scratch radiated from her skin. He had no intention of kissing her. He had noticed the scrape on her face.

Stupid, Jetta. How desperate are you?

Maverick removed his hands and took a step back, leaving her feeling chilled even though the weather was hot enough to fry an egg on the hood of Maverick’s truck. His voice was raspy as Maverick retreated. “You’re hurt. Come with me. I’ll get you fixed up.”

CHAPTER EIGHT



MAVERICK

Maverick couldn't believe that he'd almost kissed Jetta.

When he realized there was an intruder in his house, he'd been ready for a fight. Storming down the hallway and into the living room with his fists balled and adrenaline coursing, the last thing he expected to find was Jetta sprawled on the floor, clutching a plate of Mary's signature oversized muffins with eyes as wide as the pastries she held. The sight had disarmed him immediately. He hated the terror on her face and wanted to make it right. No woman should ever fear a man because of his anger. Sure, his was semi-justified in the heat of the moment. He still hated to see her cringe.

Then, one thing led to another, and in his concern, he noticed the dribble of dried blood on her face. He had only meant to examine it, except when he had his hands on her delicate neck, and they were so close that he could drink in every detail of her, the desire to kiss her almost overpowered him. Mercifully, he'd stopped himself before he made a mess of the whole situation. There would have been no way he could extricate himself from a predicament as complicated as kissing a woman who held him at arm's length. Retreating from the temptation was for the best, though he wasn't entirely

certain he was glad their lips had failed to meet. It was impossible to believe that Jetta wasn't an extraordinary kisser.

"What happened?" he asked Jetta as he sorted through the first aid supplies he'd brought in from the bathroom. "It's not a clean cut, and it appears to have happened a while ago since the blood's already dried."

"I got into it with a juniper tree on the way here. There's a big pothole in the road and I swerved to avoid it so I wouldn't bottom out in Amelia's golf cart. Apparently, that bunch of junipers didn't care for me invading their personal space because one of them did this to me."

A small smile slipped past Maverick, loosening the crease between his brows as he concentrated. He'd been trying to cool off after their almost-kiss, and Jetta was making it extremely difficult. There was something irresistible about her. A siren call she didn't even know she was singing.

Maverick peeled the packaging off an antiseptic wipe. "I should probably spend an afternoon cutting back some of the brush along the road. It's just usually me coming back here, and my truck can handle the potholes."

"This house is pretty far away from everything else on the property. I take it you enjoy not having decent internet?"

Maverick couldn't stop an outright laugh at that. "I like the seclusion. It took me a while to figure out what made me happy. It turns out, being alone is a big part of that. Not having the fastest internet in the world is worth the sacrifice. Now, hold still. This might sting a little."

Gingerly, Maverick ran the moist pad over and around the scrape on Jetta's face. She sucked in the tiniest breath and Maverick hesitated, though Jetta never complained. Risking another moment of closeness, Maverick tilted her chin so he could better see his handiwork. Jetta complied, stealing a quick glance at him before turning her lashes down as he cleaned her up.

It was a good thing she wasn't looking at him while they were inches apart or she might have seen the frantic drumming

of his pulse in his neck. There'd be no hiding the reaction he had to her.

"All done." Maverick crumpled his trash and strode across the kitchen, as much to throw it away as to get space from Jetta's intoxicating influence. Being next to her was a sure way to get pulled in. Jetta's draw was as tangible and real as gravity. "On second thought, let me put a Bandaid and some ointment on you."

So much for keeping his distance. It lasted all of four seconds before he gladly returned to her orbit.

He tucked her hair behind her ear to keep the bandage from sticking, and this time, she watched him with great intensity, like she was holding her breath while he defused a bomb. Apparently he wasn't the only one who was feeling the pressure of the situation they'd found themselves in.

"Thank you." With her Bandaid on, Jetta stood and took the remaining scraps of trash to the garbage before Maverick could get them. "Think I'll have a scar?"

"Hard to say. It's not very deep, if that's what you're worried about."

"I'm not worried. I kind of think it'd be cool to have an Indiana Jones-esque scar on my face."

"Didn't he get the one on his chin from using a whip to defend himself against a lion? Not exactly the same as driving into a juniper bush."

Jetta flicked her hair sassily and looked away from him. Could she stop being so cute? It'd help him a lot to maintain his composure if she could. "Hush, you. It's the story that counts, with maybe a hint of embellishment, not the actual origin of the scar."

"Then I've got loads of stories to tell."

Jetta's eyes flew across his body in a flash, looking for evidence of the scrapes and scratches that dotted his skin. "I bet you do. A reclusive cowboy in this day and age? You're probably an entire book series of adventures." Then, almost as an afterthought, she added, "I'd read that."

Maverick reflexively swallowed and for a nanosecond, Jetta looked almost surprised as he felt, as if she couldn't believe she'd said any of that out loud. It'd been a long time since he'd allowed a woman to catch him so off-guard that he was flustered. If he kept on this course, it would inevitably sweep him down a river to where he couldn't control what happened. Instead of the unknown, he steered for safety in talking about something other than himself.

"You said Mary sent these for me?" He unwrapped the cling wrap that'd held the muffins securely, and selected a blueberry sour cream muffin, crowned with oversized sugar pearls. He took an enormous bite, savoring the tangy, sweet flavor of Mary's offering. "Here. Have one."

"Thanks, but I already ate one while I was sitting in the shade, watching Darby and Sterling have their wedding announcement photos taken. Don't get me wrong—it was delicious..."

"But you feel like you cleared out an entire buffet?" Jetta nodded, complimenting it with a smirk. "Yeah, Mary feeds people the way she loves them. Wholeheartedly."

"My mom and aunts are like that. I've had to stuff food in my handbag to eat later so they won't be offended by how much I can or can't eat when we get together."

"My mom's the same way."

Maverick cleared his throat, trying to loosen the tightness choking him. This whole time, ever since Jetta showed up, had been one unexpected twist after another. There was no shame in bringing up his mother, except he could still hardly talk about her without his voice quivering and tears leaking out of his eyes. As alluring as Jetta was, he wasn't sure how he felt about being vulnerable in front of her. What was the benefit in showing someone a weakness?

"At least when you show up for Sunday dinner, you probably make her happy with how much you can put away. I'd bet my favorite paint brushes you can eat your weight in fried chicken and mashed potatoes."

A more intense tightness cinched itself around his neck. No amount of effort would ease it. He'd have to keep his jaw clamped and let it pass. "It did make her happy."

The healthy pinkness of Jetta's cheeks lightened a shade when she caught on to Maverick's use of past tense. "Did?"

"Yeah. I haven't had Sunday dinner with my mother in a couple of years. Not since she passed away."

"Oh. I'm so sorry, Maverick. I didn't mean to bring up anything..."

He wafted away her comment with his hand, then busied himself with cleaning up the crumbs he'd dribbled. "You didn't know."

"I'm still sorry. It's hard having to say goodbye, especially to the ones we love most."

"I appreciate the sentiment. She was a wonderful lady." They were both silent for a beat before Maverick added, "She was so happy I ended up here."

"Because you get to be a cowboy?"

"Yeah, that was part of it. More because she loves Christmas as much as the Peppermints. She got along so well with Mary and Nick that she joked she wanted to become one of their Christmas elves and work for them."

An unexpected laugh burst out of him when he remembered how delighted his mother had been when she found out he'd agreed to be in the Peppermints' float for the holiday parade for the first time several years ago, dressed as one of Santa's workshop elves. As he recounted his struggles to pull on the leggings that clung to him like a second skin, Jetta had tears streaming down her cheeks. It had always interested him that tears happened on both ends of an emotional spectrum. Amused or bereaved, the chance of tears was just as likely. Maverick was also reminded how much he enjoyed hearing Jetta laugh. Enough to sacrifice his own pride to hear it.

"I can't wait to see the parade. Darby and Amelia have told me all about it." Jetta put a hand over her mouth, stifling

another laugh. “I’m not sure I can adequately picture you in candy cane striped tights.”

“Pants. They were stretchy and tight, but they were still technically pants.”

“Semantics.”

“An important one.”

“Tights are a step too far for you?”

“I’d sooner clean out a dirty horse trailer with my bare hands than wear tights. Besides, I hate to disappoint you, but it’s my year to drive the truck pulling the float. You can enjoy Cooper and Porter in those stretchy shreds of festive fabric. I’ve done my due diligence as an elf. And last year, I was the dancing Christmas tree. That was only a mild step above the torture of the elvish variety.”

Jetta laughed again, her eyes dancing as he assumed she was imagining him dressed in all the ridiculous ways the Peppermints thought the children might enjoy. It wouldn’t have been that far-fetched for the Peppermints to ask him to dress as a reindeer and run in front of the truck, glowing red nose and all.

Something over Maverick’s shoulder distracted Jetta, and she tilted her head with a quizzical expression. “Mind if I ask you something?”

“Shoot.”

“Why do you have a horse staring in your window?”

Maverick turned to see his horse Queenie peering inside with one large, soft brown eye. Was she judging him for having another lady in his house? He smiled. “That’s Queenie. She’s my first and best horse.”

“And she became a house pet since she retired?”

“That’s an accurate label.” Maverick laughed softly and sauntered to the back door, which was still open. With the shade of a pin oak protecting his house from the worst of the sun, and a breeze to cut through the heat, he didn’t mind not

running the air conditioning. “She deserves to live the rest of her life living in the luxury befitting her name.”

Making a kissing noise, he coaxed Queenie over to the door. She slowly ambled over and poked her head inside, her ears pricked toward Jetta. “She stays out here with me, keeping my back yard mowed.”

“Hi, Queenie.”

“Here’s a fun fact for you. This scar?” Maverick pointed at his chin, right below his lip. “I got it on my first ride on Queenie.”

“Yeah? You two butt heads?”

“Nah. I was feeling too big for my britches and asked her for a gallop to test her speed. She delivered, though her explosiveness left me in the dust.”

The reminiscing story brought out shared smiles between Jetta and Maverick. “How old is she? If she doesn’t mind me asking about her age.”

“She doesn’t mind, do you, girl? Queenie’s as laid back as they come.” Maverick ran a hand down her long face, and the mare released a sigh so hearty her nostrils quivered. “She’ll turn twenty-nine this next spring. I’m rooting for her to make it into her thirties. If we’re lucky, I promised her a whole bucket of carrots and apples on her birthday.”

“Thirty? Wow. That’s like having a dog times three.”

“In a way, yeah. Although for me, my horses are superior than even the best dog. They’re my partners. We know what the other is thinking, what they’ll do before they do it. I can’t get my work done with the cattle without them, and to have any level of success, everything we do together is done as a team. On more than one occasion, I’ve owed my life to Queenie.”

Jetta’s gaze picked him apart, exposing him without him knowing he was giving anything away. “Huh.”

“Huh what?”

“You’re not as reclusive as you like to think. Not the way you talk about horses like they’re people.”

“That’s fair.” Maverick grinned, moving his hands from Queenie’s forehead to her cheeks. “I do like my horses better than I like most people.”

Jetta silently watched him treating Queenie to an ear massage when Jetta tentatively stepped forward and joined him. Her fingers delicately trailed down Queenie’s nose and ran along the velvety ridge of her nostril. Queenie was in heaven, and Maverick was interested to notice with Jetta there, he was ascending, too.

“Who gave Queenie to you? I mean, I’m assuming that by her age and yours, you were just a kid when you got her.”

The story of Queenie was one that entwined the carefree happiness only childhood could evoke and the eventual pain when growing up forced a boy to realize the world wasn’t as perfect as he’d originally thought. There was no way around it, no matter how he told it. “My dad got her for me.”

“Ah.” Jetta nodded like she was a sage who could see into the past. “So you had one of those idyllic fathers who bought you a horse to spoil you?”

“Hardly.” The bitterness in Maverick’s tone was acrid, causing a bitter taste on his tongue.

“It sounds like there’s a story there. Need to vent?”

Everything in Maverick screamed to keep his mouth shut, except her question triggered something inside of him. Once the floodgates were open, he might as well have tried to stop that internal rushing river from cascading out as keep his mouth shut.

“Yeah, my father bought me Queenie. That’s about the last good thing he did for me.” Shoving a hand through his hair to get it out of his eyes, Maverick huffed an angry breath. “I was his shadow when I was a kid. Followed him around on the farm, whatever he was doing. I’d hand him wrenches while we tinkered on the tractor and ride out with him every morning to

check on our herd of cattle. No matter what it was, I was there. I wanted to be just like him when I grew up.”

Without looking at her, Maverick waited for Jetta to fire off questions. That’s what happened whenever he let anything slip about his relationship with his father. Everyone wanted to know what was so terrible about his childhood. What he had to complain about. So far, he sounded like an entitled brat who wasn’t satisfied with his seemingly perfect life. Whatever Jetta was thinking, she didn’t press him into anything he wasn’t ready to share. With patience, she quietly waited. For what, she couldn’t have known. His father’s betrayal still haunted him to that day and was difficult for him to speak about without feeling all the initial pain he’d felt when his family life imploded.

With Jetta’s silence granting him permission, he continued. “I had my dad living so high on a pedestal that I thought he could do no wrong. That was my first mistake. It wasn’t until I was ten that I realized there was something going on between my parents. Trouble I couldn’t have fathomed. When they spoke, they were terse and combative. Most nights, my dad slept on the couch, if he came home at all. Then one day, he and my mom got into a shouting match when he came home from a supposed dental appointment.”

When he paused, Jetta moved her hand from Queenie’s face to his hand. Her palm was warm and soft across his knuckles. “What happened?”

“It took me a couple of minutes to put it all together. For one, people rarely get their teeth cleaned in their best suit. He also had lipstick on his collar that I’d never seen my momma wear. My mother saw all the signs the second he waltzed through the door. Probably knew it all along, though she’d never had evidence. Either my dad got sloppy, or he wanted her to find out. My mom kept screaming at him about another woman, and everything he’d denied in all their previous fights came out. He’d been having an affair with a real estate agent he’d met in town and was leaving my mother for her. By extension, he was leaving me, too.”

Maverick risked a glance at Jetta; she was staring hard at Queenie; her face white and her spine rigid. When Jetta sniffed, Maverick noticed the glistening tears hanging precariously on her lashes. Guilt sliced at him. The pain other people felt at his misfortune was another reason he'd learned to keep his past to himself. Imposing his grief on others turned his stomach. It was easier to pretend it hadn't happened and shoulder the big emotions those memories piled on him without asking someone else to sacrifice themselves to his burden.

"I'm sorry." Maverick wanted to rewind the last five minutes to save Jetta from this torture. "I didn't mean to unload on you."

"You're not." She quickly swiped at her eyes before the tears escaped. "I can imagine the anguish that must've caused you, having your dad leave like that. And your mother..."

A bridled sob restrained her words.

"It definitely wasn't a bright spot in my life. There was some good that came out of it though."

"What good could come of something so horrible?"

"My relationship with my mom was one of them. I think I took her for granted beforehand and probably gave her a lot of grief when I unquestioningly aligned myself with my dad. After that, we became really close. Kind of had to be."

"I suppose. And Queenie, too?"

"Yeah." Maverick's smile was genuine as he regarded his old mare. "Mom insisted we keep her, no matter the cost, even though my father had to sell the farm in the divorce. This horse has seen me through a lot of highs and lows. Gave me a lot of good babies, too. A couple of them are in the Peppermints' stables right now. I ride one gelding pretty regularly for working the cattle. You know Crash? That's one of hers. And another is used for the trail rides Cooper and Sterling lead during the on-season. One of Queenie's last babies, I trained up and sold for such an outrageous price that I bought my mom a brand new car. It wasn't something she

would have ever asked for. I just wanted to give her something big, to let her know how much I loved her and appreciated having her as a mom.”

“That was generous of you.”

“It sort of felt like the least I could do seeing as the other man in her life couldn’t keep his word to her.”

“Your poor mother.” With her hand over her mouth, Jetta stepped back, using the edge of the counter to steady herself. “No one deserves that kind of betrayal.”

“No, she didn’t. If my father wouldn’t follow through with his promises, I swore to myself that I would never break her heart, especially in such a despicable way as lying to her. People who sneak around to hide what they’re doing are the lowest of the low if you ask me.”

A gusty breeze made the wind chime hanging next to the bird feeder tinkle melodically, and it broke the trance they were in. Blinking rapidly, Jetta dropped the hand she’d pressed over her mouth, her eyes moving quickly through Maverick’s kitchen.

She was scared. Overwhelmed by his past, and the bitterness he harbored. Maverick kicked himself for his lack of restraint and knew something like this would happen.

“What is it?” he asked. “You look like you’re about to bolt.”

“I need to get back. Amelia is probably wondering where I am. She’s counting on me to bring the lasso to her.”

Jetta tripped over a pair of boots he’d left out and bumped into the wall. When he reached out to steady her, she recoiled, though she tried to make it out as if she hadn’t noticed him trying to help.

“How about I drive you back?” he suggested, trying to shove aside a feeling of desperation. “My truck can get there faster than Amelia’s golf cart.”

“That won’t be necessary. If you don’t mind me borrowing your lasso, I’ll be on my way.”

Her change in demeanor was another loop in his day. As Maverick retrieved the discussed lasso from his closet, he couldn't decipher what had caused the shift in Jetta's demeanor. Was it his bitterness? His proximity to his father and his betrayal? Surely she couldn't blame him for growing up in a home broken apart by his dad's inability to keep his promises.

Maverick handed Jetta the lasso, and she didn't meet his eyes as she muttered a thank you. Seeing herself out the door, she alternated between speed walking and jogging to Amelia's golf cart. Bandit rose and stretched, easily catching up to her before she pulled away.

Standing behind the screen door, Maverick watched her go. Despite his best efforts to deny that this was an all too familiar experience, akin to his father abandoning him, the messy rending of his heart as she left Maverick alone confirmed his mistake. In offering her a piece of his soul, she had turned it down.

Being alone was better than being hurt.

CHAPTER NINE



JETTA

“Please tell me you made peach cobbler,” Darby asked Amelia the second her door swung open. “I might hurt someone if I don’t get dessert pronto.”

Jetta took a conspicuous step away from her friend. Realistically, there was zero chance of Darby lashing out, but the move on Jetta’s part made Darby crack a smile.

“I thought you were joking about how bad of a day you were having,” Jetta said.

“Nope.” The neat stack of shoes Amelia had near the front door were bowled over when Darby kicked off her Birkenstocks and padded barefoot into her house. “I want kids someday. I really do. But I’ll never let them have a pet rat. I spent no less than three hours with my arms in the air ducts trying to catch a loose varmint and, of course, I couldn’t give up because the little boy who lost it was standing over my shoulder crying pretty much the whole time. I don’t think I have the energy for that.”

Amelia’s face went a shade grassy. “No arguments from me. Rats? Nuh uh. They’ve surprised me too many times around the farm, their beady black eyes looking straight through me.”

“Thank you. I’ve yet to convince Jetta that they’re not cute and cuddly. You’d think she’d know that after seeing New York City rats scurrying around the subway.” Darby shuddered.

Jetta defended her stance on domesticated rodents. “Subway rats aren’t the same as pet rats. Their little noses and whiskers are cute.”

“Lie all you want to yourself, but a sewer rat is no better than a pet rat’s cousin.” Inhaling deeply, Darby’s nose turned toward the kitchen and she clapped her hands, rubbing them vigorously. “Cobbler?”

“Do I ever disappoint?” Amelia asked haughtily. “Ask, and ye shall receive.”

Amelia whisked Darby and Jetta into her kitchen, where a pan of peach cobbler was still bubbling after being pulled from the oven.

One whiff and Jetta’s stomach rumbled. “How could you *not* tell that Amelia made cobbler? I bet you could have smelled it all the way from Sterling’s house. It’s divine.”

“Because,” Darby said, helping herself to a shoveling spoonful into her bowl, “Amelia’s house *always* smells this amazing. It’s like she has a pan of apple crisp permanently in her oven.”

“I’m telling you, it’s the scented candles. I can’t help myself, especially the closer we get to the holidays. Scents are just as important to me as music or food. They bring up so many memories of Christmas.”

“Holidays?” Jetta wrinkled her nose, though her smirk was still a permanent fixture. “The next holiday is Halloween, and that’s still almost a month away.”

Amelia’s shoulders twitched with a casual shrug. “What’s the harm in enjoying Christmas all year long?”

Of all the things to nitpick, what holidays a person enjoyed and for what portion of the year wasn’t worth arguing, so Jetta let it slide. Accepting a bowl from Amelia, she waited for

Darby to finish scraping the peaches she wanted out of the corner of the pan.

Darby licked her spoon when she was finished. “Ice cream?”

“You know where it is.” Amelia hitched her thumb toward her refrigerator. “Just take it easy. I will not entertain complaining about not fitting into your wedding dress if you overdo it. You know Mary’s only warming up for baking season, too. The test cookies she leaves out while she tweaks recipes are going to keep coming.”

“I’m on my feet all day. That has to give me a couple free calories, doesn’t it?” Darby tossed her head back and laughed maniacally as she danced over to the freezer to retrieve the tub of vanilla bean ice cream. “Besides, Sterling’s already told me more than once that I’d look fabulous wearing a feed sack when we get married. I could fit in one of those no matter my size. Imagine a cute, frayed piece of twine as a belt.”

“So help me...” Amelia pinched the bridge of her nose. “If you keep teasing me with jokes of marrying Sterling in a crumpled feed sack, I swear I’ll quit.”

“You can’t quit. We already paid for your wedding services in full.” As Darby stuck out her tongue, Jetta laughed at Darby’s silly ribbing. Amelia was less than amused.

She shook her head, looking equally devious. “Not quit my role as your competent, talented, disciplined wedding planner. I’ll resign as a bridesmaid. No more nice gal. I’ll keep all desserts out of your reach and have you on the treadmill every morning at five. I’m serious. *And* you’ll thank me for it.”

“Glad I’m not getting married,” Jetta murmured.

Amelia’s eyes sliced over to her, and it was worse than being on stage while naked as the spotlight found her. “Don’t be so sure it’s not in your future.”

“What? Me?” Jetta’s forefinger landed on her chest. “How do you figure?”

“Have you seen the way Maverick looks at you?” Amelia’s eyebrows pumped up and down. “A complete stranger could

tell how ga-ga he is over you.”

Jetta’s insides took a nosedive. It was too early to look at her watch and pull a *Gee, look at the time* trick, so she veered the conversation elsewhere. “Isn’t Clara supposed to come tonight? I have the painting she commissioned for her classroom finished. Want to see a picture of it? I have it here somewhere on my phone.”

As Nick and Mary’s niece, it wasn’t fair for Jetta to hide behind Clara. However, it was easier than facing the guilt over her strained, awkward pseudo-relationship with Maverick. They had been cordial and mature in their Best Man and Maid of Honor duties, but their personal interactions were bumpy and strained. That hadn’t stopped nearly everyone from trying to feel out any relationship potential between them. Every other previous girls’ night, someone had fallen prey to Amelia’s insistent matchmaking. And now, in Jetta’s attempt to mislead anyone about her confused feelings for Maverick, the second Clara opened the door, she could be ambushed by Amelia *and* it would be all Jetta’s fault.

Resisting Maverick was more complicated than she had initially expected.

“Clara’s running late.” By the look on Amelia’s face, she hadn’t even nipped at the bait Jetta had dangled in front of her. “She had to pick up Nori from the flower shop.”

“Working late for that fundraiser the mayor’s running?” Darby asked between mouthfuls of cobbler. Amelia nodded. “She’s going to work herself to the bone if she doesn’t learn to say no once in a while.”

“We’ll talk with Nori about it when she shows up. Right now, we’re talking about Jetta,” Amelia said. “More specifically, her and Maverick.”

There went her eyebrows again, bouncing like they were entertaining themselves on a trampoline.

The peach cobbler scorched her tongue as Jetta hurriedly put a spoonful in her mouth. Pretending she hadn’t heard, then pretending she couldn’t talk did nothing to deter Amelia. With

some warm sugar, butter, and cinnamon in her, Darby got on board with Amelia, too. They waited patiently until Jetta accepted that silence and aversion would not win her any battles.

Dragging a paper towel across her mouth, Jetta sighed. "I'm not interested in dating anyone, okay?"

Wrestling another generous scoop of ice cream from the tub, Darby plopped it in Jetta's bowl to replace the melted cream that pooled on her cobbler. "That's not what she said."

"Do you think she's evading?" Amelia threw a sideways glance at Darby as Amelia helped herself to her dessert. "I think she's evading."

"She's definitely trying to throw us off." Nodding, Darby took another monstrous bite, chewed, and swallowed. "It's not working, Jetta. Maverick's got the hots for you, and you have a thing for him, too. It's so obvious. Like, painfully so."

This was not the way Jetta envisioned their girls' night going. Sure, they'd given Nori and Clara a hard time about being unattached. Heck, even Amelia had to deflect some of the attention off of her, insisting she would never date because she would only settle for the perfect man. According to Amelia, no perfect men existed, ergo no dates for Amelia. Otherwise, Jetta had dropped plenty of hints about her contentment about her relationship status. The other evenings with the women Jetta had come to know and love had been lighthearted and fun. An opportunity to bond with women her age, not be grilled about her conspicuously missing love life.

Then something clicked in Jetta's brain. They all knew she and Chuck were no longer an item. Jetta had tap danced around the details, which they had accepted, probably assuming she was still in mourning over the loss of their relationship. Her perceived grace period for supposedly mourning his loss must've ended. In any other breakup, she might have been able to move along. Probably would have wanted to. After Chuck's betrayal, she couldn't. As an accomplice in his scheme, unknowing or not, Jetta had convinced herself the only way to pay penance for her sins

was to stay single. She couldn't steal any great guys from any deserving women who'd never been a man's dirty little secret if Jetta kept herself off the court.

They weren't wrong that Maverick's machismo was magnetic, but after he'd told her about the way his father betrayed their family, Jetta could hardly stomach the thought of revealing to him that she, too, had experience in that level of betrayal because she'd been a part of it. Suddenly, the peach cobbler in her mouth turned to ash and her stomach roiled. Next to it, her heart was little more than a shriveled raisin, barely beating.

"Hey." Darby set down her bowl, reading the dread on Jetta's face. "We're just giving you a hard time."

"I'm not retracting what I said." Amelia hopped onto the counter and crossed one leg over the other. "You like Maverick. Sometimes it takes a while for those feelings to marinate into a burning passion neither of you can resist. I bet both of you are about to fall head over heels any day now."

Darby's mouth lifted into a smile. "Living vicariously through other people's love lives, Amelia?"

"That's irrelevant. I know my cause—holding out for the perfect guy, knowing he doesn't exist—might be futile. That doesn't mean I'm not rooting for everyone else." A glob of cobbler fell off Amelia's spoon and trickled down the front of her blouse. She dabbed unsuccessfully at it with a paper towel, eventually giving up and tossing the spent paper towel into the trash. "People being in love is good for the wedding business, you know."

Darby leveled a curious gaze at Jetta. "I noticed a shift in you about a month ago. You had been so easygoing around Maverick, like you were good friends. Then something happened, and you clammed up. Sometimes, you can barely stand to look at him without getting all flustered and red in the face."

The sharp breath Amelia took in sounded like a mouse squeak. "Did you kiss?"

“No!” If only there was a way to abandon ship, Jetta would have strapped on her life vest and taken the dive. “No. That’s not it. It’s much more... complicated.”

“Why don’t you start from the beginning?” Darby polished off her cobbler and set down her bowl to give Jetta her full attention. “What put a stumbling block between you and Maverick?”

Amelia pointed her spoon at Jetta. “He’s a great guy, behind all the grumpy frowns and one-word grunts.”

As Jetta opened her mouth, unsure of what to say, she heard the front door open and slam shut.

“The party’s here!” Nori chirped as she and Clara strode into the kitchen. “I brought chips and salsa.”

“*I* brought chips and salsa,” Clara said. “You just carried them inside.”

“Well, I was working late. I planned on making brownies, but you know how it is owning a small business.” Nori slumped onto a bar stool tucked under the butcher block island. “I wear all the hats and, sometimes, other commitments go by the wayside.”

Clara stopped short when she saw Jetta’s face. Jetta tried to be casual by taking another bite of cobbler, but dread must’ve contorted her expression into an obviously open book of anguish.

“What’s wrong?” Clara asked.

“Jetta was about to tell us what happened between her and Maverick,” Darby whispered. “Go ahead, Jetta. We’re listening.”

Instinctually, her first reaction was to dig in her heels. Then, she reconsidered. The secret about her breakup with Chuck had been gnawing holes in her soul for long enough. These women had proven themselves to be friends, and good ones at that. Nothing good had come from bearing the weight of her worries without confiding in someone else. Even if she was skeptical Maverick could ever forgive her indiscretion and date her, the fear she’d been harboring that she was unloveable

was unhealthy. She needed someone outside of the situation to tell her she wasn't irredeemable. Not so she could accept a man loving her again, but so that she could at the very least look at herself in the mirror without self-loathing.

"Alright." Jetta let out a shaky breath. "I'll talk."

The seconds ticked by with Jetta's pulse doing double time as she gathered her bravery.

"Why don't you start from wherever you think is best," Darby coaxed. "Maybe where things became strained between you and Maverick?"

"I'm not sure if strained is the word." Jetta rolled the hem of her t-shirt between her fingers, staying grounded by memorizing the feel of the fabric. "The weirdness was one-sided because Maverick doesn't know about Chuck."

"Chuck?" Amelia's brow furrowed. "Your ex? What's he got to do with any of this?"

"Everything, actually." With a resigned, cleansing sigh, Jetta dove into the convoluted retelling of how she'd arrived at Peppermint Hollow Ranch, and almost immediately noticed her attraction to Maverick.

She glossed over the more personal details—how his face was an artist's dream, from the slope of his nose to the angle of his cheekbones, how often a tingle tiptoed up her spine when his eyes landed on hers, or that she loved the way the veins protruded in his forearms when he was hot and sweaty. When she recounted the day Amelia had sent her on an errand to retrieve the lasso from Maverick's house, Amelia couldn't contain her excitement.

With a quartet of congratulatory claps, Amelia bounced in her spot. "I was trying to figure out a way to get you over to visit him. The opportunity presented itself so perfectly, it hit me like lightning. Mary sending along muffins was a nice touch, too."

"You know that could be considered manipulative, right?" Nori shook her head, even though the slightest hint of a simper played on her mouth.

Amelia playfully stuck out her tongue. “Call it what you will. Sometimes, people need a nudge. It wasn’t like I was sending her with a bouquet to beg him to take her on a date.”

The snort that preceded a laugh hurt Jetta’s sinuses. “That would have been awkward.”

“So, what happened while you were there?” Darby rinsed her bowl in the sink and filled a glass with water from the fridge. “You two were warming up to each other until recently. Now, you hightail it or freeze every time you’re in the same room together.”

Jetta continued to tell about the visit to Maverick’s house in as much detail as she could remember. How Bandit led the way, her run-in with the juniper tree, how much her tailbone throbbed when she tripped backward when Maverick came storming after her, and her triumph at saving Mary’s muffins.

Clara giggled. “So, it *was* awkward.”

“It wasn’t my finest moment, that’s for sure,” Jetta agreed. “It wasn’t all bad, though. Apparently, the juniper got me worse than I thought, so Maverick bandaged me up. He was so tender and sweet about it.”

“Aww!” Darby clutched her hands to her chest in the universal sign that her heart was melting. “You know, when I arrived at Peppermint Hollow, I banged up my knee pretty good and Sterling was the one who patched me up. There’s something super sweet about a big, powerful guy being mild and attentive to someone who’s been hurt.”

“So romantic.” Resting her chin on her fist, Clara agreed dreamily.

It was true. Jetta had replayed the moment over and over in her head, when Maverick, with his mouth inches away from hers, examined the minor cut on her cheek. She swallowed, remembering the achingly delicate feel of his hands on her. She could have sworn there was a burning desire in his eyes as their gazes locked. That was what had scared her the most while simultaneously implanting within her a serious case of yearning.

The second scoop of ice cream Darby had served her had gone the same way as the first, and Jetta's cobbler swam in melted cream. "I think we almost kissed."

It was sort of an afterthought she let slip, and it immediately caused a raucous uproar of excitement.

"What?" Darby shrieked. "How could you keep this a secret?"

With her hand over her mouth, Nori's sparkling eyes did the talking. "You *what*?"

"Think I'm overbearing now?" gloated Amelia. "I'm telling you, sometimes people just need the opportunity to be in the right place at the right time for sparks to fly."

"So romantic," Clara reiterated.

"Hold up." Jetta hushed them with splayed hands. "You're reading too much into it. I said I *think* we *almost* kissed. There was no actual kissing involved."

"But you wanted to." Darby's eyebrows went at it again, springing up and down. "Why are you running from your feelings now that you know you have them?"

Raising a hand as a barrier, Amelia spoke in an exaggerated stage whisper to Darby, "She said this all has to do with Chuck, remember?"

"I don't understand why you're hesitating, either." Spending her days surrounded by kindergarteners, Clara's natural propensity for believing in happy endings was constantly reinforced by the simplicity of seeing things through children's eyes. "If something's worthwhile, go for it."

"It's not like one kiss solidifies anything in stone," Nori agreed. "Nothing wrong with enjoying some noncommittal smooching before seeing where things go."

Exasperation compelled Jetta to pace. If her hands weren't sticky from the cobbler and ice cream, she might have gripped her hair to temper her exasperation. "It's not that simple."

"Not that complicated either," Amelia said.

“Yes, it is.” Jetta stuffed her hands into her pockets to keep from shearing off her fingernails with her teeth. “There’s something you don’t know about me. About why Chuck and I broke up. I thought everything was going so well. Like we had an actual chance of becoming a power couple and marrying once I got my act together and started selling my art.”

“Your art wasn’t selling?” There was a tentativeness in Darby’s voice. “Things sounded like they were going so well for you.”

“I was embellishing for the sake of my pride when we spoke on the phone. In fact, things were getting so dire I had to get a job at a craft store to make ends meet. When I could have been furthering my career as an artist, I had to show up at six in the morning to stock yarn and sort felt sheets after customers raided the shelves, then changed their minds. It wasn’t exactly a high point in my life.”

Clara reassuringly patted Jetta’s arm. “There’s nothing wrong with having a rough patch in your career. It makes the triumph even more grand when you find your voice and get yourself out of that funk.”

The sting of tears pushed against Jetta’s eyes, and she pinched them shut, denying their freefall. “I wish fibbing about my floundering career was the worst part of it all.”

No one moved as they waited for Jetta to finish her cliffhanger. She choked back the rock of emotion building in her throat and worked to say what had been shaming her since she’d arrived in Peppermint Hollow.

“Things had been going well with Chuck. At least, I thought they had been.” Jetta’s lips were dry and her hands shook. “One night, we were out celebrating at this amazing restaurant. It was a taste of the life I thought we’d have together. I could literally see myself dining with the social elite forever. Then, this woman walked in and stopped by our table.”

Amelia gripped her counter with intense interest. “Who was she? An ex? A jealous admirer?”

“Chuck’s wife.” A single tear traced down Jetta’s face at the same time she laughed. “The jerk turned out to be married... Which makes me the other woman. The home wrecker. His secret mistress. Whatever label you want to put on it.”

A pin falling would have shattered the silence in Amelia’s kitchen. Jetta stared at her coral pink toenails, knowing that eyes were darting and minds were racing. Even with the secret she’d been hiding in the shadows out in the open, Jetta’s heart raced. The possibility of rebuke made her want to crawl under a rock, never to be seen again.

“Oh, Jetta.” Compassion seeped from Darby’s words. It was a balm for the worry ingrained in Jetta’s spirit that she was a social outcast. A repellant woman for so many reasons. “I’m so sorry. That’s horrible.”

“Yes, it is.” Another tear squeezed past Jetta’s defenses. “Sometimes I can hardly believe I was so stupid! What kind of woman falls for a married man? All the signs were probably there, and I willfully ignored them.”

“Just because you were conned by a loser like him doesn’t mean you have to shoulder any of the blame,” Nori said definitively. There was a murmur of agreement from everyone else.

With the breadcrumb trail of clues Jetta had given in her recounting of events, Amelia followed the clues to the answer to her own question. “That’s why you’ve been avoiding Maverick.”

Temptation to spill the beans about Maverick’s sordid family history was as persistent as a strong itch. Jetta resisted. If he hadn’t told anyone else, then it wasn’t her business to blab. “I think after Chuck, I’m gun shy about feeling any sort of attraction to a man. The wounds are too fresh. Besides, what would a man like Maverick think of a Jezebel like me when he found out?”

“Maverick’s not the kind of man to hold a grudge for a past mistake,” Clara said, “especially when it wasn’t your fault.”

Jetta wanted to believe them, except she knew how badly he'd been burned by the unfaithfulness of his father. There was no hope that Maverick could ever look at her without disgust. It was better to leave things as they were. Platonic. Cordial. Distant.

An exhaustion pressed down on Jetta and she slumped onto a seat, barely managing a smile. There was some relief in her confession. Unburdening herself of her shameful secret had been cathartic. Keeping Maverick's family drama to herself, and how she knew he'd react if he found out about her, tied Jetta up in knots all over again. Her past was too close to his trauma.

Managing a cheery smile, Jetta nodded once. "Who knows? Maybe you're right. He might be the sort of man who'd forgive it all."

There was another round of murmured agreement, extolling Maverick's exceptional virtues.

Maverick *was* incredible. That wasn't what anyone was debating. If only they knew what Jetta did, they'd know precisely how wrong they were.

CHAPTER TEN



MAVERICK

The lasso whirred as Maverick spun it in a tight circle over his head. At just the right moment, he released it. It sailed across the paddock and landed easily around the practice dummy cow he used to keep his skills sharp. Giving it a quick jerk, the loop closed around the plastic head. If the thing were alive, it wouldn't get anywhere while Maverick had a hold of it.

Even though the evenings were cooling nicely, the days were still scorching. The fabric of his shirt was damp, and the air was repressively still with no breeze to cut through the heat. Rain had been scarce, turning the grass crispy and giving the treeline a brown haze. At this rate, people could wear shorts and sandals to Darby and Sterling's wedding at the beginning of November.

It wasn't all bad. Jetta favored cut-offs and t-shirts in this repressive weather. Everything from her bare feet to her sun-kissed skin to the shape of her lips as they smiled made Maverick's heart stumble over itself whenever she crossed his path.

The thought made him stop short. He had been trying carefully to compartmentalize his thoughts at all times, particularly when it involved Jetta. Pondering the future,

specifically when it involved Darby and Sterling's wedding, inevitably evoked thoughts about Jetta. Surveying the land would remind him of Jetta's artwork. Driving home, past the junipers, brought up thoughts of Jetta. All of it would inevitably lead him back to that afternoon when she'd snuck into his house, and frankly, into his heart. He'd been so close to kissing her, and he was sure she had wanted the same thing. Then, in a moment of vulnerability, he'd shared some of his darkest memories, and instead of cementing their budding relationship as something more than mere friendship, it'd made Jetta so visibly bereft that she'd fled. Afterward, sightings of her were scarce. When he had the pleasure of her company, she either looked like she was searching for an escape route, or she shrank into herself, trying to smile but unable to completely mask the distress pinching her expression.

The whole thing tied his insides in knots. The stubborn cowboy side of him wanted not to care a lick about what Jetta thought of him, except that wasn't the way his emotions worked. He knew what he wanted—Jetta. His heart was set on her. Witnessing her try to be stalwart and strong as she hid whatever troubled her wasn't enough to scare Maverick away. He knew how to forge ahead, even when the waters were rough, and he wanted to prove he was worthy of her trust and affection.

Worthy of her love.

That would mean getting Jetta to stay long enough that he could coax out whatever it was that was making her apprehensive. Something was deep-rooted within her, withdrawing her from him. If he had to kiss all her worries away, he would gladly do so. The thought made him smile.

Maverick jiggled the stiff lariat rope, and it loosened enough that he could whip it off the dummy steer. As he wound it in a big loop, he strolled across the empty paddock to look over the extensive pasture outside the confines of the fence rails. Front and center of his view sat Jetta with an easel and a partially painted landscape. Of what he could see, her interpretation of the land before her was much more vibrant and alive. The

greens were deeper, the sky more azure. It wasn't her painting that held his gaze. Unequivocally, his attention was drawn to her. He recognized this moment for what it was—an opportunity.

“Ask, and ye shall receive,” Maverick murmured to himself.

There were a hundred ways he could have approached Jetta. He sorted through his options quickly and landed on an idea that was sure to grab her attention.

Positioning his lasso, he swung it around and around until he was confident he had the perfect shot. Miss it, and his boyish prank would lose its effectiveness. He loosed the rope from his hands, and it sailed over the fence, the loop landing gently around Jetta. With a flick of his wrist, the rope tightened so it wouldn't slide off.

Jetta jumped like she'd sat on a tack and the cutest surprised shriek made her drop her brush. Turning around, she looked murderous until her eyes landed on Maverick. The indignation was quickly replaced by a smirk that couldn't hide her amusement at his stunt.

Jetta bent down and picked up her brush, and stood to stare at Maverick with a raised brow. If he weren't constrained by gravity, Maverick felt like he could blast off into the stratosphere right then. This was the first time in too long that Jetta wasn't actively running from him. Sure, it probably had something to do with the rope tied around her, but it wasn't like she couldn't slip right out of it. This was a step in the right direction, and one he wouldn't mess up.

Stepping to the paddock fence, Jetta shed the rope, then lifted her foot to rest it on the bottom rung. It was so natural for her to be standing there in a place where he felt at home. “I'd heard you were talented with a lasso, but I have to admit, I was skeptical of your legendary ability. That's impressive.”

“It's a lot easier when you're not a moving target.” He drew back the stiff rope into his hand, kicking up a trail of dust as he towed the loop to him. “Did I interrupt you?”

“Not really. I was ready to take a break.”

“How many paintings have you finished this week?”

“A couple. Everything I took into the art gallery in town has sold, and the owner called to commission twice as many as I’ve been bringing in.”

“That’s fantastic. I knew people in the area would appreciate your paintings.”

“A few of them have even been shipped out of state, so purchases haven’t only been fueled by the aesthetic of the town coaxing people to buy.”

“That’s great.”

“It is. I suppose I have you to thank for giving me the boot to the behind to motivate me.” She leveled her eyes at him, and his stomach quavered. Actually sprouted dozens of tiny wings that were all bent on taking flight and bringing Maverick with them. It reinforced exactly how enamored he was with Jetta. “So, thank you.”

“All I did was open the door and shoo you inside.”

Silence stretched between them. Maverick didn’t rush it. There was a lot a man could learn about a woman in the absence of conversation. When Jetta smiled and turned her gaze toward her feet, the moment was over, but not before Maverick had gathered some valuable intel. Some apprehension remained, but he was nearly certain it wasn’t solely because of him. There was something else at the root of their roadblock. But what was it? It would require further investigation.

“Do I owe you a new brush?” Maverick asked.

“Nah. It fell on top of the grass. Didn’t even get dirt on the bristles.” Jetta pushed herself off the fence and retreated a step. “I’ll leave you to practice. Never know when lasso skills might come in handy.”

“You want to try it?”

The moment the words were off his tongue, Maverick’s heart pounded with increasing intensity. It’d been a simple goodwill gesture with immense implications riding on it. If he

couldn't convince her to stay, then it was proof they weren't out of their funk.

"I..." Jetta's lower lip caught between her teeth, and the muscle in Maverick's chest tightened. Whenever she did that, he had the overwhelming urge to take her in his arms and kiss her senseless.

"You said yourself you never know when lasso skills might come in handy. Here's your opportunity for one-on-one instruction."

She continued to wrestle with her thoughts and fidgeted while she did. The extended exhale she released was evidence Maverick had won this round. "Alright. I'll do it. Who knows the next time I'll ever have the opportunity to learn how to lasso? Certainly not back in New York City."

The thought of Jetta moving away sent a genuine pain through Maverick. He had no more claim on her than anyone else in Peppermint Hollow, though he wanted more than anything for her to stay. Yeah, his father hadn't been a stellar example of how a man should love a woman. That didn't mean Maverick was doomed to find a good woman, was it? And if his gut was right, there was something special about Jetta. Unless he could convince her to explore the possibility of something more than whatever confounded, tedious friendship they'd formed, it would take time. For that to be his reality, he'd have to step up his game.

Leaving her brush on a fence post, Jetta climbed over the rails and landed easily on the other side. "Alright, Maverick. I'll take you up on your private lesson. It better be good, though."

"Why's that?"

Jetta raised her eyebrows, and her hands found her hips. He swallowed. She had no idea how mesmerizing she was, and she wasn't even trying.

"Because," she brushed a fringe of her brown hair out of her eyes, "I won't recommend you as a teacher if you're lousy at this. Not in good conscience."

Their laughter started them off on the right foot. Though Jetta was a complete novice when they began, getting the rope tangled more often than not, Maverick didn't mind. She didn't discourage easily, and accepted pointers without it wounding her ego. If anyone was winning at their role, Jetta was an excellent student. When she was close to getting the hang of the final movement as the rope left her hand, he stepped close to offer additional pointers. Standing behind her with her wrist in his hand, and inadvertently inhaling her scent, his heart nearly left his chest in a familiar stampede. If she didn't feel it whacking against his ribcage, it would be a miracle. With all his willpower, he suppressed the urge to lean in and take a second breath, close to the crook of her neck. That was what Jetta did to him. A hardened, grumpy cowboy was fantasizing about the feel of her wrist in his hand, and wishing someone could bottle her scent.

Half an hour later, Jetta landed eight of her ten throws. The last one slipped around the dummy steer's horns without touching the plastic, and with a quick jerk backward of her arm, she secured the rope around its neck.

"I think you're getting it," he said with a slow clap.

"Thanks, but I'm guessing this is all just the tip of the iceberg."

"What do you mean?"

"I've seen the movies. How easy those cowboys make it look when they're galloping their horse and trying to hit a moving target. I would fall off in the first five seconds on a galloping horse, without even getting to throw the lasso."

"That's fair. We all have to start somewhere, though."

"Right." Jetta rewound the rope. "Congratulations, by the way."

"For what?"

"For earning a gold star with your teaching skills. You're very patient and articulate. A good instructor is as important as the hands-on experience."

“I don’t think anyone’s told me I’m articulate before. Could you maybe write that down so I can prove something to Amelia?”

“That you’re capable of more than single syllable conversations? Yeah, she’s told me. You like giving her a hard time, don’t you?”

“Someone has to. I figure if I have nothing to say, why waste my breath?”

“Well, thank you for your time *and* wasting your breath on me.”

Nothing about their time together had been a waste. If anything, Maverick was invigorated by it. He saved that confession for another day. “You’re welcome.”

The conversation ebbed again, and Maverick sifted through his brain, trying to figure out what else he could say to keep her engaged. To keep her there with him. He was put out of his misery by the ring of Jetta’s phone.

Fishing it out of her pocket, the usual color drained from her face as she stared at the screen like she was holding a venomous snake. “Oh.”

A thousand questions hatched and wriggled in Maverick’s brain with her gasp. Whoever was calling startled her. More of a shock at opening a large and unexpected bill than the joy of walking into a surprise birthday party.

Jetta was frozen. The phone rang and rang. She didn’t blink. Didn’t breathe.

“Are you going to answer?” Maverick asked in a quiet voice, like she might either break down crying or stomp her feet and scream.

The phone went silent, and Jetta dragged her gaze up to his face. She’d returned to the present, though the phone call had rocked her to her core. Before she could put her phone away, it dinged, signaling an incoming voicemail.

“Excuse me. I’d better listen to this,” she said, almost meekly. All the clues she was giving him didn’t compute into

anything logical. It was another layer of the mystery that made Jetta fascinating.

Handing the lasso to Maverick, Jetta walked away. Curiosity continued to gnaw at him, though his first priority was to comfort Jetta. Whatever her past, she was the kind of person who deserved nothing but the best from what the world offered. She was that good and kind and exquisite.

Maverick's fists tightened because of the distress she tried to conceal from him. He had a few choice words he'd like to share with the caller.

When Jetta hung up, she stood with her back to Maverick, visibly shaking. If Maverick was ever torn between rushing in to help or let the tribulation run its course, it was right then. How could he help when he had no context for her worries? When Jetta finally turned around, Maverick waited for her to speak first.

"Sorry to interrupt our lesson. It was important that I..." Jetta fidgeted, her eyes moving from her watch to her feet to the Peppermint Hollow Lodge roof, peeking over the metal ridge of the barn. "It was an unexpected call."

Maverick nodded, still waiting for her to say what was actually on her mind.

"Thanks again for showing me how to throw a lasso. The next time I have to rope an inanimate object, I'll be ready. Assuming I have a rope on hand, I suppose."

She tried to laugh, but it was as flat as week-old, already-opened soda. Maverick sensed a caveat to her compliment, and that she was using humor as a diversion. Still, he didn't speak.

She shielded her eyes from the sun as she finally met his gaze. "I'd better go."

"You can't."

Jetta lifted her eyebrows at his denial, then snorted defiantly. "Are you going to stop me? Because I'm telling you, if you try, I'm mad enough right now I might break your nose."

Despite the gravity of the situation, Maverick smiled. *That* he believed. “I don’t doubt it.”

“Then may I be dismissed from class so I can go eat my weight in Mary’s gingersnaps while I sort through my problems? That or scream into my pillow?”

“You haven’t taken your test yet.” Maverick walked over to where she stood and drew a line in the dirt with the heel of his boot. “We have to head off in a contest to see who can rope the dummy the most.”

She folded her arms, intrigued. “How many shots?”

“Best out of ten. Then you can go sniff out the cookie stash if you promise to save me one. Gingersnaps are some of my favorites.”

The usual sunshine in Jetta’s countenance peered out from the thunderstorms that had been storming since her unexpected and unwelcome phone call. Her happiness made him happy. It was another intangible thing about Jetta he wished he could wrap up and save for a special occasion, like Christmas morning. It’d been a while since he’d thought about what it felt like to come down the stairs as a child and see the tree swamped with presents. That was what being with Jetta felt like.

The hiccup in their otherwise enjoyable late afternoon had also distracted Jetta enough that any of the residual awkwardness from her visit to his house had dissipated. He’d achieved his ultimate goal when he threw a loop around her. The phone call, as unfortunate as it was, had been the final piece. Mentally, he thanked whoever the poor soul who had called was and would either receive her scorn or her cold shoulder later. At least it had distracted her from whatever had driven a wedge between her and Maverick.

“Alright.” Jetta straightened herself. “Prepare to be walloped.”

“I like your confidence.”

“How about we make it more interesting?”

That got Maverick’s attention. “What are you thinking?”

“For every one landed, the lassoer gets to ask the other person a question.”

It felt like a trap. There were plenty of things Maverick had never uttered aloud. Not even to his own mother, and Jetta could ferret them out of him. Then again, Jetta had only been working a lasso for an hour, whereas he had years of experience on his side. It could be a chance to get good information out of her. Even with the warning sirens blaring in his head, Maverick started compiling his ten most burning questions for Jetta.

He held out his hand. “Deal.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN



MAVERICK

She slipped her hand into his, and her slender fingers were enclosed in his broad, calloused ones. With one firm shake, they had an agreement.

Maverick was going to milk the opportunity for all it was worth.

“Ladies first?” he offered.

“Oh, no.” She pushed the rope back at him. “Not in this case. I think you ought to have the honor.”

“Alright. Hope you’re ready to spill all your deepest, most intimate secrets.”

Jetta’s laugh was flippantly singsong and light. “I don’t know that you’ll even know what to ask to find out about them. Go ahead and try, I guess.”

“Where Amelia claims I’m wanting in my ability to socialize, I make up with my powers of observation. I see more than most because they’re too busy being chatterboxes.”

“We’ll see.” The possibility of him being truthful about his ability for scrutinizing made her swallow, though she refused to relinquish her smile. “Whenever you’re ready.”

Taking a breath to clear his head, Maverick slowly looped the lasso around and around. He'd won enough lassoing competitions as a youth to know how to deal with the pressure of winning on the line. Having Jetta as his rival, and the promised prize of knowledge about her, upped the ante a hundredfold. When he was confident in his aim, he flung the lasso toward the inanimate steer's head. It slid easily over the top.

"Point one for me." He wriggled the lasso off and drew it back to him, smirking and watching Jetta out of the corner of his eye. Judging by the shock on her face, she was taking his warning seriously now. "Let's see... where should I begin? What's your favorite color?"

Jetta snorted. Incredulity elevated the corner of her lips. "Really? That's what you're going to start with?"

"Maybe I'm luring you into a false sense of security before I land you with something mind blowing and exposing."

"Fine." She rolled her eyes, though it was playful. "Asking an artist what their favorite color is doesn't seem fair though."

"I'm not telling you that you can only paint with that color the rest of your life. So, what is it? Lavender? Burnt orange?"

"Definitely not goose poop green."

Maverick laughed. "Believe it or not, I'd already drawn that conclusion."

With her face contorted as she thought harder than she probably needed to, Maverick soaked in her expression. Everything she did enlivened him. "I guess I'd have to say blue."

"Really? Blue. Just blue?"

"Boring, I know, but it's true. It's so peaceful and calming." She inhaled deeply, the very thought of the color affecting her. "It's kind of like vanilla. It might start basic, but add in any other number of color combinations and there's no end to what can be created."

"Blue," Maverick repeated for his memory's sake.

“What’s yours?”

He thought about the amber hue of her hair when it caught the sunlight. The rose on her cheeks when she blushed. The impossibly beautiful hues of her sparkling eyes. Her lips, painted with a juicy, cherry red lipstick. How could he choose one favorite from any of those?

Holding up his forefinger, Maverick tsked and shook his head. “Lasso the steer’s head to find out.”

“Seriously?”

“We’re in a competition, aren’t we? I’m not about to give up any information willingly.”

“You’re going to be a jerk about this, aren’t you?” She reached for his arm and gave him her heftiest shove. Both laughing, Maverick stumbled a few steps. Jetta made him feel like a kid again, while maintaining the wisdom he’d gleaned since graduating from childhood. It was the best of both worlds with her. “The rules weren’t written in stone, you know.”

“When I agree to something, I’m all in.”

“Alright, fine. I’ll remember that for next time.”

His stomach sprang with anticipation. Next time? Was that confirmation of a future time with him? “Your turn.”

Jetta accepted the rope, pretending not to notice their fingers brushing in the exchange. Flexing the joints of his fist, every one of Maverick’s nerves tingled with electricity. He tucked his fingers into his pockets for safekeeping. Jetta narrowed her eyes, focusing on her target as she spun the lasso. When she released the rope, it fell short of the cattle head by a couple of feet. She griped under her breath, shoving the rope back into Maverick’s chest as he chuckled at her misfortune.

Maverick kept his questioning light following each successful roping. If given the choice, she’d pick hamburgers over hot dogs, unless there was sauerkraut involved, she knew she wanted to be an artist ever since she went with her kindergarten class to an art museum, she had a brother named Jack, and there was nothing in the world that could convince

her that dark chocolate was delicious. Not even adding caramel or toffee or sea salt. To her, it was as appealing as shoving a handful of dirt into her mouth. Her insistence and exuberant distaste for it, including melodramatic facial expressions of disgust, had Maverick howling with laughter.

When she finally had a successful turn, slapping the lasso around the dummy steer, she jumped up and down so hard the horses across the way in the pasture all lifted their heads to stare at her brazen celebration.

“Woo-hoo!” She danced circles around Maverick, her arms pumping the air. When her exuberance waned to manageable levels, she tugged her slouchy v-neck t-shirt back into place and smiled at Maverick like he was the reason the sun rose that morning. “Are you ready for my first question?”

“I am.”

She hesitated, nibbling the corner of her lower lip. “You don’t have to answer if you don’t want to. I’m not a stickler for the rules like you are.”

Maverick had a feeling she wouldn’t ask him if he preferred lemonade to iced tea. “An agreement is an agreement. There were no caveats to our game that I can remember.”

“No, there weren’t.” Her smile dimmed and after a beat, she worked up the nerve to ask, “Did your mom ever recover from what your dad did to her?”

No one had ever asked him that before, in part because he’d made sure that he left that part of his past behind when he relocated to Peppermint Hollow. No one had ever known about the suffering his father had caused. It saved him from enduring the inevitable pity and sympathy that was well-meaning but usually unwelcome. “Wow. Jumping right in the deep end, aren’t you?”

“I might have eased you into it, but I’m down to five questions.” She winced. “If it’s tactless to ask, forget I said anything. Maybe just tell me about your favorite childhood memory about Queenie.”

“I gave you my word. What’s a person worth if not what they say?” His mouth was parched and his tongue stuck to his cheeks as he spoke. “Mom... I don’t think she was totally blindsided by what my father did. There were signs, and she told me once that she’d ignored them, either to give him the benefit of the doubt or to live in denial a little longer. Their life had been a happy one for a long time. Superficially perfect. At least that’s how she remembered it. I guess I do, too.”

Rambling gave time to hash out his answer. The dry dirt under his boot shot swirling puffs into the air as he toed at it. Maverick wanted to look Jetta in the eye. To be strong when he felt vulnerable. He couldn’t. The shame and anger weighing on him pressed down worse than a boulder lodged between his shoulder blades, and he didn’t want her to see him struggling. That would be asking her to carry some of his burden, too. As he’d silently promised before, imposing his burden onto her was never his intention.

When Jetta spoke, her voice was soft. “Thank you for sharing. I’m sure that wasn’t easy.”

“No, it wasn’t.”

Though she’d brought up Maverick’s least favorite subject, the heaviness of it didn’t linger too long. He continued to avoid looking directly at Jetta, who he could see staring at him from his periphery, so she wouldn’t see any sadness he might have accidentally leaked into his expression. With the rope in his hands, he secured another point for himself.

“Question six, and since you deployed a heavy hitter, I’m going to have to do the same. This is a battle for knowledge.”

Her spine stiffened, but she didn’t run. “Okay.”

“Who called you?”

Jetta blinked, almost as if she didn’t comprehend his question. He tilted his head toward the phone in her back pocket, and her hand reflexively touched it. “You mean who left the voicemail?”

Maverick affirmed her question with a slow nod that sent a shadow from the brim of his hat down his face.

Jetta ran her tongue around her lips. His question had the same effect hers had. They were being fragile for one another, for better or worse. “My ex.”

Boyfriend? Husband? Business partner?

“You’re still too upset to talk to them?”

Jetta mirrored his teasing finger wave. “That’s another question. Have to get another lasso throw if that’s what you want to ask me. First, I get another turn.”

Jetta had adapted to the distance, and easily secured the lasso around the dummy again. Before she even had the rope off, she turned to Maverick. “Where is your dad now?”

His heart squeezed again. No. Worse than squeezed. It was stuck in a vise and someone was crushing it with all their might. If she was going to keep chipping away at him with questions that landed like a sledgehammer, he might have to sit down. “He’s not with the real estate lady, if that’s what you’re wondering. I think he’s been hitched and divorced a couple more times. Last I heard, he married a woman who’s younger than me by five years. They have a son together.”

Jetta’s hand moved to her mouth. “You have a half-brother?”

“I have a trail of half-siblings. I haven’t met the newest one, though. I guess my father needed another couple of heirs now that we’re not exactly on speaking terms.”

Jetta’s hand dropped from her mouth to her stomach, like she might be sick from his confession. “I’m sorry.”

Maverick brought his palm up to stop her. He didn’t like the way his blunt answer had made her cringe, but he wouldn’t allow her to feel sorry for him. That’s where he drew the line. “Don’t. If there’s one thing I pride myself on, it’s not allowing myself to wallow. There’s no need to feel sorry for me. He did what he did, I moved on. Just because he fathered me doesn’t mean I owe him any loyalty. People should have to earn the right to be in my life. All I ask for is honesty, a pinch of morality, and enough allegiance to convince me a person won’t betray me the second it’s convenient to do so.”

He could almost feel his heart turning to steel and breaking free of the tight grip that had been hurting him. Truthfully, it was a farce when he said he'd gotten over what his father had done. On the outside, it might have appeared like he had adjusted. Inwardly, he had retreated, guarding himself by living behind a fortress of defensiveness topped with razor wire and cannons on towers. It's why he had never had more than casual relationships, why he only had a handful of friends, and a large part of his reason for living so secluded. The fewer people he allowed around him, the less chance he might be wounded by their carelessness.

The effervescence in Jetta's countenance fizzled. If there was a worse torture than hurting someone, he never wanted to harm, Maverick couldn't imagine what it was. He'd been naïve thinking any of this wouldn't lead to pain. It was a good idea that was flying downhill faster than an out-of-control avalanche. There had to be a way to navigate this challenge and come out not only stronger, but without scaring Jetta away.

In a slight gesture of goodwill, Jetta handed over the lasso with a smile. Weak, yes, but she was trying. So would Maverick. He winked and managed a lopsided grin. "You sure you want to keep going?"

"You have four more questions if I'm counting right."

Maverick flung the lasso. It fell limply to the ground. "Oops. I missed."

Jetta scoffed and poked him in the chest. "No, you didn't. You did that on purpose."

"Can't prove anything."

"Sure, I can." The rope whizzed over Jetta's head, and she slapped it onto the dummy, cinching it tight around it. "There. Did you intentionally miss the last throw?"

"You're going to waste your question on that?"

"Quit evading. No questions unless you land it, and you didn't. I did. So?" She planted both of her fists on her hips. Again, the carnal urge to sweep her off her feet and press her

close to him for a passionate kiss nearly overtook him. Heaven knew he could use one. *Wanted* one. “Did you miss on purpose?”

“Maybe.”

Her laugh was abrupt, and she pushed the rope back to him. “Don’t take things easy on me.”

Maverick was careful to phrase his words as a statement rather than a question. “You prefer to face your opponents head on, even if you might lose.”

“Don’t you?”

“Touché.”

Jetta raked her hand through her hair. Her mouth hung open and her hands scrambled in the air, trying to grab onto what she wanted to say. “It’s more than that, though. I don’t want anyone taking it easy on me because I don’t deserve it.”

“Deserve?” Maverick asked.

It was a microsecond that Jetta looked at Maverick before she dropped her gaze. If he wasn’t imagining it, her eyes were glistening with tears. From sadness or frustration or sheer boredom, he couldn’t distinguish.

“That’s a question. If you want it answered, you know what you have to do.” Blinking rapidly, Jetta stared at the horses, who were taking a break from grazing, standing with their hind legs cocked as they lazily swatted their tails at the flies pestering them. “You have three questions left.”

More than kissing Jetta, he decided he wanted to pull her into a bear hug. There was a spot between her neck and shoulder that would be perfect for nestling into. He’d promise her that everything would be alright. Whatever haunted her past, she’d get through it, just like he’d survived the implosion of his family. It wasn’t pretty, but it was possible, especially with someone else to lean on. He wanted to be that pillar for her.

Needed her help to pull himself onto higher ground, too.

With an embrace of any sort out of the question, Maverick only had his remaining questions to rely on. If he was careful, he could still turn the time with Jetta around. The lasso landed exactly where he wanted it to, and before he pulled the slack out of it, he knew what he wanted to ask. “Why did you and your ex break up?”

“Simple.” Her shoulders twitched with an indifferent shrug. “He broke my heart.”

Vague, yet definitive. She had intentionally not expounded on the cause, which probably meant that even weeks after she’d fled to Peppermint Hollow, she still wasn’t over the pain he’d caused.

There was a tremor in Jetta’s hand that made her miss her next throw. As much as Maverick wanted to root out more information so he could truly know Jetta, it was time to pull back and let her recuperate from the stress of reliving broken relationships, hers or vicariously through Maverick’s. Forcing the issue wouldn’t endear her to him.

When it was Maverick’s turn to ask again, he asked, “How many paintings have you sold at the art gallery in town?”

Jetta had been bracing herself for another tough question. When Maverick asked about her work, she sagged with relief, which fueled a full smile. “Seventeen. Can you believe it? I almost can’t keep up with her request for more. I took that huge one I started when I first arrived here. Remember it? I doubt it’ll ever sell, but it’s hanging like a giant calling card for my work.”

“You finished it?”

“Yep.” She nodded enthusiastically, forgetting that he’d asked her a question which should have required him to score a point. “When I took it in, the owner also convinced me to sign up for an artist’s retreat.”

“You’re leaving?”

“For four weeks, right after Sterling and Darby’s wedding. I’ll travel around this area of the country, learning from some of the masters and networking with people in the art field.

Bonus is I'll be back in Peppermint Hollow in time for Christmas, so I won't miss anything." Maverick kept quiet about his torn feelings. It would be an excellent opportunity for her, though judging by the gaping hole in his chest, he missed her already. "I guess I should thank you for not letting me give up on it."

"It would've been a shame." He tried to imagine what her masterpiece looked like and mentally checked his schedule to see when he could make it into town to see it for himself. "The potential was there."

As she held his gaze for several seconds, his mind went blank of everything extraneous. The chirp of sparrows as they foraged for food. The whisper of the leaves while a slow wind sifted through the trees. The weather was neither hot nor cold. Time was irrelevant. Even the brightness of the sun seemed dim compared to Jetta.

When Jetta's smile turned mischievous, he realized he'd been staring too long. "My turn."

Jetta had regained her ruthless drive to win, and earned herself another question. "What *is* your favorite color?"

It was a chance for him to be honest, and it might give him an opportunity to gauge her reaction. "What if I said you were?"

"Me? Your favorite color?" Any verbal answer was blocked by his paralyzed tongue, so he dipped his chin in a nod. She giggled. "I'd say you were a suave flirt who borders on crazy."

Nothing got past her. Grinning, he accepted the rope and made sure his last question wasn't wasted. He roped the dummy steer a final time. "If you could only have one thing for Christmas, what would it be?"

He was shamelessly going for the gold, though Jetta didn't seem to mind the inquisition. She tapped her forefinger on her lips as she considered her answer. Maverick focused on not thinking about how pillowy and kissable they looked. "To love and be loved. Obviously, I'm a proponent of self-love... No one can expect someone else to love them more than they love

themselves, but I can't lie and say it isn't wonderful when a guy knows how to make me feel special by loving me even when I don't love myself. Kind of pathetic, isn't it?"

"I don't think so." A daydream carried Maverick to a place where he had the privilege of showing Jetta how he could love her. He'd do it right so she never needed to question whether or not she was worthy of everything he showered on her. He would wear out the knees of his jeans worshiping her. "A lot of people would like a gift like that."

"Perhaps, though it'd be awfully challenging to wrap up." She hesitated with the lasso. "Last one, right?"

"If I'm counting correctly."

She secured her target, looking rather pleased with herself that she'd done as well as she had. "Do you believe people are redeemable?"

The question surprised Maverick. Who was she talking about? If she was trying to get him to attempt reconciliation with his father, then no. Maverick had tried before and it'd inevitably led to disappointment. If she was thinking about her ex, Maverick hoped he wouldn't tempt her to come back to him with paltry apologies and promises that he'd changed. Jetta deserved better. Honestly, Maverick wasn't entirely certain *he* was worthy of anyone's affections, for all the times he'd let people down and hurt them. His life had hardly been perfect.

"Yes." Maverick's voice was husky. "And no."

Jetta waited for him to expound on his answer. Her expression gave away nothing, and selfishly, Maverick thought he preferred it that way. At least he couldn't tell if he was twisting some unknown knife if she didn't appear pained.

"Most of the time, I think people don't intend on hurting anyone else. We're all just struggling through life the best we can, which leads to a lot of blind stumbling and stupid mistakes. Then, there are those sins that are unforgivable. They're intentional and so cruel I'm not sure why anyone who betrayed another would even ask for forgiveness. They've

already done the damage, then they expect mercy.” Maverick thought of his father, who was as unrepentant as they came, and wanted to spit. “Maybe it’s wrong of me, but there are some things that are too severe to forgive and forget.”

“Like your father,” Jetta whispered.

“He’d be on my list.”

Quiet strained between them, and for all of their easy banter, Maverick couldn’t figure out how to guide their conversation back to sure footing. Jetta was the first to make a move.

“I’d better go. I have to drop off another few paintings in town, and I promised Darby and Amelia I’d help figure out the seating arrangements for the reception,” Jetta said.

She took a tentative step toward Maverick, then another. Wrapping her arms around his neck, she drew herself onto her toes and hovered inches from him. Her warm breaths came out short and shallow as she stared at him. Sliding his hands over the top of her hips, the temptation to kiss her was compelling. She was right there. Emotions were running high, spilling over the brim. One dip of his mouth to hers and he could end the waiting.

Before he could muster any internal boldness, Jetta kissed him on the cheek, slapped him on the arm in a chummy way, and stepped back, effectively breaking his hold on her.

“You’re a great friend, Maverick. Thanks again for the lesson. It was all very... informative.”

With a militarily precise spin on her heels, Jetta trotted for the fence, climbed over it, and quickly grabbed her things. Maverick watched her go.

He’d been decisively punted into the friend zone. A place of doom. A place of no return, and not at all the satisfying happy ending he’d been working to secure.

CHAPTER TWELVE



JETTA

Jetta's jaw went slack, and crumbs of the spritz cookie she'd been sampling at Mary's request tumbled out of her mouth and down her chest. "Excuse me? You want me to do what?"

"I need you to go try on my wedding dress. It's the final fitting today," Darby said, speaking each syllable slower than she had when she'd rushed into the kitchen and had been dangerously close to an emotional meltdown. "I accidentally double-booked myself. Sterling and I are having a taste test for the reception dinner at the same time, and you're the one who is closest to my measurements. Mostly, it's to ensure sure the sleeves Harlow added lay right."

"Are you able to reschedule, dear?" Mary asked as she gingerly transferred her latest batch of cookies to a cooling rack. Even though everyone else was decorated for Halloween, and Mary had tried to restrain herself by putting out jack-o'-lanterns and a cheerful scarecrow by the front door, she was already gearing up for Christmas. Her cookies were swirls of red and green, accented with tiny pebbles of colorful sprinkles. Jetta wasn't picky about which holiday's cookies she was eating—the spritz cookies were buttery and crispy and divine. "I'm sure everyone will be understanding."

“I can’t!” Fanning her face, Darby paced the kitchen trying to keep her tears corralled. “The caterer doesn’t have any other available slots because of all the other fall weddings. Plus, they need to put in the order for food for us by tonight. Then, I’ve already rescheduled twice with the seamstress. Harlow might strangle me with my veil if I try again.”

With Darby’s tears on the verge of flooding over her crumbling dam of self-control, Jetta agreed to be her savior. “It’s fine. I can go. As long as it’s not bad luck, mind you.”

Darby froze. “I’ve never heard of any old wife’s tales about another woman trying on your wedding dress. Have you, Mary?”

“Pish posh. Those sorts of superstitions are outdated. If having your best friend try on your wedding dress is bad luck, then I would have been cursed a long time ago. I let my sisters, my cousin, and a couple of my friends try mine on. It’s fun pretending it’s your big day!” Mary chortled and bumped Darby with her hip. “What’s more important, your marriage will be magnificent. The wedding beforehand is just a reason for the rest of us to have fun with you.”

“You’re right.” Darby’s rising anxiety deflated, and she produced a relieved grin. “I’m way overthinking this. It’s not like I’m asking you to pick *out* my wedding dress. I just need you to make sure the alterations look alright.”

Jetta snatched a spritz Christmas tree and ate it in one bite. They were terribly addictive, and if she was Santa Claus, she’d want a whole plate of them at every house. “When do you need me there?”

“In thirty minutes.”

Jetta checked her watch. “Alright. I needed to run into town, anyway. I’m running low on my supply of ultramarine blue.”

Blue. The word alone snapped her mind to attention, and it made a million instantaneous connections that landed her thoughts on Maverick. It was no surprise. After her private lassoing session with him, she’d felt a connection that she couldn’t deny. Not that it was necessary because of anything

he'd done. Maverick had been a perfect gentleman and an even better friend. That kind of behavior both thrilled and terrified her. Was she ready to fall for someone again? Especially with a man who'd been hurt in the past by the very betrayal she'd been involved in with someone else?

If it was a purely physical attraction, her body knew what it wanted. Her lips tingled and her pulse intensified whenever she thought about how close she had been to kissing him. Twice. The slow burn drove her crazy, and there were times she had a mind to march out to his house in the evening's cool to let herself have at it. Even with that primal reaction, she knew she wanted more—she wanted an unquestionable friendship, a strong emotional bond, and complete trust if she was ever to love again. Chuck couldn't give her that, and because of it, she had been left wondering if there truly was anyone who'd be willing to sacrifice it all for a relationship with her. Maybe Maverick was just being kind and Jetta was reading far too much into their involvement.

With impeccable timing, Maverick strolled into the kitchen, and the heavens parted. All he was missing was a halo.

"More cookies?" he asked Mary, though his eyes were on Jetta. "I thought Peppermint Hollow would've run out of butter and sugar by now."

Mary slid the tea towel off her shoulder and slung it at him. He nimbly danced out of the way. "Who are you to complain about me making cookies? I'm fairly certain you eat more than the guests do."

"You can't prove anything," Maverick smirked. His eyes found Jetta again, and he winked. It was such an insignificant gesture that it might have seemed like nothing, except it was like sharing a secret with him. Jetta warmed from the inside out until she was sure her face was the color of boiled beets. "Nick said you needed me, Mary?"

"Me?" She pushed her glasses up her nose and flicked her long, silvery braid to her back. "Nope. Nick must've been mistaken. Unless you're wanting to help finish the cookies, there's no reason I need you here."

“Huh.” With a quick shrug, the misunderstanding was past. “Well, I have to run to town to get some barbed staples and a couple tensioners. We had a tree down on the fence line and it ripped every line of wire off of six posts straight.”

“Must’ve been a massive tree,” Mary said as she put another pan of cookies in the oven. “Jetta here needs to run an errand, too.”

Darby brightened with a gasp and clasped her hands. “Why don’t you two go together? Harlow’s been trying to get you to come in and try on your tux, anyway, and Jetta’s helping me with my dress.”

A lazy smile extended on Maverick’s face, and Jetta thought she knew why. Something fishy was going on, and very possibly Mary and Darby had coordinated this whole thing to get Maverick and Jetta to spend more time together.

Not that Jetta was going to refuse a fortuitous opportunity.

“I’d be happy to go with Jetta.” He held out his elbow for her to take. Was this for real? A hot guy with manners *and* an eye singly on her? “She can tell me what she thinks of me in a tux.”

“Are you trying it on with and without a cowboy hat?” Jetta asked.

The intensity of Maverick’s eyes sent a shiver through Jetta. “If you want me to. I happen to have one in the truck.”

“I insist. There’s something extra about a cowboy in a tux.” She slid her hand through his arm, feeling the curve of his muscles with her fingertips. She kissed her restraint goodbye and allowed her enjoyment. “Shall we?”

“We’re off,” Maverick said to Mary and Darby. “We’ll let you know how everything goes.”

They walked arm in arm out the back door where Maverick’s burly truck had been parked. Taking his keys out, he tossed them twice before dangling them for Jetta like catnip in front of a kitten. “You want to drive?”

“Me? That monster truck?”

“Yeah. It’s part of the farm experience. You’ve lassoed, gone on a trail ride with Darby and Sterling, done some farm chores —”

Jetta groaned. “I’m never helping Cooper and Porter ever again. They asked if I wanted to have fun, and that somehow translated to unloading half a ton of feed bags into a grain hopper. My arms were jello for a week, and I sneezed just as long.”

Maverick laughed. “They like to upsell hard work for more than it actually is, which is plain hard work.”

“It is satisfying, though I wouldn’t call it fun.”

“Exactly.” The keys rang like tiny bells as Maverick shook them again. “So? I promise driving a truck is more enjoyable than unloading grain.”

“Alright.” Jetta snatched the keys, and Maverick guided her to the driver’s side where he opened the door for her. “I’ll take you up on trying out your macho truck. Thank you.”

He shut the door and jogged to the passenger side, giving Jetta a half a second to check that she didn’t have cookies in her teeth or crumbs on her lips, and run her fingers through her hair before he climbed in. When she turned the keys, the truck readily roared to life with a guttural growl, and immediately, Jetta knew she was going to like this. The power she maintained with minimal control was exhilarating. Being confined with Maverick and his potent, alluring scent was a hearty bonus.

They talked little on the way to town. Their other senses were already on overload, and Jetta for one had no qualms with the silence. In town, the population of Peppermint Hollow had been steadily increasing since the first week of October, with Christmas lovers coming for their early holiday fix. Jetta had never considered herself especially sentimental about the season, but something about the quaint town and living at Peppermint Hollow Ranch were getting to her. Or maybe it was Maverick. He was helping her live with Christmas joy in her heart all year long.

She grinned at her own campiness as she pulled into a parking spot by the alteration shop. “Don’t forget to bring your hat. I’m serious about wanting to compare you with and without it.”

“What the lady wants, the lady gets.” Stepping out of the truck, Maverick twirled the hat around his finger and pressed it atop his head.

With the hat. Definitely with the hat.

Maverick held the door for Jetta, and inside, the shop was quiet compared to the outside activity of window shoppers and sightseers. Though organized, the space was brim-full of all sorts of clothing, from vibrant and glittering formal wear to pearly white wedding dresses to designer jeans. An adorable dress that looked like Mrs. Claus herself would wear to a formal ball was displayed in the window with a small sign letting passersby know it was handmade by Harlow. Jetta hadn’t met Harlow yet, but she’d heard Harlow once worked in the movie industry out in California until seeking the solace of a more manageable pace of life in Peppermint Hollow. By the sheer volume of clothing items in her shop, she had yet to slow down.

“Harlow?” Maverick’s rich voice filled the space, and a woman’s head poked up from behind a rack of clothing.

“Maverick? You here to try on your tux?” she asked, looking at him above the rims of her oversized glasses, and he nodded. “I thought I was going to have to slog all the way out to your place to get you in it. There are the boonies, then there’s *your* neck of the woods.”

“My apologies.” Maverick grinned, though it made him look like a boy who knew he was being a stinker, but also knew how cute everyone thought he was. “Suits make me uncomfortable, so I haven’t been especially eager to put one on.”

“Not mine. You’ll want to round up cattle in it, it’s so comfy. I promise it’ll fit you like a silk glove.” Harlow’s glimmering green eyes shifted to Jetta. “You brought a date who’ll reassure you that you look good in your tux. Nice.”

The pitch of Jetta's voice scaled an octave in an instant. "Not a date."

"Just friends," Maverick concurred.

Why wasn't he flustered by Harlow's accusation? Because he *wanted* this to be a date? Jetta denied the romantic side of herself and stuck with reliable, sensible logic. They were friends. That was it. That was close enough. As much for Jetta's sake as for Maverick's safety. Little did he know about her ability to ruin things.

"Actually, I'm here as a stand-in for Darby," Jetta said after clearing her throat.

Harlow rolled her eyes. "She double-booked herself? Again?"

The weight of the question was reduced when Jetta noticed Harlow's mouth twitching with a repressed smile. Jetta reciprocated. "She's finalizing the reception dinner meal. She wanted me to make sure the sleeves you added looked good. Otherwise, we're about the same proportions."

"I don't care if Darby sends in a greased pig at this point. If Darby trusts you for the last try on, then so do I. Here." Harlow stood from the stool where she'd been hemming the seam of what looked like a periwinkle-blue fairy godmother dress, and moved to a rack of finished items. Selecting the two she needed, she handed one to Maverick, the other to Jetta. "The changing rooms are in the back. And before you complain about the walls being too short, I'm not the one who installed them fifty years ago. People were a lot shorter back then, and I'm making do with them until I have time to swap them out. M'kay?"

Maverick and Jetta exchanged a confused look, but held their questions. Filing to the back of the shop, they found the changing rooms where they were told they'd be. Harlow hadn't been exaggerating. The walls only came up to Jetta's chin. Standing inside hers, Jetta could still see the top of Maverick's shoulders and up. He'd have to change on his knees to hide his bare torso if he wanted complete privacy.

Something about the crooked smile on his face suggested he wouldn't be kneeling.

"Should we change with our backs to each other?" Jetta suggested.

"It'd probably be the decent thing to do."

Jetta didn't miss the lightning fast dip of his eyes. He couldn't see through the solid walls of the changing room, but that wasn't stopping him from imagining it. Heat emanated from her chest while a shiver ran rampant. The smile on his lips turned lazy. Dangerous.

And she liked it.

Maverick turned first, unzipping the bag protecting his tux. Jetta turned, too. Her heart was still racing as she moved with trembling fingers to unzip Darby's wedding dress garment bag. She couldn't see him, but that didn't halt the sounds she could hear coming from his changing area. The clink and slide of leather and metal as his belt was unloosened. The drop of heavy denim as his jeans hit the ground. The slide of cotton against skin as he pulled his t-shirt over his head.

As Jetta carefully stepped into Darby's wedding dress, she couldn't resist the urge to sneak a peek over her shoulder at Maverick. She watched the curves of his shoulder muscles over the walls, and the way his unruly, dark hair curled around his neck and along his ears. She'd seen him shirtless before when they'd met for the second time in the barn. It was different then. Jetta thought Maverick was a grouchy cowboy not worth her time. How wrong she'd been.

"See something you like?"

Maverick's question startled Jetta. She blinked and let her mouth fall open. The final condemnation was the scorch of her cheeks. She'd been caught ogling.

"I need help getting zipped." She gestured over her shoulder, as if Maverick wouldn't be able to figure out where the zipper might be. It was both a cover-up and a truth.

"Give me one more second." Maverick drew on a crisp white shirt, and with each button, the magnificence of his

chest was hidden. “Could they make these buttons any smaller?”

Jetta laughed, but it was airy, further incriminating her. While she waited for Maverick, she turned around again, busying herself with trying to pull the zipper up on her own. The dress Darby had selected was an elegant and timeless satin gown the color of pearls. The sleeves Harlow had added looked like they’d always been a part of the dress, though there wasn’t a lot of stretch to the material. Jetta’s arms were flexible enough that when wearing a tank top, she could easily clasp her hands between her shoulder blades. Unfortunately, the unyielding material protested and ripped right under her left armpit.

“Sounds like you should have waited for help.” Maverick was leaning over the top of her changing area, his chin resting on top of the wall. “Open up, and I’ll get you zipped up.”

“I ripped Darby’s wedding dress!” A rush of tears made her eyes sting. “She’s going to demote me from Maid of Honor.”

“I doubt there’s a better time or place to rip a wedding dress than at Harlow’s.” Maverick rapped a knuckle on the stall door. “Knock, knock. Anyone there?”

Reluctantly, Jetta opened the door. Maverick pushed it open, and immediately, Jetta’s trepidation evaporated. *Poof!* Seeing the entirety of Maverick in his tux—even without his cowboy hat—made Jetta’s heart stutter and trip over itself. He might not like getting dressed up for formal occasions, but he looked magnificent.

“You look...” Jetta licked her lips to give her tongue something to do while she thought of an appropriate word to describe him. One that wouldn’t make her sound desperate, like she’d never seen a well-dressed man before, nor one that would make her sound calloused and lackadaisical. “Good.”

If that was the best she could come up with, she was definitely going to struggle at Darby and Sterling’s wedding when she was going to be near Maverick in that suit all day.

Maverick's brain seemed to run into the same trouble hers had, only he didn't need to say anything. Jetta could read what he was thinking all over his face. He liked the look of her in Darby's wedding gown.

"You're beautiful," he murmured, his voice delightfully husky.

"Thanks."

They stared a moment more before Jetta turned around, exposing her back and the zipper she'd failed to pull up. "Help please?"

Maverick stepped inside the changing area. Jetta stared straight ahead, but could feel the palpable electricity in the air. His warm breath on her neck made goosebumps run rampant, and as his fingers brushed delicately against her skin while he drew up the zipper, she couldn't suppress the quickest shiver. His touch was a gratifying sort of torture.

"There." Maverick retreated, holding out his hand. "Come on. Let's show her the damage."

Jetta placed her fingers on his palm and relished the feeling as his hand closed around hers. It was the physical manifestation of feeling safe.

Maverick wound around the clothing racks and helped Jetta step onto a fitting platform for Harlow to look. Jetta showed her the ripped seam, trying to apologize as Harlow waved away her words with a swat of her hand.

"Better it happens now than when Darby's trying to throw her bouquet, right?" Harlow said as she walked around Jetta, meticulously inspecting her work. "Just maybe don't mention it to Darby."

"Why not?" Jetta asked.

"Ripping a bridal dress is supposed to be bad luck," Harlow said with pins between her lips. "It's an omen that the bride might fall ill and die or something."

After Jetta's initial surprise, Maverick barked out a laugh. "We *definitely* won't tell her. Darby's bordering on neurotic as

it is.”

“Smart choice,” Harlow agreed.

When she was satisfied that everything was just right, and once again reassured Jetta that the ripped seam would take less than five minutes to repair, Harlow ushered Maverick onto the platform.

“You’d better be careful, Maverick, or you’re going to be breaking more than a few hearts this Christmas,” Harlow said, walking slowly around him.

When Maverick reached for his cowboy hat and plunked it on his head, Jetta succumbed to an immediate swoon that was minimized by the plush chair she was sitting in.

“Actually,” Maverick’s eyes swept to Jetta, “Jetta and I think Mary, Amelia, and Darby are in cahoots.”

Harlow knelt down to tuck a pin into the hem of his pants. “To do what?”

“To set Jetta and me up.”

The way Maverick said it was so relaxed that Jetta might have believed he liked the idea. He had been polite and thoughtful since they’d been open with one another, but he hadn’t made a move that would suggest he was interested in anything stronger than a safe, platonic friendship with Jetta. That nagging thought weighed on her. It wasn’t what she wanted, but if it’s what he was comfortable with, then Jetta would respect that.

“You know what I think?” Harlow asked, twirling her finger to indicate Maverick should turn.

Maverick turned on the fitting platform as she instructed. “What’s that?”

“I think you two would make an adorable couple. Everyone knows how much Peppermint Hollow loves a Christmas romance.” Harlow looked between Jetta and Maverick. “Maybe you ought to give them something to talk about.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



MAVERICK

Maverick watched over the heads of people mulling around, waiting for Jetta to make an appearance. After trying on the wedding attire—Maverick in the suit he would wear as he supported Sterling, and Jetta in another woman’s wedding dress that she made look ravishing—they’d agreed to meet on Main Street by the bakery after running their separate errands.

With some intuitive pull on him, Maverick looked to the right just as Jetta turned the corner. Serendipity was thick as the crowded street seemed to clear of other pedestrians and it allowed Jetta an unobstructed smile at him from a block away. She was pulled toward him, rushing with hurried steps to where he stood.

“Miss me?” she asked, linking her arm through his without him having to offer.

She knew how to catch him off-guard with her proximity, and for a moment, words seemed too high of a brain function for him. Smiling devilishly to give himself a second to answer, he bent low to her ear for his answer. “I knew you’d come around.”

Maverick considered it a win every time he noticed a physical reaction in Jetta. A shiver. Goosebumps. Color in her

cheeks. Most of the time, she tried to hide it from him. It was futile. He was playing the same game, though he doubted Jetta missed how his jaw went slack or how his pupils dilated to saucers as his eyes greedily gobbled her up. They were dancing around what appeared to be obvious to everyone else.

Still not entirely certain where they stood, aside from their mutual attraction, Maverick tried to keep things light between them. When the moment presented itself, he'd take it. Then, there'd be no question about how to define their relationship. Hopefully, they would slide seamlessly into something more significant. Friends, yes, but also partners, confidants... lovers? For the first time since bitterness about love because of his father's betrayal had planted a seed in his heart, Maverick wasn't afraid of the thought of giving his whole heart away.

Not to Jetta.

"Pastry?" He held up a white paper bag with two oversized cream cheese Danishes.

"Does Santa live in the North Pole?"

"Supposedly. Although it could be argued he and Mrs. Claus might live right here in Peppermint Hollow. Nick and Mary are awfully convincing, especially when they're in their costumes."

Jetta was in the middle of an enthusiastic bite of her Danish. "I've seen pictures of them in their getup. They do look like the real deal. I hear they have elves accompanying them and everything."

Her eyes slid over to him, and she started giggling. He'd been hoping Jetta would forget about Maverick's costumes by Christmas, but Jetta stored interesting facts the way a squirrel buried acorns. She'd never let him live down his Elven past.

Maverick groaned. "Did she show you pictures of me in an elf costume?"

"Tights and everything." Jetta covered her mouth and giggled. "I have no idea how you squeezed into them."

"Leggings. *Not* tights. There's a difference, remember?"

“Oh, I don’t know. They were awfully *tight* leggings.”

“Still pants.” Since they didn’t have any place in particular to go after they finished their errands, they lazily strolled arm in arm around Peppermint Hollow. Most of the shops had their Christmas displays up since Halloween had come and gone the week previous, and it was a sight to behold. “Did you find the art supplies you needed?”

“Yep. I probably have enough ultramarine to last me the rest of my natural born life.”

“Can never have enough blue, right?”

“Nope.”

Jetta finished her pastry and licked the final few flakes off her fingertips, then ran her tongue around her lips to make sure she got it all. Maverick nearly groaned. Did she know what she was doing to him? If she didn’t, he was going to have to figure out a way to confess. He wasn’t sure how much longer he could resist kissing her. Once he started, there was no telling if he’d ever come up to the surface.

“Oh!” Jetta sucked in an excited gasp. “I forgot to tell you. That huge landscaping painting I started when I first got here? It sold!”

Maverick grinned, enthused by her success. “Congrats. That’s something worth celebrating.”

“I know.” Jetta grasped his arm like it was the lifesaver holding her up in a turbulent sea. “I almost fell over when the gallery owner told me.”

“She mention who bought it?”

Jetta shook her head, and her brunette hair swiped at her collarbone. It had grown two inches since Maverick had thrown his sweaty shirt at her. Either her hair grew fast, or she’d been in Peppermint Hollow for a while. He liked the thought of that. “Nope. Only that they’d paid the asking price and wanted to remain anonymous. Crazy, right?”

“I don’t think so. There’s obviously plenty of demand for your art here. Look at all the other paintings you’ve sold.”

“Yeah, but are people really buying it because they like *my* paintings, or are they buying because it’s a souvenir of an adorable town? There is a difference.”

Maverick stopped Jetta and took both her hands in his, ducking slightly to meet her lovely brown eyes. “Don’t undersell your artwork. It’s unique and interesting, and some of the most breathtaking paintings I’ve seen in a long time. You know that’s saying something. I’ve seen a lot of paintings in my life.”

“You don’t have to be nice to spare my feelings. I can’t grow if I can’t handle the criticism.”

“And you know I’d be blunt with you if it warranted it. Remember my comment about the shade of green you’d chosen? I’m a straight shooter when I need to be. So what if your art wasn’t selling in New York? The value of your work isn’t conditional on whether people there understood and appreciated it. It’s no less important if you find your niche outside of a populous city of people who think a wad of chewing gum on a blank canvas would pass as art.”

Jetta’s eyes roved around his face, studying his features like he was a conundrum. Maverick held still and let her look because he was doing the same thing.

“Thank you. I appreciate your comment, then.” Jetta tightened her hold on his fingers. “You know what I should really do is paint a few pieces for your place. It could use some sprucing up.”

“What’s wrong with my place?”

Jetta seesawed her head side to side. “I know I’ve only visited once... the outside was lovely, with all the flowers bursting with color, but the inside...?”

“Yeah?”

“It was boring. Like, painfully stark white, bland. I might have to paint an entire mural on your wall to liven up the place. If I didn’t know you lived there, I wouldn’t have been able to figure it out with your lack of personal design. I’m a

firm believer that a living space should reflect whoever's living there."

"Wow. Tell me how you really feel."

Jetta pressed her free hand to her forehead. "I'm sorry if I'm being rude. I guess I'm trying to tell you that if you want some help decorating, I'd be happy to help. A couple of bright and bold paintings would do wonders."

"Alright." Maverick nodded, intrigued by her offer. "There's no expectation that you'll do it for free, though. You should be compensated for your work."

"Are you going to teach me how to shoot a pistol while galloping a horse, John Wayne style? Or give me a week's worth of foot rubs and shoulder massages? Sometimes my neck gets a huge kink in it while I'm painting. Right here."

She moved her lightweight sweater aside and pointed to a spot that Maverick had previously noticed looked extra kissable. The skin was especially silky on that slope of her neck.

"Name your price," Maverick said. "I'll pay in full."

Jetta grinned, as if reading his mind and all the ways he would show his appreciation. "Deal."

They continued to meander, content in one another's company. It hadn't been expressly agreed upon, but the unhurried stroll felt like a date. Not a first one, with jittery nerves and undefined expectations, but a twentieth date, when both parties knew where they stood. It was comforting to get a glimpse of what might be with Jetta. If he had the patience and the boldness, they might actually be paired off before Christmas.

"Can I ask you something?" Jetta said when they stopped in front of a fiber arts store to appreciate the tiny needle felted animals in the Christmas display.

"Shoot."

She nibbled her lower lip, dithering in her resolve to speak her mind. Then, she let out a short, forceful breath. "What do

you think of Darby and Sterling getting married?”

Maverick hadn't expected that to be her question. From what he'd observed, Jetta and Darby were as close as good friends could be. Almost more like sisters. Was she something other than thrilled for Darby? “I'm happy for them. Darby's been good for Sterling by helping him figure out what he wants out of life, and Sterling worships the ground she walks on. Why?”

“I don't know...” Jetta stopped herself, staring intently at the window display. “I think I'm... I think I'm jealous. There.” She huffed at her confession. “I said it aloud.”

Wrapping her hand securely in his, he tugged her into a stroll. His brain seemed to work better when his body was moving. “Why are you jealous? Do you have feelings for Sterling I should know about?”

“No!” She balked at his joke. “It's not that. It's so stupid.”

She massaged her temples, hiding her shame while kneading out the headache that appeared to be forming.

“I doubt it. Go on. Explain. I won't say anything until you're done talking.”

Maverick tightened his grip, hoping she'd understand it was his way of demonstrating she was in safe company. When she smiled at him through the tears shining in her eyes, he knew she understood.

“It took me a while to understand what the dark, aching cavern in my chest was. Jealousy is the last thing I thought I'd feel for her, but it's definitely taken up residence. Honestly, it's not really even about her. I'm envious of Darby for what she has. If you need any reassurances, I don't want Sterling. She can keep him because they're so utterly perfect together. But I want what they have together. A stable, loving relationship. Hope and excitement for what the future might bring. No secrets.” Her breath hitched. “No shame for how I've become the person I am today.”

Maverick turned Jetta to face him near a toy shop that had Christmas music playing through the outside facing speakers.

It all was a reminder of everything special at this time of year. The abundance of goodness everywhere he looked. People's generous giving, and the hope of a brighter tomorrow. All of it was amplified whenever he was with her.

"Jetta," he said, "I think if anyone deserved all the good things coming to them, it'd definitely be you. You're hardworking and fun. You have an incredible eye for beauty, and you'd sacrifice everything you have for the people you love."

"I feel like you're putting me on a pedestal."

"Did you or did you not spend an hour trying on your friend's wedding dress when you could have been doing a hundred other things? Did you offer to decorate my house for me? Do you laugh at Cooper and Porter's lame jokes?" With downcast eyes, Jetta looked away from Maverick. There was no argument from her, though he knew she wasn't a hundred percent convinced. "Unfortunately, being good and having good showering down doesn't always coincide. For whatever reason, sometimes the blessings for what might be owed us are delayed."

"What if I'm not as good as you think I am?"

"I have a hard time imagining you as anything but saintly." He winked, and she swatted at him with a miniscule smile that couldn't quite reach the sadness still embedded in her eyes.

"Trust me, I'm no angel."

"I bet you're better than most. At least give yourself credit for that."

Jetta stared at their interlocked hands. He could almost see the battle raging in her head. Pull away and retreat or lean on Maverick. He wanted to be part of her life. She already felt as necessary as breathing to him, but if she wasn't willing to take a risk on him, it wouldn't matter how much he wanted her.

"Maverick, if you only knew..."

"Knew what? That you're as amazing as I know you are? How you became the person here today is sort of irrelevant, if you ask me. We weren't in each other's pasts, but we're here

together now. You are incredible because you've stumbled, gotten back up, and kept fighting. Maybe it's time to let go of the parts of your past that cause you pain. You can remember those stories, except you should shed the guilt and shame you've convinced yourself you should carry for making mistakes. It's definitely not the reason why you haven't made it to where Darby's at. For that, you have to meet the right guy at the right time. Sometimes it happens right away. Other times, love unfolds like a flower. It'll happen, though it can't be rushed."

Maverick's heart was unprotected as Jetta processed everything he'd said. He'd laid it out for her to decide for herself, and he couldn't—wouldn't—force her to jump to the conclusion he wanted. It wouldn't be genuine, and it'd be stealing her right to choose whomever she wanted. If it wasn't Maverick, he hoped he was strong enough for Jetta's sake to be happy for her.

"Thank you." She swiped at her cheek as a crystalline tear plummeted to the sidewalk. "I know what you're saying is right, though I sometimes struggle to accept it as truth. Nobody's perfect."

Maverick could have waxed further poetic about how perfect Jetta was, but he refrained. This wasn't exactly the right moment. Not with an audience of bystanders. He reminded himself to be patient. The time would come.

He *hoped* it would come.

Maybe, if nothing had happened by Christmas, he'd find a way to wrap up his feelings for her. Maverick couldn't think of anything more perfect than telling the woman he loved exactly how much he felt for her. It's what she wanted, wasn't it?

A sweeping gust of wind stirred the scattered, fallen leaves into the air, bringing with it a coolness to the air that had only felt like an impossible memory during the scorching summer months.

Jetta let go of his hand and hugged her arms around herself. "Wow. That wind has a chilly bite to it. I didn't dress for such a sudden change in weather."

His hand felt empty without hers in it, so he busied it with fishing the keys out of his pants pocket. “That’s Indiana for you. One day it’ll be blistering, the next we could have snow.”

“Serious?”

“Yep. Sorry I don’t have a jacket to offer you.”

“It’s not that bad. I’m a lot tougher than I look.”

“I believe it.” Another gust of wind was strong enough to knock over the sign in front of the hair salon across the street. “I think autumn finally showed up. Ready to head back and *not* tell Darby you ripped her dress?”

She moaned and hid her face in her hands. “Let’s pretend it never happened.”

“Alright.” He mimed zipping his lips. “It’s our little secret.”

“Good.” She held out her hand, motioning to where they’d left the truck. “Let’s go before we get caught in one of these mythical Indiana blizzards.”

They ran hand in hand, dodging other pedestrians who were escaping the weather by ducking into the Main Street shops. Jetta insisted he drive home, and he opened the passenger door for her to climb inside. Both of them grinned like children waiting for Santa Claus to show up, all the way back to the ranch as they laughed and joked with each other. They’d had a breakthrough of sorts, and it lifted the nebulous cloud of worry that’d been hanging over Maverick. It’d been stubbornly refusing to budge since he could admit to himself that he had feelings for Jetta. Sentiments miles beyond friendly. Sometimes, it still scared him. Made his mouth go dry and his usually strong body quiver. Her presence hadn’t totally erased the pain of his upbringing, though it had muted it. Maverick pushed aside thoughts that it all might end the way it had for his parents. Lightning didn’t strike in the same place twice.

“That was a lot more fun than I expected,” Jetta said, kicking off her shoes in the lodge’s mudroom. She froze. “That wasn’t to imply I thought that going with you wouldn’t be enjoyable. I was apprehensive about trying on Darby’s dress for her.”

A slow grin elevated the corners of his mouth. “Understandable. I’ve never had so much fun picking up barbed staples and tensioners before, either.”

Quiet slid in between them, an unwanted barrier to their progress. A hurdle to the next step. Would things always be so halting? One minute, comfortable, the next, at a crossroad? Jetta motioned over her shoulder. “I should go tell Darby that the dress looks fantastic.”

He nodded. Was this how it all ended? One more casual goodbye? Another day gone where he bridled what he truly wanted to say? As far as he could tell, Christmas was an eternity to wait.

While he was busy summoning the gallantry to act, Jetta made the first move. She stepped so close he could feel her warmth as she tucked herself next to him and slid her arms around his waist. It was entirely natural for his arms to loop around her, keeping her securely against his chest. His heart ticked rapidly, nearly breaking the confines of his ribcage, and if he wasn’t mistaken, he could feel the same rapid pace of Jetta’s.

Her face was turned toward his, voluntarily open. Cautiously, she moved a hand to the back of his neck, drawing him to her lips. He willingly obliged.

The instant their mouths touched, fireworks detonated within Maverick. Sparks whizzed and screeched before exploding spectacularly where his heart was still pounding. Everything he had imagined a kiss with Jetta might be was blown away.

The kiss itself was chaste, barely lasting more than a few seconds before Jetta drew away. She stared at him with big, round eyes. The remnants of sun was the only light in the room, and it cast a soft, romantic glow across Jetta. Though Maverick didn’t live in the lodge, it had all the hallmarks of a cozy home. Maverick could just as easily see himself kissing Jetta in his kitchen or porch or living room as he could there. It was a perfect first kiss.

It was their moment.

“Sorry if I sprung myself on you.” Jetta’s cheeks were burnished and scarlett. He hoped it wasn’t from embarrassment. There was no shame in a kiss that powerful.

Only one word came to Maverick’s mind through the continued glittering explosions sending streaks of electricity through him. “Wow.”

When Jetta smiled and leaned into him, tilting her chin to make her mouth available for more, Maverick could hardly resist.

At first, the kiss was an equivalent intensity as their first. Longing and deep, but slow. An expedition into uncharted territory. Emboldened by their mutual passion, it quickly became an exhilarating adventure. Maverick’s hand roved along her back while the other cupped her cheek. Her fingers migrated from his shoulders to his hair, and he swore to himself he would never change the length of his hairstyle. The way her fingers tangled through it made his scalp tingle.

Then there was her mouth. It was hot and sweet and breathy. With every movement, Maverick could feel her soul being poured into the embrace. Everything they hadn’t been able to say to each other was communicated unmistakably, and without a single syllable uttered.

A small moan emanated from Maverick’s throat.

Scratch that. *One* syllable.

They might’ve continued indefinitely if the sound of footsteps from the kitchen hallway didn’t alert them to someone’s approach. Jetta jumped away first, tucking her hair behind her ears. If she was trying to hide her guilty pleasure, she was doing a terrible job of it. Maverick couldn’t help but chuckle as he casually reached for the bucket of barbed staples and the sack of tensioners. Right as he settled his oilskin hat on his head, Cooper rounded the corner.

“There you are.” Cooper narrowed his eyes at Maverick. “We’ve been waiting hours for you to come back with that fencing stuff. Had to move the cattle out of the pasture because they wouldn’t leave the downed fence alone.”

“Sorry.” *Lies*. Maverick wasn’t sorry. It was all a formality for Cooper. “I was asked to take care of a few more things while in town.”

Cooper’s eyes flicked to Jetta. Her body tensed, and Maverick wanted to laugh again. If she ever did anything wrong, she’d probably melt into a puddle at even the hint of a suspicion. Her attempt at innocence was obviously a ruse. “Maverick and I were discussing whether you men should wear your cowboy hats with your tuxedos for Sterling and Darby’s wedding. I think you should. Don’t you?”

The wary look he gave Jetta suggested he knew something was going on, but he couldn’t put his finger on what. “Either way would be fine with me.”

“Here’s what we need.” Maverick held the supplies out for Cooper to take. He needed to get rid of him so he could finish properly wishing Jetta a good night. “I’ll be at the barn in a second to help.”

Grumbling under his breath, Cooper took the bucket and bag, and stomped out the back door, letting a cold gust of wind in with him as he left.

“I guess I’d better go help—”

Jetta grabbed two fistfuls of his shirt and greedily pulled Maverick in for more. She was burning with passion as fervently as he was, and Maverick didn’t mind one bit that she was confident enough to take the wheel. She was welcome to take them wherever she wanted to go anytime she liked.

Everything was a blur. There were eternities in each second, while time raced onward. When had his hat been knocked off? Had he ever felt complete without this incredible woman in his arms? Happiness bordering on giddiness swept through him as he nibbled on Jetta’s earlobe. She squealed, and somewhere in the main lodge, loud laughter from a group of people reminded them they weren’t alone. There was no shame in two adults enjoying a thorough make-out session, but Maverick preferred to keep those exploits away from prying eyes.

Reluctantly, he withdrew from Jetta. Barely able to keep his lips to himself, he kissed her once more on the crown of her head.

“I hate my job right now,” he whispered, panting as he caught his breath. “If I worked at a regular office job, I’d be off the clock.”

“Not gonna lie, so do I. Want to do breakfast tomorrow?”

“If I can wait that long.”

Walking backward toward the hallway connecting the mudroom and the kitchen, he didn’t want to give up even a second of looking at her while he was blessed to be in her proximity. “See you later.”

“Bye.”

Maverick grinned so hard his cheeks hurt as he hurried to the front door. The day had ended even better than he imagined it was possible, in part because Jetta was infinitely more amazing than he supposed. He should have known she was. There had been hints of it all along, from the way her emotions coursed so close to the surface, to the passion that manifested in her art. She might be painting landscapes that were based on very real locations, but to see them through her eyes was to experience magic.

His stomach growled as he walked through the kitchen. Most of the food had been taken out to the dining room for the lodge’s guests, and though it smelled like Mary had recreated Christmas morning in a single afternoon, it was muted compared to what he’d just experienced. Nothing would ever taste or smell or feel as good as Jetta ever again.

About to push through to the dining room, excuse himself for interrupting on the way to the front door, Maverick remembered he’d parked behind the lodge. Sure, he could walk around from the front to the rear as easily as he could retrace his steps, except returning through the mudroom would give him one more excuse to see Jetta.

It wouldn’t be a crime to steal one more kiss. Cooper and Porter could fix the fence without him...

Maverick found Jetta exactly where he'd left her. Her fingers were delicately tracing her lips, and she appeared deep in thought. When he walked back in, she snapped out of her reverie. Wordlessly, they were pulled together by pure gravity. Again, their lips crashed together, and their bodies tangled around one another until Maverick wasn't sure where he ended and Jetta began. He could hardly believe he'd almost missed this experience entirely because he'd thought shunning love was better than the risk. Yes, it had the power to crush people when it went terribly wrong. Conversely, it could heal and magnify and elevate two people to resplendent heights.

"I just remembered I parked out back," Maverick murmured against Jetta's lips.

She kissed a trail along his jawline to his collarbone and back up to his mouth. "I wondered why you went that way."

By the time they regained their composure, Maverick experienced what he imagined a marathoner felt when they crossed the finish line—exhausted, but exhilarated. Twilight was settling firmly over the horizon outside, and again, he wondered if the virtues of a nine-to-five desk job was so couples had the benefit of an evening with no interruptions.

"Cooper's waiting for you." Jetta rested her head against his chest, listening to his heartbeats.

"Probably Porter, too."

"Right." Jetta sighed contentedly. Maverick enjoyed knowing he'd contributed to her happiness. "Do you think Harlow was right?"

"About what? That ripping Darby's dress was no big deal? Yeah. She'll have it fixed and double reinforced in no time."

"Not that," Jetta said, giggling softly. "About Mary, Amelia, and Darby? About everyone who's been meddling... that we should give them something to talk about?"

"I don't see why not."

"Me neither. I'm not exactly unhappy with them being nosy if this is what I get."

“Agreed.” Maverick stepped toward the door, but not before he pressed his lips to her knuckles. “If they wanted a love story, let’s make sure they get what they asked for.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



JETTA

“Can you believe I’m getting married in two days?” Darby did a jig in the middle of Amelia’s living room, demonstrating her level of excitement with uncoordinated flailing.

“Yes. That’s how time works.” Amelia threw popcorn at Darby. “You set a date, and time has marched forward to your big day. If the forecast is right, you’ll have a white wedding.”

Nori scoffed. “Don’t count on it. It’s like a fifteen percent chance there will be anything substantial. The snow that’s coming down now looks like it’s powder. It’s all blowing away.”

“Way to be a pessimist,” Amelia said. “Fresh powder snow is beautiful.”

“It’s pessimistic to hope Darby doesn’t have to deal with a blizzard?” Nori hugged a plush snowman pillow to her chest. “It might be pretty, but I for one don’t want to take wedding pictures in knee deep snow.”

Clara drew her knees into her chest as she nestled into the corner of the couch. Jetta noticed the faraway look in her eye, showing she wasn’t confined to the room anymore, and was

off on a mental daydream somewhere else. “I think a Christmas wedding would be so romantic.”

“Oh, gag. Not me,” Harlow said, reaching for a handful of popcorn from Amelia’s bowl. “I wouldn’t touch a winter wedding with a twenty-foot pole.”

“That’s because you already have a Christmas birthday,” Nori pointed out.

Harlow crunched on her popcorn a piece at a time. “No, I have a *December* birthday. I can’t help it if I dislike having to compete with Christmas for some attention.”

The girls’ night Amelia had agreed to host was in lieu of a bachelorette party Darby refused to have, pointing out that she’d already been married once, and some things she had no desire to repeat. It suited Jetta just fine to skip a raucous party somewhere in a nearby metropolis, far from Peppermint Hollow Ranch. Staying on the property meant there was a better chance of bumping into Maverick unexpectedly. Should she be so lucky, they might steal a kiss in an alcove, or find some peace and quiet in the barn after all the horses had been tucked in for the night. Jetta didn’t care where she got her time with Maverick so long as she got it.

Better than leaving things to chance, Jetta covertly fired off a text to him, asking where he was. A minute later, her phone dinged with his answer. He was already at home, having a late dinner. Despite the enjoyable evening she’d had with everyone, her spirits fell. Already, her hopes of stumbling across Maverick were dashed.

“I’m calling it a night.” Nori stood and stretched her back as crumbs of popcorn tumbled off her shirt.

The rest of the women complained, though Jetta saw an excuse to leave, too.

“You can’t leave already!” Amelia cried. “It’s barely even dark outside.”

Harlow stood to take Nori’s spot on the couch. “It’s dark all the time. It’s winter.”

“I need to go because I have an insanely early morning tomorrow. *Somebody* ordered enough flowers to sink the Titanic for their wedding.” With a pointed look, Nori at least silenced Darby. “Oddly enough, as often as I’ve procrastinated, they won’t arrange themselves.”

Nori’s reason gave her a pass without further protests. If Jetta was going to excuse herself, too, riding on Nori’s departure was an opportune moment.

“I have to get going, too,” Jetta announced.

Instead of whines and groans, the room went silent. Five sets of eyes turned to her with a full measure of curiosity. She didn’t have an excuse like Nori, and though they’d been together for three hours, the low-key bachelorette girls’ night was hardly over for the rest of them.

Jetta could almost hear whispers of their thoughts as they stared. Maverick and Jetta had kept their new relationship under wraps, agreeing it would be best to wait until after the wedding to drop that bombshell. They didn’t want to steal Darby and Sterling’s thunder. Plus, they weren’t entirely certain how they’d define their own relationship. Friends with kissing benefits seemed accurate, but disappointingly lacking. No, they were much more than that, except Jetta didn’t want to be accused of instalove. She had been very meticulous when allowing her heart to open up again, and so had Maverick.

“And why, pray tell, do *you* need to go?” Darby asked, her eyebrows slowly ratcheting higher. As her closest friend, Jetta knew Darby had her suspicions. Everyone probably did. What she and Maverick were would be revealed when they were both ready. “Any reason in particular?”

“I think I might be getting the cold that Porter’s been passing around to everyone,” Jetta said. Her throat *was* a touch dry, and she’d needed to reach for the tissues more than once that evening. Never mind that it was probably a product of the frigid air outside. Luckily, her little white lie worked exactly as she hoped it would.

Shooing her out of the room, Clara pulled her hoodie over her mouth as a makeshift mask. “Go on. Get. I’ve already had

two back-to-back colds this year from all the kindergarten germs, and I'm not celebrating Darby and Sterling's wedding by hacking up a lung."

Jetta twiddled her fingers goodbye to everyone, promising that she'd go right to her room to get some rest. The next day, Amelia had all hands on deck preparing for the wedding, and a cold wouldn't be an excuse not to be there.

Jetta promised she'd do as she was told while hiding her crossed fingers behind her back. After parting ways with Nori, who slowly drove away in the showering snow in her tiny Honda, Jetta went to her room, though she had no intention of going to bed. She'd been in town earlier that day to pick up her royalty check from the art gallery when she spied some items in a home decor store she knew Maverick had to have for his place. Jetta hadn't yet finished her paintings for him she had planned to give to him at Christmas. The rest of her offerings could have waited, too, except the day after the wedding, she was scheduled to leave on her month-long artistic sabbatical. She was looking forward to learning from some of the masters of her field, but she couldn't shake the sadness she experienced every time she thought about the time apart from Maverick. They'd only just begun and she was already leaving, if just for a few weeks.

That's where the justification to give Maverick the home decor bounty she'd found came into play. Maybe it would help remind him of her. The woven blanket she bought would double as both a decorative throw over the back of his couch, while also being soft enough to curl up under. She bought a set of six sandstone coasters for his end tables, and though she had no idea if Maverick would ever light the candles in the rustic pair of repurposed kerosene lanterns she'd splurged on, they'd at least look great on his fireplace mantle.

Stealing a quick look in the mirror, Jetta decided to go with plain old lip balm in lieu of a sultrier shade of lipstick. Popping over to his house would be an unexpected surprise, and she didn't want to look like she was trying too hard. Zipping up her coat, she eyed her gloves and hat she'd left on her dresser. She reached for her gloves and stuffed them into

her pockets, but left the hat. Stacey hat hair wasn't a good look on her, especially with her hair still cropped short.

With her gifts tucked carefully in a canvas bag usually reserved for toting around her art supplies, Jetta set off. It was easy to walk out the front door without anyone paying any special attention to her because the lodge was bursting at the seams. There was no sign of Mary and Nick, who had their hands full with guests, which only seemed to keep coming the closer they got to Christmas. Jetta cordially greeted everyone she passed, and walked smartly to her car, her feet crunching on the powdery snow. It might not be as powerful as Maverick's truck, but it had four-wheel drive. With enough confidence that it would make the trek, Jetta rounded the lodge to the main parking lot.

Where she'd left her car, Jetta found an unfamiliar Mercedes with its flashers on, stalled right behind hers. It was jacked up with a tire completely missing from the driver's side wheel well.

"Great," Jetta grumbled.

"What's great?" a familiar voice inquired.

Jetta whirled around to find Cooper standing behind her. Porter rolled what appeared to be a newly repaired and inflated tire, while Cooper slapped a tire iron in his palm, looking smug about startling her.

"My car's blocked in," Jetta rushed. "I was planning on going somewhere."

She pinned her eyes on Maverick's coworkers. If she let her gaze drift in the direction of Maverick's house, it'd be an incriminating clue to her plans.

"Cooper can drive you," Porter said. "Putting a tire on isn't really a two-man job."

"No!" She grit her teeth at her excitability, and slowed herself. There was no way she'd let either of them drive her to Maverick's or the rumor mill would be well-greased and running overtime before the day was over. "That's alright. It's

not a big deal. I'm sure you two are ready to put up your feet after a long day of work."

Neither man argued with her, and she tried to be as casual as possible as she backtracked. Her feet carried her back toward the lodge, and she let out a relieved breath when she was sure she wasn't being followed. If she couldn't drive out to Maverick's place, then she had to hustle onto another plan. Maverick had shown her how to drive the tractor, but on top of it being overkill, she wasn't entirely comfortable operating it. There was no way she could get a saddle on one of the horses the right way, and she wouldn't ask them to do more work when they were already bedded down for the night.

Worrying that she'd have to go on foot, a lightbulb went off in Jetta's mind. She'd borrow Amelia's golf cart. It'd done the job once before, and even though it was dark, the trail had been obvious enough to follow without trouble. Even without Bandit, Jetta was sure she could manage. Turning toward the building where Amelia parked her vehicle, a thrill zipped through Jetta's insides.

Something about clinging to the sides of buildings and running from shadow to shadow made Jetta giggle, like she was some sort of spy on a covert mission. What she was doing wasn't even that scandalous. Dropping off home decor items at Maverick's place was hardly worth concealing.

Still, the secrecy made it amusing. She couldn't wait to tell Maverick all the trouble she went through.

Inside the machine shed, Amelia's golf cart was dwarfed by the other equipment also stored there. Lucky for Jetta, the key was still in the ignition, and it was easy enough to sneak out of the sliding door without a rumbling engine to make anyone notice her departure. Maneuvering it outside, she slowly shut the door to keep any of the snaking snow out, and drove the first hundred yards without headlights by relying on the hundreds of strands of Christmas lights lighting the tiny village of cabins situated at the heart of Peppermint Hollow Ranch. Stopping briefly at the edge of the woods, Jetta gazed at the idyllic view of it all. It really was magical, like Santa

and Mrs. Claus had relocated their headquarters further south. She could hardly wait to spend Christmas there.

An unbidden but heartening thought came to her—she could see herself staying in Peppermint Hollow. Originally, her plan had been to hide away in the obscurity of the small town while she figured out how to make a triumphant return to New York City, where she'd take the art scene by storm *without* the help of Chuck. No matter how many times he'd called to beg her to take him back, promising things were over with Victoria. Eventually, she had been brave enough to cut him off completely. All it took was to block and delete his number. She didn't owe him anything and the more time she spent with Maverick, the more she wondered what she'd ever seen in Chuck. His arrogance was a turn off and his suave personality reminded her of a wiley fox. He'd certainly been as dangerous as one. Without her even realizing it, the dream of conquest and dominating one variation of the art world had faded in favor of a new one. Maverick was the key. He'd pushed her when she needed it, yet was a safety net when she doubted herself. The future looked very different than what she'd originally imagined, and she wasn't sad about it.

With a happy sigh, Jetta flipped on the headlights and followed the trail into the woods. Any residual bits of summer weather that had stretched into late October had been swept away the day Maverick and Jetta had shared their first kiss. Winter made a grand entrance, with biting cold temperatures, and the occasional gust that penetrated deep into Jetta's joints. Painting had been relegated to inside, and often she ended up thinking about Maverick as she worked. She wondered if he was warm enough while he and the other men looked after the cattle and horses. Sometimes, his cheeks were frozen and red as cherries when they'd find each other at the day's end.

It never took her long to warm them up, though.

Busy daydreaming about Maverick, the golf cart lurched over something hard, popping Jetta out of her seat, and came to a sudden halt. Jetta revved the gas twice with no luck, before jumping off the golf cart to assess the damage. A rock

on the edge of the trail had been obscured by the snow, and it was large enough that the wheel rolled up and over the stone. There was no way she'd get it dislodged by herself. The golf cart was high centered on the rock and wasn't going anywhere.

“What the heck?” Jetta kicked a wheel, wanting to curse. “What is with this evening?”

She grabbed her bag of goodies for Maverick, and looked both ways. Beyond the reach of the headlights, all was inky blackness, peppered with steady flakes of snow. She was far enough away from the lodge that she couldn't hear or see any sign of life. Scraping through her memory, she thought she was over halfway to Maverick's house, though when she'd driven Amelia's golf cart to find him, the trees still had leaves and the weather wasn't a factor in her travels. Through the twisted and bare branches, large flakes of snow silently fell, then were lifted by the unpredictable gusts of wind. In any other situation, it would have been a beautiful sight. Alone and deep in the woods, it was unnerving. One way or another, she had some walking to do.

She chose to head toward Maverick's house. Of all the people she might have to tell that she high-centered the golf cart because of her harebrained, rash scheme to see him, he seemed the least likely to poke fun at her. He might even be flattered that she'd tried so hard. Plus, his truck had an engine powerful enough to tow an elephant out of a vat of superglue. Freeing a golf cart would be nothing.

Several minutes into her walk, the repeated press of her pocketed phone against her thigh reminded her that she had means of communication. The cold had been amplified by a wind that blew sideways through the trees without a break. Her ears burned from the cold, and the snow coming down in icy pellets was most definitely not enchanting anymore. The predicted blizzard was arriving. With stiff fingers, she dialed Maverick.

“Pick up, pick up, pick up,” she murmured bitterly. It was ridiculous to be disgruntled about having to call Maverick for help, but it killed some of the romance of the surprise she had for him. She loved grand gestures, and thought she'd finally

figured out a way to perform one for Maverick. “Where are you?”

Pulling her phone away from her ear, her frown deepened when she realized it wasn't ringing because she had no reception. With every passing minute, she was turning into a damsel in distress, the dumbest part being she had no one to come save her. Foolishly, she hadn't told a single soul where she was going, so no one would know to look for her.

This is what became of little white lies.

“Come on, Jetta.” Her teeth began chattering. “Maverick's house isn't going to get any closer because you're moping.”

The harsh pep talk she gave herself had the desired effect, and she huddled against the headlong wind and kept walking. Each breath burned, and she wished her hat wasn't resting unused on her dresser.

She stumbled forward, using the flashlight on her phone to help grope her way through the trees. The merciless wind kicked up the snow, reducing visibility to a few feet, and she wasn't even sure she was walking in the right direction. The thought scared her. She might wander for miles and freeze to death before anyone found her.

Distracting herself with a joke, she quipped, “This would never happen in New York City. Ten feet and I'd run into a building I could go into.”

The paltry laugh she could manage barely made it through her clenched teeth. Hunkering down further in her coat, she kept a firm grasp on Maverick's gifts. She wouldn't sacrifice them because she'd been an idiot.

Fifteen minutes passed. Then twenty. The snow had drifted deep enough in some spots that she sank up to her knees. Sweat soaked her underarms and back, while her extremities had begun to lose feeling. If she ever decided to run a triathlon, she imagined it would be this exhausting, minus the impenetrable blackness and the potential for frostbite. Would Maverick still love her if she had no fingers or toes?

The thought made her stop. Leaning against the rough bark of an unidentifiable tree, she heaved and gulped for air. *Love*. Had she really wondered if Maverick loved her? Sure, there'd been signs of it. The way he looked at her. The care he took to make her feel special. Jetta dissected her thoughts, wondering why she was concerned about how Maverick regarded her. It wasn't him that needed to prove anything. It was her that needed to be open enough to accept his offering. Ever since Chuck, a bottomless pit of guilt existed within her and whenever she pondered the possibility of being loved again, it yawned wider. She was damaged goods. Second choice. Maverick might like making out with her, but what more could she be to him?

Hot tears streamed down her cheeks, quickly becoming chilled on her skin. She angrily swatted them away and pushed onward. The middle of a blizzard wasn't the time to analyze her love life. In such a predicament, everything seemed unfairly dire.

She staggered further, almost crying again when she found the creek bed. Maverick's house was on the other side of the hill.

"Maverick!" she shouted into the wind.

It taunted her, throwing her voice back at her and sweeping it away. If she wanted to escape the misery she'd gotten herself into, she'd have to fight for every yard gained.

Cautiously, she skidded down the hill, using her backside as a makeshift sled to give her legs a rest from walking. At the bottom, the snow was piled so high it was impossible to see where the bridge might be. It was wide enough that Maverick drove his truck over it every day, but any residual tire tracks from his commute home that evening were gone. Jetta didn't know if there was any water in the creek bed, and finding out firsthand was something she hoped to avoid. So close to safety, and this was the most dangerous stretch of her hike yet.

Feeling through the snow with her feet, she found what felt like the solid concrete of the bridge. She took one step, then

another. Hope that her ordeal was almost over hurried her onward.

One misstep was all it took. She must have been walking on the edge of the bridge, and without a guardrail to guide her straight, she walked diagonally off the safety of the concrete. The mounding snowdrifts broke her fall, but did nothing to keep her dry as she landed in the wet snow flowing through the creekbed. A startled shriek ripped out of her throat and she hurried to stand. Her already violent shivers turned to clenching muscle spasms as icy water dripped from her coat and clothes. Her body ached. She longed for the warmth of her bed, where she could have been curled up with a good book and a steaming mug of Mary's famous hot chocolate. Instead, her pride had led her here.

Like everything bad that had ever happened in her life, all the blame eventually found its way back to her.

Progress up the hill was painfully slow. One clawing, lurching movement forward at a time. When she finally crested over the top, she laid down. Her cheeks were so cold that the snow covering the ground felt no different against her skin.

Closing her eyes, she counted her breaths and measured time by the harried beat of her heart.

“Come on, Jetta. You're almost there.”

Her body didn't answer. She laid there, curled up and trembling. Another stab of guilt sank through her. If she expired right there, Maverick would be the one to find her. He'd see the silly gifts she'd brought and would easily put two and two together, recognizing that she had been trying to get to him. Knowing him, he'd blame himself. The thought made Jetta want to cry, though she couldn't. Her tears were all frozen with the rest of her.

Sleep was so tempting. If she closed her eyes, the warmth of her faraway bed was close to a reality...

“Jetta!”

She knew that voice. It took her a moment to place where she was, her thoughts running as slowly as cold molasses. “Maverick?”

“Jetta? Jetta!” She tried to open her eyes. Chunks of ice glued her lashes together, and without her phone guiding her way, the darkness was nearly absolute. “It’ll be alright. I’ve got you.”

She had to rely on her other senses to orient her sluggish mind. Strong arms lifted her as if she was nothing more than a downy feather off a molting hen. Maverick. He’d come to save her. Or was this all a pleasant end to a terrible nightmare? His arms pressed her close to his muscular chest, and on his feet, he ran in great bounding strides. There was a chance she was hallucinating the whole thing, except for the tiny hints that confirmed it was indeed reality. The thick, soft cotton of his flannel shirt against her cheek, and the robust spice of his aftershave perfuming the wind.

“Hang on, Jetta. Everything will be alright.”

His voice was tight with worry, and in her daze, she reached up to caress his cheek. His skin was so warm it scorched her frosted fingertips. He stumbled up the steps of his porch and kicked open his front door.

The contrast in temperature in his house was the difference between an arctic night and high noon in summertime, though it did little to aid Jetta’s frozen body. It didn’t matter that she was chilled to the bone. The sight of the fireplace crackling merrily, casting a warm glow in the whole room, coupled with Maverick cradling her next to him extinguished all worry.

She was safe.

Safe with Maverick.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



MAVERICK

“Nope. No you don’t.” His voice came out in a growl, tension and worry putting him on edge. Jetta’s eyes kept fluttering shut, and she was tipping toward the side of the couch, trying to fall asleep. “I know you’re tired, but you have to stay with me.”

“Just a quick nap,” she murmured between violent seizures as her body tried to cope with the extreme exposure to the bitter winter storm.

“How long were you out there?” Maverick asked, trying to keep her alert.

“It could have been months. Ages. Millenia.”

Her lips were blue, and every strand of hair was sheathed in ice. Even her eyebrows and lashes had bits of snow and ice clinging to them.

“When we get your body temperature back up, then you’re welcome to sleep as long as you want. Until then, you need to stay conscious.”

“So cold. I’m a meat popsicle.” Her giggle was weak.

He couldn’t tell if she was being silly because she was delusional or if she was trying to help him not panic by

pretending this was all one big joke. Maverick operated on the assumption that she was not completely lucid. “I’m working on that.”

After slamming his front door shut, Maverick had set Jetta on the couch to dump more logs on the fire. He needed to get Jetta thawed, which meant he’d have to get things a lot warmer. Though the snow squall had knocked out power to his house, he’d been plenty comfortable eating potato soup and half a baguette for his dinner, and staring at the flames dancing in front of him. He’d been thinking about Jetta after she texted him. Scratch that—he’d already been thinking about Jetta before that, and her cryptic text had kept his musings securely on her. She hadn’t answered when he asked why she wanted to know where he was. It was starting to make sense now. She’d intended on tracking him down.

The logs crackled and sparked as he stirred the embers to rouse them back to life. Rushing to the kitchen, he instinctively flipped the switch. The darkness didn’t flee, and his teeth locked. Electricity wasn’t an option. Panic was making him forgetful. He needed to stay calm and use his head. Working by feel, he found his kettle and filled it so he could make her a cup of tea by heating it near the fire. If he could get some warm fluids into her, it’d assist in raising her core temperature. More light would also make his rescue attempts easier, so Maverick rummaged through his cabinets and remembered his stash of emergency candles. It wouldn’t be much, but then he could assess the damage, and maybe keep Jetta from being so tempted by sleep. As cold as she was, if she dozed off, she might never wake up.

The thought twisted his gut. He couldn’t lose her. Not after she’d fought so hard to get to him.

“What were you doing outside in this weather?” Maverick asked as he returned to the living room. Jetta was curled into a ball on his couch, her eyes closed. Dropping his candles on an end table, he heaved her to her feet. “No sleep, remember?”

“I wasn’t sleeping.”

“Likely story.”

“You don’t believe me?” Her eyes opened a crack.

He grinned, even as his insides took a nasty swoop. Not only was she cold, her clothes were wet and partially frozen. No matter how much he raised the temperature of the room, her body would be battling against the frigid clothes stuck to her skin.

“We have to get you out of these clothes,” he said, already battling the frozen zipper on her coat.

“Do you have a hot tub?” She trembled with a forceful shiver. “I could really use one of those right about now.”

“Sorry, no.” He forced the zipper down and tugged her arms out of the sleeves. She dropped a canvas tote he hadn’t noticed she was clutching. Pushing everything to the side, he coaxed her closer to the fire. “I might put you in a warm bath if I was sure my hot water heater could even fill it up, but it’s electric. It might get cold halfway through when it ran out of hot water, and what good would that do you?”

“I like bubble baths.” She giggled as he examined her fingers. They were icy and white. He allowed himself a small sigh of relief. Cold, yes, but there was no sign of the black frostbite from which flesh couldn’t recover from. “Bonus if there are candles.”

“I’ll light some candles once we get you settled.”

Reaching for an old wingback arm chair, he jerked it closer to the fire and had her sit down. Her shoulders curled inward, like she was the last shriveled leaf on the tree, just waiting for winter to carry her away. It’d almost worked, Maverick feared.

He unlaced her boots and carefully drew them off her feet. The cotton socks she wore were muddy and wet, making slurping, suctioning noises as he pulled them off. White as marble and cold as her fingers, with hot pink nails. He wanted to kiss her feet, grateful her toes were safe, too. Not that a few missing digits would change how he felt about her. He’d love her, no matter the number of digits she had. A warmth unrelated to his proximity to the fire ignited in his chest.

Maverick wasn't afraid to admit he loved her, a fact that felt more important when faced with the possibility of losing her.

It wasn't the time to confess anything of that magnitude. Survival was imperative, and even if he did tell her, she might not remember it come morning. When he laid it all out, he'd do it like a man—looking her straight in the eye so she could see into the depths of his soul that he was telling the truth.

“Jetta, we need to get you out of your wet clothes,” he repeated. “Are you alright with me helping you?”

“I won't be able to do it myself, if that's what you're wanting to know. At least,” she paused as her teeth drummed together as her jaw chattered, “I'm wearing my good underwear today.”

She definitely was trying to lighten the mood. How he loved that about her. The bravery she exuded, even when others would be terrified. He was torn between laughing at her humor, even in the most grave of situations, and groaning from the temptation she was unintentionally inviting. He knew he had the willpower not to try anything while she was helpless. That didn't mean he might not notice the beauty of her body. He'd learned to appreciate art over his lifetime, and Jetta's form was the most stunning piece of art he'd ever seen.

Working quickly, he kept his mind on his task, trying not to take in her body as a whole. Something about focusing on her belly button, then her collarbone, then her elbows and back up to her chin as he worked her shirt off made it feel less intrusive. Once her jeans were off in a crumpled heap on the floor, he wrapped a wool blanket around her shoulders for privacy and warmth.

“Thank you.” She huddled into herself, trying to stoke some source of internal heat.

Maverick shoved a hand through his hair. He wanted to do more. Watching her suffer was as agonizing as a slow, serrated knife sinking into his belly. Keeping busy would stave off his almost overwhelming anxiety for her well-being. Arranging the candles nearby, he struck a match and lit every last one of them. It helped improve visibility, and gave his mind time to

think. He had an electric blanket upstairs, but without power, it wouldn't do any good. Lending her wool socks wouldn't help her frigid feet if her body didn't have enough body heat to circulate it to her extremities. He'd already put the kettle near the fire to make her chamomile tea, and it should only be a matter of minutes before it began boiling. Next to it was a rice heating pad Mary had sewn for him when he mentioned having slept wrong, and the subsequent sore neck he had. What else?

"I watched a documentary once with Darby when we were teenagers," Jetta said. Her lips trembled as she tried to smile while shivers continued to plague her. In a second, he was kneeling in front of her, rubbing his hands up and down her arms to create friction. "Her brother, Jack, was getting ready to go on a backpacking trip with some other boys his age. She swore it was to help him learn some extra survival skills. I'm pretty sure she was trying to scare him."

Maverick tried to figure out why her mind had gone to that memory. Instead of asking questions, he simply listened. It did nothing to wish they could trade places.

"What was the documentary about?" he asked when her eyelids grew heavy.

"Some mountaineers who got caught in an unexpected snowstorm. One in their group got hypothermia when he slipped into a mountain stream and was head-to-toe soaked. I'm seriously empathizing with him right now."

Maverick set his head on her lap. "I imagine."

"The point..." She rearranged the blanket so she could reach a hand out and work her fingers through his hair. Goosebumps ran rampant, and Maverick squeezed his eyes shut in a silent prayer that he could help her. That he could fix this. "The point is, part of the documentary were the interviews with the guys who helped the victim survive, even when they didn't have access to medical assistance or electricity."

"That'd be useful information right about now."

"There is something we haven't tried yet."

Maverick lifted his head to look at her. Hope buoyed him. “What is it? I’ll do anything you ask.”

“Skin to skin contact.”

Maverick immediately understood why she’d been shy about her suggestion. Why he hadn’t thought of it earlier, he assumed, could only be because the gentlemanly side of him refused to do anything risqué. Helping her out of her wet clothes was one thing. Laying half naked with her was a line he hadn’t suggested she cross. Her virtue and reputation was imperative to him.

So was her comfort and survival.

“Would you take off your shirt and snuggle with me?” There was a hint of mischief to Jetta’s gaze, and her mouth seemed to be remembering how to smile as her lips drew into a tiny grin. She knew the predicament she’d gotten them into, and what she was asking. Without saying it, she also acknowledged the inevitable challenge it might be for the both of them. “Then maybe I’ll thaw out before Christmas.”

“Of course.” He swallowed, even though there was nothing from his barren mouth to go down. “I’ll grab more blankets from upstairs, and move the couch closer to the fireplace. It’ll take just a minute.”

“I won’t go anywhere.”

Maverick took one of the candles with him and moved as quickly as he could without extinguishing it. In the linen closet, he found a sleeping bag he hadn’t used since he’d gone camping with Porter and Cooper several years earlier, and a large flannel blanket of his mother’s that he’d kept when cleaning out her place. In his bedroom, he snatched his pillows and dragged his down duvet with him. It would be overkill for him, but this wasn’t about his comfort. Even if he was sweating all night, bordering on heat exhaustion with all of his bedding and Jetta piled on top of him, he’d gladly do it.

It would be a fine line between snuggling with her because she needed his warmth and enjoying the opportunity to be

close to her. If he balanced the metaphorical tightrope just right, they'd get through the night without any regrets.

Jetta was still huddled in her chair when he returned. Dropping his armload of blankets, he shoved the couch as close as he dared to the blazing fire. Returning one last time to the kitchen, he grabbed a mug, dumped a heaping spoonful of sugar in, and bought the entire box of tea packets he stored above the stove. The kettle was warm enough that wisps of steam puffed out of the spout. Better not too hot, or she wouldn't be able to drink it without scalding her tongue. He prepared her a cup of tea, and put it in her hands.

"Drink this."

"Oh." She put her nose on the rim of the mug. "Do I have to drink it? This is lovely just like this. The steam feels so nice."

"I'll make you another one just to warm your nose after you finish that one if you want." Maverick lined the couch with the sleeping bag, and fluffed the pillows. He draped the blankets over the edge so he could easily position them over the top of them once they'd been situated. "No sleeping if I lay you down, remember?"

"Scout's honor." She tried saluting, but it was laughably awkward as her joints refused to function. "I promise I'll do my best to stay awake until I'm warmed up."

"Alright." Maverick stripped off his shirt and tossed it onto the growing pile of other things he'd pushed aside. Jetta might not have meant to stare, but she was. He'd caught her trying to sneak a glance when they were changing at Harlow's shop the other day, and if he was honest, he'd enjoyed helping her zip up Darby's dress. With her primal desires still functioning, Jetta gawked. This time, there were no walls blocking her view. "I'm ready whenever you are."

In the low light of the candles, Maverick could see color growing in her cheeks as she flushed. This would be a challenge for her, too. She might be mortified by her blush, but at least it was evidence her heart was able to push blood to the surface. Draining the last of her tea, Maverick took her mug and set it on the end table. Lifting Jetta in his arms, she leaned

into him, her cold fingers stark against his warm skin. He didn't mind. All the rushing he'd done and the heat from the fireplace had him already close to overheating.

He reclined on the couch, and Jetta shed the wool blanket. "It's too itchy on bare skin. It'd be better on top of the pile."

"Your wish is my command."

"Stop. You're going to spoil me."

"Worse things have happened. Besides, you probably are due for a little lavishing."

With his arms extended to give her the option of where she wanted to arrange herself, Jetta nestled into the crook between his left arm and his ribcage. Her body trembled and her toes wriggled under the cuff of his jeans, seeking warmth. Reaching for the blankets, he cocooned their bodies in layers of material. Immediately, she relaxed into him. It would have been appropriate for him to be a passive participant, except it was more natural for his left hand to comb through her hair, while his right rested on the small of her back. Her bare skin was smooth, and it seemed to be the most natural thing in the world to have her pressed against him.

For better or worse, this was going to be a long night. Maverick grinned when a congratulatory thought popped into his head.

Merry early Christmas to me.

If this was a gift, then he'd gratefully take it.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



MAVERICK

All joking aside, Maverick and Jetta's conversation would have to keep happening. If she needed it to stay awake, then Maverick would need it to keep his mind on the straight and narrow.

"What *were* you doing walking to my house tonight?" he asked.

She nestled closer to him and wedged her freezing toes by his ankles. Any discomfort from her chilled body was easily bearable, and he didn't flinch. "I was afraid you'd ask that."

"I'm not mad if that's what you're worried about. By the way, I'm sorry about sounding like a bear when I first picked you up. Worry makes me... tense."

"I know." She sniffed and ran her thumb in a slow circle on his pectoral. All he could do was try to block out the sensation so his rudimentary side didn't hijack the situation. "I'm more embarrassed than anything."

"Why don't you start from the beginning?"

"Alright. Since I'm not going anywhere..." With a deep breath, she recounted everything from the relaxed bachelorette party at Amelia's house, the seemingly innocent half-truths

she'd told to extricate herself from the gathering, the car with the flat tire, inconveniently blocking her in. By the time she was recounting her run-in with the rock, Maverick was shaking with restrained laughter. "That rock was out to get me. If I didn't know that inanimate objects don't have minds of their own, I'd bet it purposefully jumped under the tire, just to mess up my night. Something was making it awfully difficult to come here."

"You never thought of giving up and trying again later? Maybe it was the universe's way of keeping you from getting stuck in this storm."

"Nope. I had a surprise for you, and when something's worth doing, I don't quit when things get a little tough."

"A little tough? You're a few tenths of a degree away from full-fledged hypothermia."

"Maybe I'm too obstinate for my own good."

"I prefer to call that grit."

"Alright. Then maybe this was all my evil plan to trick you into cuddling with me."

"I doubt that. For one, I don't believe you have a wicked bone in your entire body. For another, all you'd have to do is ask if you needed a snuggle."

Maverick could feel her laugh more than he could hear it. One syllable, forceful, and onerous. She doubted she was as perfect as he thought she was. The ice in her hair had melted, leaving it damp, and Maverick untangled the wind whipped snarls with his fingertips. For some reason, everyone knew the damage a person could do with their unkind words and actions, but when it came to people's ability to help one another heal, see the best in themselves, or lift a burden, there was a sentiment that a person had to somehow retrieve personal worth on their own. Like self-love had to be an entirely selfish endeavor. Not for Maverick. It had taken time and Jetta's help to admit that he wasn't satisfied with his life as a lone wolf. He needed others, and needed what unique and addictive love she had to offer.

He let her sit with her thoughts for a while until he remembered the bag she'd been clutching on her journey. "What did you bring with you? I've seen your purse and that canvas tote would be overkill for a wallet and some lipstick."

She turned her face to his bare chest and whimpered. "It's so stupid."

"Try me."

Her breath was warm on his skin as she exhaled. That was a good sign that she was warming up from the inside out. The skin to skin contact was working. "That's the whole reason I got myself into this mess. I was in town and stopped by this adorable home goods shop and found some things I thought would look nice in your house."

"Well," Maverick took a breath, his torso easily lifting Jetta's weight, "I suppose it could be argued that it was something that could have waited, but that storm blew in harder than I think the weather forecasters predicted. What's a little blizzard to deter Jetta?"

Warm droplets hit his chest, and initially, he ignored them, assuming they'd slid off her hair. It was the stifled sob that tipped him off. He lifted his head to see if Jetta was crying. She was. A painful squeeze seized his heart. "You're trying to make me feel better about putting myself in danger. And you for that matter."

"It worked out alright."

She sighed, widening the circle she was tracing on his chest and morphing it into a figure eight. He wobbled on his moral tightwire, almost tumbling dangerously into desire. Closing his eyes, he enjoyed the moment briefly, letting himself fully experience it, before resting his hand over the top of hers to halt the tempting movement of her finger.

Jetta sniffed. "It's kind of funny. What I brought, I mean."

"Yeah?"

"I brought a blanket for the back of your couch. A soft, knit one with a beautiful pattern. Also, coasters. Don't think I didn't see what a barbarian you are setting mugs directly on

your tabletops. And two candle holders that look like old kerosene lamps. All of it would have been useful in my rescue.”

They laughed together, and it felt good to be enjoying what would be an inside joke between the two of them. The evening poignantly struck Maverick, the way a crisis could shift into opportunity. Even be enjoyable. It wasn't a phenomenon he'd ever believed possible without experiencing it, but life had a way of surprising him by the way things turned out.

“Your purchases were rather prophetic,” Maverick mused. “That was very thoughtful of you to bring them out.”

“You'll have to look at them later. Much later. I'm not sure when I'll be warm enough to peel myself off of you.” She giggled unexpectedly—hard enough that she had to gasp for air—before explaining her outburst. “I sort of feel like a leech. Sucking all the warmth out of you.”

“I have plenty more where this came from.”

The following drag of silence was more than companionable. It was complete. The lack of needing to speak was not an indication of any clumsiness or disinterest. It was simply allowing their communication to continue on without the need for anything as superficial as words. The song of the snapping fire serenaded them. The changing light painting the walls. Every skin cell in contact with one of Jetta's happily sang the feelings Maverick had yet to name.

Jetta yawned, and Maverick gave her a tiny shake. “No sleeping, Jetta. Not until you're sweating, so I know you're warm enough.”

“You're doing a fine job.” She adjusted the blankets under her chin. “I suppose we ought to continue interviewing each other. That's about the only thing that'll keep me from drifting off. What time is it, anyway?”

Maverick squinted to see the hands on the cuckoo clock he'd inherited from his mother. “Looks like about five after ten.”

Jetta sucked in another gaping yawn. “I would have been going to bed around now, anyway. It’s supposed to be an early morning tomorrow, helping get everything ready for the wedding.”

“We’ll worry about that when the dawn breaks. Now what is it you’d like to know? I’m an open book, and you don’t even have to out-lasso me to get an answer.”

She lifted her head to look him in the eyes. They were so close, the melted chocolate of her eyes was extra sweet. “How did you find me?”

That had been an interesting experience. He’d been eating his dinner, the silence accented by the tick of the clock, the pop of the newest log he’d put on the fire, and the constant cry of the wind, when he had an urge to get up and look out the front door. At first, he’d brushed it off. All that’d do would be let in a draft of cold air. Then, he had a second impression, more urgent than the first. Jetta had already been teasing his thoughts on and off for hours, but his mind’s sudden, hyper-focus on her made him sit up and take notice.

He would be eternally grateful that he’d listened to that little voice.

“I had an impression,” he admitted.

“What about?”

“You. That you were close. I looked out the window, but couldn’t see anything other than blowing snow and the faint outline of trees. I was about to ignore it when I had the thought that I needed to go outside to check. I argued with the idea for a while until I reasoned it wouldn’t hurt anything if I went to investigate. No one would know how dumb it was for me to be looking for you to show up in a snowstorm.”

Her mouth gaped open, and Maverick wondered if she thought he was crazy. “You had a feeling I was close?”

“Turned out I was right, wasn’t I? When I stepped out onto the porch, I swore I could hear my name on the wind. Then I saw the faint light of your phone wobbling as you staggered

forward. The second I knew you were out there, I ran as fast as I could go.”

“I’m glad you listened to your intuition. I’m not sure I would have been so brave.” Jetta returned her head down on his chest. “Feelings tend to be so unreliable for me. I don’t know if I’m comfortable trusting them because they’re not concrete or rooted in fact. It’s probably because they’re too ambiguous to be lasting. Does that make any sense? Or am I being incoherent?”

Maverick lightly traced the groove of her spine in her lower back, the touch of her skin making it easier for him to say aloud the thoughts he would have normally concealed and denied. “I know what you’re trying to say, but I think I have a different angle.”

“I’m listening.”

“I don’t disagree that emotions can be fickle and fleeting. That makes them difficult to pin down. However, I think some of the most real things in life aren’t witnessed or recorded or proven in some sterile laboratory. They’re felt or experienced. Those moments are just as valid and real as any scientific law. Sometimes, when things look bleak, all it takes is one positive thought that it’ll work out okay, and it can turn around an entire disaster, you know?”

“That’s an interesting point.” Jetta considered his assertion. “Experience has been a thorough teacher for me, though I’m not positive everything has a happy ending.”

“There are definitely rough patches we’re all called to go through. In the end, the good outweighs the less stellar, mundane parts of life. That’s another thing my emotions have whacked over my head repeatedly. The older I get, the more sure I get when things *feel* right, like everything will work out alright. Sometimes, we just have to trust the process and accept that some things take their time.” He chuckled at himself. “Now who’s rambling?”

“I love listening to you talk,” Jetta said, unfolding herself as she stretched out. The cooler parts of her near-hypothermic body against his were less stark and her muscles had stopped

twitching with shivers. They had gotten her out of danger, though Maverick wasn't about to toss her off. Their situation was far too comfortable to hurriedly abandon. "It's a gift you don't give to just anybody. I think that's one of the things I love about you. How thoughtful you are about everything you do. Nothing is flippant."

Maverick saw an opportunity to tease her, so he took it. "You love me, huh?"

It was meant as a blithe wisecrack, though Maverick's heart sped up, wanting it to be true.

Again, Jetta lifted her head and met his gaze without flinching. "You know what? I think I do."

An explosion of happiness, like their first kiss multiplied by infinity, replaced where his heart had been beating. It was easy and exciting to kiss a beautiful woman. It was an exhilarating triumph to win her love. "You do?"

She nodded, her teeth catching her lower lip as she looked at him uncertainly. "Is that wrong of me? Too forward? I don't want you to think I'm being rash. While I was trudging through the snow, I had a lot of time to think."

He couldn't help himself any longer, and he maneuvered to reassure her with a kiss. It was limited to a chaste, closed-mouthed, brief peck, but it was given with a promise that he would cherish her confession always.

When he drew away, he smiled at her. "I have zero hesitation about hearing what you think of me. I'm honored that you've bestowed your affection onto me, and hope I can be worthy of it. My only regret is I didn't tell you how I feel first, because I love you, too."

Jetta's smile was so wide it changed her entire countenance. With a featherlight kiss, she accepted his offering. "Who knew you'd turn into such a Romeo when you talk about mushy stuff?"

"You prefer the quiet, broody version of me?"

"Your growl is sexy enough to give me goosebumps—" She must have been thinking about it because she shivered.

Maverick grinned. “—but honestly, I love all your angles.”

“Same. You have so many depths and heights that every time I’m with you, everything is an adventure.”

He held her gaze a moment longer, swimming in the ocean of feelings between them. Jetta smiled before nestling her head against him and murmuring, “Definitely a Romeo.”

Maverick tightened his hold on her, content in the thought that, even for a brief moment, everything was right with the world. If this wasn’t proof that everything would work out, he didn’t know what would be.

He had no recollection of sleep easing over him, and when he was conscious enough to remember what had transpired the night before, he woke with a start. So did Jetta.

She sprang off of him, knocking the wind out of him as heels of her hands pushed into his diaphragm. Remembering that her wet clothes were in a pile on the floor, leaving her in nothing more than her unmentionables, she snatched a blanket off of Maverick and cloaked herself with it. Maverick gave her the courtesy of shielding his eyes, but he couldn’t help what he’d seen. A goddess wrapped in his down comforter. He hid his smirk, even though he saw one on her face, too.

“Good morning,” Maverick said, lazily stretching his arms over his head. “Guess I didn’t do very well keeping you awake. You seem like you’re doing alright, though. All warmed up?”

“I am. Thanks for your help. It would have been a long night otherwise.” She started hunting around for her things, frowning when she pinched her shirt and lifted it from the heap on the ground. “They’re still wet.”

“Here.” He rolled off the couch, shaking the pins and needles feeling of the arm that’d been under Jetta, and stood. Finding the flannel shirt he’d removed at her request, he offered it to her. “I’ll hang your clothes by the fire to dry. I might have a pair of sweatpants with a drawstring you could borrow.”

“That’d be appreciated.” She peeled her eyes off his torso and accepted his shirt. “I’m going to use your restroom, if you don’t mind. Where is it?”

“Right there.” He pointed to the door opposite the landing of the stairs. “I’ll be right back down. Then we’ll have to figure out the next step.”

“With us? I thought we kind of defined the relationship last night.”

“I meant what we’re going to do with breakfast since it appears I still don’t have power.” Maverick smirked. “But we can talk more about us if you’d like.”

Jetta’s blush played peek-a-boo behind the dark curtain of hair she used to hide her face. With a chortle and an embarrassed shake of her head, she shut the bathroom door.

Maverick wasted no time racing upstairs, taking the creaky steps two at a time. Nothing scandalous had happened last night, but they both were acting like they’d crossed a line. Admitting love certainly opened unfamiliar territory, but being half clothed while saying it may have had something to do with their shaky unease.

With the sweatpants over his arm, and having brushed the morning halitosis out of his mouth, he was buttoning another plaid shirt as he skipped down the steps. Two from the bottom, he stopped when he saw Jetta. On her, his shirt was so big it brushed her legs, right above her knees. It wasn’t the way her wearing his shirt made his heart palpitate—it was her expression and in the pale morning light, what she was staring at.

“You...?” She pointed at the once void space behind the back of his couch where her framed painting had been given a place of honor. “You’re the one who bought my painting?”

He swallowed. He’d been meaning to tell her, except he hadn’t figured out how. It had been a pretty penny to pick it up from the local gallery. He hadn’t haggled over the price because he knew he was going to want the painting before it was even finished. The careful way he chose his words

stemmed from the worry he'd cultivated that she'd think he bought it to patronize her, the way an adult might pat a child's head for scribbling with crayon on a paper.

"I did," he confirmed.

"*Why?*"

The earnestness of her question pained him. For the success she'd had all season, selling her paintings in Peppermint Hollow and beyond, she still doubted herself. She couldn't see what she offered through the perceptive and imaginative way she saw the world.

"It was an early Christmas present to myself." He smiled and finished the stairs slowly, like she was a flighty doe he might startle. She stared at him with wide, glassy eyes. Was she on the verge of crying? That was the last thing he wanted. Drawing her into a hug, he rested his chin atop her head. "You know one thing that's so magical about art? And this piece in particular?"

She sniffled. "What?"

"When I look at it, I feel something. It's the same gooey, substantial warmth I get when I'm looking over the land I love so much, except this isn't fleeting and ever-changing. It's amplified by the way I feel about you, too. Because you've given me a way to see the world through your eyes. You've adeptly captured the beating heart of the earth, and what makes it alive. And every time you sell a painting to someone, whether or not they know it, they're getting the benefit of all the tears and frustration and joy that comes with painting that piece. It's years of failure and triumph, both of which I witnessed firsthand as you brought this from blank canvas to masterpiece. In essence, this represents a piece of your soul that you'd gift to someone else. I knew I had to have it. *That's* why I bought it."

Tears streamed down her cheeks, and her chin became pinched as she fought the deluge. "I might have a way with paintings, but you have a talent for words. I've never thought of my artwork that way. It definitely explains why it feels so

vital that people connect with my paintings. It's sharing a bit of myself with them."

"Exactly."

Jetta chuckled and scrubbed the tears from her cheeks. "I would have given it to you if you'd have asked."

"I know. You have an unfailingly generous heart. I didn't want you to, though. You don't need to devalue your work as a gift for me. I bought it before we were dating, and you didn't know it was me, so it wouldn't coerce you into being my girlfriend."

"You really thought this through, didn't you?"

"Had to consider it from all sides to make sure I didn't look like a stalker trying to lure you in by pretending to be a huge admirer of your work, either."

That made Jetta laugh harder. "I don't know if that's where my mind would have gone or not."

Maverick shrugged. "You'd be—"

Before he could finish his thought, loud, stomping footsteps ascended his porch steps, and the front door swung open. Cooper brought a sweeping gust of Arctic wind in with him.

"Maverick. Have you seen Jetta? She's—" Cooper stalled when his gaze swept across the room. In two seconds flat, he absorbed the hints of what was available to him, and his mind concocted a narrative to fill in the blanks. The wry smile on his face told of his amusement. "Ah, there you are. Good morning, Jetta. Sleep tight?"

In unison, Maverick and Jetta shot off what had happened, trying to quell Cooper's active imagination. By the way his eyebrows were rising, Maverick could tell he was mentally *uh-huh-ing* their story, and couldn't wait to get back to the lodge to blab to everyone what he'd discovered. Trying to convince him otherwise would be an uphill battle he wasn't sure he cared to wage.

Cooper held up a hand to stop them. "Save it for later. I'm glad we've found Jetta safe, but in case you've forgotten,

we've got a wedding tomorrow, and we're behind schedule already."

Jetta meekly raised her hand. "I take full responsibility for that."

"Everyone was worried sick, though it looks like all's well that's ended *very* well," Cooper teased.

Jetta buried her red face in her hands and whimpered. Wrapping his arms around her, he kissed the crown of her head. "No use hiding that we're dating. It was going to come out sooner or later, right?"

"I would have preferred to be fully clothed when it happened." Separating her fingers, Jetta peeked at Cooper through the crack. "This was all totally innocent, I swear."

He held his hands up, palms to ceiling. "Whatever you say. I'll believe whatever you tell me."

Unappreciative of his sarcasm, Jetta threw a pillow at him, laughing pitifully at this tangle she'd gotten herself into.

"Come on, then." Maverick grabbed his coat and boots, offering his best pair to Jetta, even if they were grossly oversized. "Let's go help them set up for this shindig and tell them all about the unbelievable night we spent together."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



JETTA

“**Y**ou look pretty.” Maverick’s breath swirled across Jetta’s exposed neck and shoulders, kicking up a rash of goosebumps in its wake as he hugged her from behind. The feel of it spoke of a closeness they shared, and a deeper meaning to their exchange than mere words. Every one of Jetta’s nerve endings stood at attention, wanting another caress. “Scratch that. Pretty isn’t adequate. You’re stunning. Mesmerizing. Ravishing.”

“You look gorgeous yourself.” She twisted to face him so her eyes could rove over him. Starting at his freshly polished boots, his tailored tuxedo, all the way up to his best cowboy hat, she approved of this polished look on him. The way he stared back at her, with an intense focus that saw nothing else in the world but her, was exactly the tunnel vision she’d developed for him. “You were made to be in a wedding party. Seriously. You could go into formal wear modeling.”

“We do make an excellent pair as the Best Man and Maid of Honor, don’t we?”

“I like to think so.” Jetta agreed with a full smile. “I can’t believe it’s already Sterling and Darby’s wedding. It’s like we were trying to spy on Sterling’s proposal just yesterday.”

“You mean that time when you pushed me over and landed on my stomach, knocking the air out of me, and ruining the surprise recording I was supposed to be making?” Maverick returned to his position behind Jetta, wrapping his arms around her waist and kissing her bare shoulder. She giggled as his manicured scruff tickled, but still leaned into him. “I think you bruised my ribs with those bony elbows of yours.”

“Uh, it wasn’t my fault. Cooper shoved Porter into me, so I couldn’t help but fall onto you.”

“Likely story. Everyone knows how much you like cuddling with me.”

“Ever since Cooper let out what he *thinks* he saw when he came looking for me at your house, there has been no end to the grief. I think everyone believes our tale of danger and the supernatural powers that led you to me, but everyone keeps getting hung up on us snuggling all night long, like that was my end goal from the beginning.”

“Wait... I thought it was.”

Jetta giggled. “You rake.”

“That might be a teensy bit true. Is it wrong that I thought about falling asleep with you in my arms last night? I may never sleep well again without you.”

Jetta’s face warmed, though only mildly. The worst of her embarrassment had ebbed, and for the most part, the last two days, people were consumed with the wedding. Any scandal they had created was background to the big event they’d been looking forward to for months.

Maverick swayed to the gentle strains of a string quartet that had commenced in the chapel, signaling the imminent start of the wedding ceremony. Closing her eyes, Jetta wondered if maybe someday, she’d be lucky enough to be the bride. As her mind filled in the details of what that day might entail, it did not shock her to see the groom was not a vague entity. Clearly, she visualized Maverick standing at the end of the aisle, waiting patiently for her.

Her eyes popped open and blood rushed to her cheeks, as if she was guilty of forcing him to the altar.

“It was a shame you had to leave.” He kissed an exposed part of her shoulder.

“If you’re lamenting one night without me, however will you survive a month of me being gone?”

Maverick groaned unhappily. “Don’t remind me about your retreat. On the one hand, I’m happy you have the chance to develop professionally, on the other...”

“You don’t want me to go?”

“Bingo. I know it’s selfish.”

“I don’t mind you being selfish. It makes me glad to know I’ll be missed.” She turned and kissed his cheek. “We’ll call every day, and I’ll bore you to death about new brushstrokes and blending techniques, and before you know it, I’ll be back.”

“I know. I’m wondering how I lived so long without you.”

“That’s a valid question.” She sighed. “You were doing fine, don’t you think?”

“I don’t want an average existence. Fine isn’t good enough. Not when I know how incredible you’ve made it.” Maverick squeezed her tighter, like he was afraid she’d disappear right then if he didn’t hold on. “You know, I’ve been thinking. Maybe in the future we should upgrade our roles from sidekicks in the wedding to the main characters.”

Jetta spun around, her breath halting, eyes wide. Talk of the future was a normal, natural progression for any relationship, but she’d never made it to this point before with any of her other relationships. Certainly not a few days after anything was official—some people didn’t even know they *were* a couple at that point. Previously, Chuck had been her most successful affiliation, and it had been doomed to fail long before she knew it. The rest of Jetta’s history of crumbling relationships didn’t inspire confidence that she’d ever be lucky enough to find a man who wanted to devote himself to her and *only* her.

The wedding was slated to begin in a few minutes, and anyone rushing around behind the scenes might overhear him. She barely managed a whisper. “Are you implying what I think you’re implying?”

“You know I don’t play games.” His eyes sparkled lively. “I know you know what I mean. When I’m sure of what I want, I go for it.”

Jetta wondered at him. They had been open with everyone about their infant relationship, especially since nothing could have kept Cooper from spilling the beans, anyway. Thankfully, no one had questioned their explanation about Jetta’s disappearance and overnight stay at Maverick’s by giving them too much grief. As happy as she was with Maverick and the newfound love he lavished on her every chance he got, she couldn’t entirely quiet the memory of what Chuck had done to her. It had been reduced from a savage monster, tearing at her whenever she let herself go to that dark place down to a furry little mouse, gnawing away quietly in the background. It poked and prodded and bled, whispering that she was shameful and undeserving, no matter how frequently she tried to brush aside her past.

Stubbornly, she kicked the thought aside. It only had power if she gave it power. Hadn’t Maverick proven that he was the antithesis of Chuck a hundred times over? Maverick had *told* her he loved her. It was time for her to start believing him.

“Alright everyone.” Amelia swept into the room, her lavender chenille dress practically fluid in her wake, clapping sharply to get everyone’s attention. “We need everyone to line up for the wedding procession.”

“We’re ready to walk down the aisle.” Maverick wove his fingers through Jetta’s and winked conspiratorially. “Aren’t we, Jetta?”

A gentle warmth suffused her cheeks. “It would be a shame to miss a perfectly good opportunity.”

Their inside joke of their promise went unnoticed as Amelia arranged everyone in order. A palpable buzz of excitement spilled over from the chapel where Sterling had been deposited

at the head of the aisle, earnestly watching for Darby's arrival. Forget the wrong turns Jetta had made and the sadness that once existed as a black hole within her. Maverick had made the chasm shrink, dawning a fresh new joy that was blindingly bright. The entire event made Jetta giddy. The excitement for her friend, and the wonder at what the future might hold. With her hand safely in Maverick's, her entire body vibrated with exuberance, like it was her own wedding day.

A change in music signaled the commencement of the wedding, and Amelia hastily gave couples the once-over. Other than brushing a hair off Maverick's shoulder, they were given the green light to begin their slow walk down the aisle to support Darby and Sterling. With his arm looped around hers, and the gentle sway as they proceeded, Jetta felt like she was floating on a cloud. Smiling faces blurred together, and she almost walked past her baby brother, Jack, who'd flown in for the event that morning, without seeing him. She did a double take, and he smiled at her with a goofy thumbs up. They had some serious catching up to do at the reception.

At the point where Maverick and Jetta were to part and stand behind the bride or groom, Maverick unwound her arm around his, and took his time kissing Jetta's knuckles. The guests in the pews collectively swooned and sighed right along with Jetta.

Of all the weddings Jetta had attended, Sterling and Darby's was so sweet there wasn't a dry eye by the time they committed themselves to each other. Their first kiss as husband and wife was passionate and elicited a raucous roar of approval worthy of the joy their matrimony evoked. It was a beautifully perfect day.

Following Sterling and Darby through the packed chapel, the newly minted husband and wife disappeared to take a few additional photos together, while everyone else was redirected into the reception hall.

Maverick kept Jetta close to his side, and she relished the feeling of knowing exactly where they stood. His eyes swept around the room, taking in the ethereal decor that turned the largest room in The Pinewood Barn into the suggestion of an

enchanted winter forest. “This is the first time we’ve attended a party together as a couple, you know.”

“We have a lot of firsts coming up. We only started dating two days ago.” She smirked at him. “You think you can keep up with me? I used to party in the city.”

He spun her in front of him and put his hands on her hips, swiveling her in a move that alluded he seriously knew how to dance. Jetta’s heart happily did a somersault, and she eagerly anticipated what the evening would bring. Having Maverick holding her in his arms while they kept time to the music for hours on end sounded like a fantastic remainder of their day.

“There you are!” Jack wove through the crowd to Jetta and crushed her in a hug. A tingle started in her nose and spread to her eyes. Since when had her baby brother gotten so big? “Wow. Who knew my big sister could scrub the paint off her hands well enough to look decent for a wedding?”

“Shut up.” Jetta slugged him amicably in the shoulder. Brother or not, she’d put him in his place. “There’s no shame in it. It’s sort of my signature to have dried paint flaking off of me.”

“Just don’t lean over my dinner plate then.” He squeezed her shoulder and grinned. “Seriously, you look nice. A long vacation has done you well.”

Jetta gnawed on her lower lip, feeling a sudden stab of unease that she hadn’t told her brother of her intention of moving here for good. It was one thing for Darby to relocate to get away from her ex. It was another entirely for Jetta to pass on her lifelong dream of having her art displayed in New York City galleries. Maverick’s warm hand enveloping hers was as much of a reminder as she needed for why dreams could change and grow and be better than imagined, even if the scale of them appeared smaller.

Maverick was a testament to how much life could change without even knowing something better was coming.

“Actually, I’m not here on vacation.” Jetta peered up at Maverick, then turned her eyes to her brother. “This is

permanent. I intend on staying in Peppermint Hollow.”

Jack’s confusion was brief when he noticed Jetta was attached to Maverick beyond their roles as Best Man and Maid of Honor. Rather than tease Jetta, Jack held out his hand to Maverick. “Hi. I’m Jack, Jetta’s favorite brother.”

“*Only* brother.”

The men cordially shook hands, quickly sizing each other up in a non-threatening way. “Maverick.”

“So you’re the reason my sister hasn’t been bored to tears here,” Jack quipped.

Jetta moved to smack him again, but he dodged her. “He’s been a lot more fun than having to babysit you. I’m amazed you haven’t gotten yourself into trouble without me in New York.”

“Please. I’m a deputy sheriff. I can take care of myself,” Jack shot back.

“I bet that keeps you busy in the city,” Maverick interjected.

Jack opened his mouth to answer, but Jetta beat him to it. “He handles hostile evictions most of the time. Did you know he’s the one who escorted Darby out of her apartment right before she moved to Peppermint Hollow?”

Their eyes all shifted to where Darby and Sterling had entered the room. Of all the billions of people in the world, Darby would be one of the last to be difficult with anyone.

Maverick snorted a laugh. “You evicted *her*?”

Jack’s face went scarlet. “*I* didn’t evict her. I was there on assignment, and didn’t know she was the one I was dealing with. You should know I filed a report about her landlord, about the call. Clearly, her ex had something to do with the debacle.”

“Relax, Jack,” Jetta said. “I’m just teasing you. That’s what big sisters are supposed to do, aren’t we?”

“I’m going to go get us a drink.” Maverick kissed Jetta’s cheek, and she knew it was as much to give her affection as it

was to offer her a segue into telling Jack they were a serious couple. Mulling it over, there were lots of things she needed to tell her brother. "I'll let you two catch up."

The men nodded at each other, and Jetta watched him go. His broad shoulders looked just as good in a tux from behind as they did from the front. When Jetta reluctantly tore her eyes away, Jack was grinning impishly at her.

"What?" she asked.

"You. You're smitten with him, aren't you?"

In an instant, their entire relationship, from the first time he almost ran over Jetta in the horse barn, to their lasso lesson, to their first kiss, to waking up in his arms, stampeded through her thoughts. Smitten was definitely an appropriate adjective.

Jetta lifted her chin, level to the wood plank floor, and folded her arms. "Yeah. What's wrong with that?"

"Nothing. I'm happy for you."

She raised an eyebrow, incredulous that her brother wasn't leading her into a trap for his own amusement. "Really?"

"Yeah. That last guy you dated always rubbed me the wrong way. He was so pompous and self-righteous, like the rest of humanity existed to adore people like him."

"Chuck was a piece of work for sure."

"I saw him last week, you know. I meant to text you about it, but I forgot, then I figured I could just tell you in person."

Jack's words made Jetta's whole body feel like she was out in the blizzard again, wet and seizing with cold. "You did?"

"He recognized me when I was out to lunch with a couple of buddies. Usually, he was so put together whenever I saw you two together... not now. He was totally disheveled and looked depressed."

That definitely felt like information Jetta shouldn't care about, but her curiosity egged her on. "What was wrong with him?"

“You.” Jack chuckled. “Or so he said. Sounds like you destroyed him when you left.”

That sent Jetta reeling. She was the reason for his grief? Clearly, Chuck was living half a truth if he thought Jetta had anything to do with his predicament.

“I left for a very good reason,” Jetta said defensively.

“Because you like making men squirm? I know firsthand how villainous you can be.”

Jack was teasing, and she knew he didn’t mean any harm by his immature jab. That didn’t make the cut any less deep. She had never wanted to hurt anyone, and she’d done exactly that. Merely thinking a man with Chuck’s status might be interested in her had created a tidal wave of fallout for so many people. Though her mouth was dry, her throat reflexively swallowed.

“No, Jack,” she spoke softly. “I left because I found out he had a wife.”

The shock on Jack’s face said it all. Other than confessing her regrettable predicament at girls’ night, Jetta still hadn’t told anyone what had been the catalyst of her breakup with Chuck. It was both cathartic and gut-wrenching to say it out loud to her brother. The less she kept it a secret, the less shame she experienced.

The real test would be when she was brave enough to confess to Maverick what had transpired.

At that moment, it was unthinkable to confess to Maverick. She’d been someone’s mistress. Unintentional or not, she’d been a rift in someone’s marriage the way Maverick’s father had been. She had the sudden urge to curl up in the fetal position and cry herself to sleep. The shame was still strong, especially imagining Maverick’s hurt. If she’d been smart, she would have told him a long time ago, before she cared what he thought of her. Knowing how complete she was with Maverick, even imagining life without him made her ill.

“Jetta...” Jack sighed.

She quickly whisked away two tears that tried to careen down her cheeks. “If it makes you feel better, I didn’t know he

had a wife when we were dating. I was just as shocked as you when I found out. That was the last time I spoke to him. So any agony he's been experiencing after I left is his own doing."

"He told me he tried calling you."

Jetta's fingers gripped Jack's forearm like she had an eagle's talons. "Please tell me you didn't promise I'd call him back."

"Of course I didn't. I already told you he rubbed me the wrong way. Why would I want to go about encouraging you to get back together with him?" Jack grimaced at the thought. "Could you imagine if you'd have married the guy? I would have had to deal with a man who's had more manicures than all my girlfriends combined as a brother-in-law."

If Maverick were next to her, Jetta wondered if it would have been an easier way to broach the subject about her unconventional and highly scandalous relationship with Chuck. Then, at least it'd be out in the open. But then what? She could envision the situation going either way. If Maverick wasn't outright enraged or disgusted, then he might forgive her transgression. It was the not knowing that kept her lips sealed.

"There's no danger of that," Jetta murmured around the fingernail she gnawed on. Her eyes swept the room, trying to find Maverick. "Did he say anything else I should know about?"

"Chuck? Not really. He looked so pathetic, and all he wanted to chat about was you, so I gave him a quick update on you, and made sure he knew you were happy *without* him."

The vacillating between hot flashes of worry and arctic blasts of dread were throwing Jetta's body through the wringer. "You didn't tell him where I was, did you?"

"Nothing specific."

"But does he know I'm in Peppermint Hollow?"

"It might have come up. I don't really remember."

A rock sank in the pit of Jetta's stomach. "You don't think he'd try to track me down out here, do you?"

Jack snorted. “That seems a bit extreme, even for him.”

Her brother’s reassurance relaxed the tension and subsequent growing headache at the base of her neck. It would be preposterous if Chuck chased her across hundreds of miles with no assurance she’d want to see him. Sure, the voicemails from Chuck that she’d listened to before blocking his number had been pathetic and apologetic, first only hinting they should give it another shot, and eventually descending into outright begging for her to take him back. A former version of herself would have been flattered that he’d asked. The newer version of Jetta, who was learning to love and forgive herself, hoped she never saw Chuck again.

“Yeah, that’s true.” A sigh alleviated some of Jetta’s panic. “He might be desperate to have a woman who will stroke his ego like I used to, but I don’t think he’d chase me here to get that.”

A different band from the wedding welcomed the guests who’d finished flowing in for the reception and started with their upbeat cover of music. The dance floor filled immediately, and Jack’s gaze wandered over to a cute blonde with a glittering navy blue shift dress. She was dancing in a group with Nori and Clara, though Jetta didn’t know who she was.

“You should go ask her name,” Jetta encouraged.

That startled Jack, and his eyes darted back to Jetta. “Her?”

“Yeah. Why not? It’s a party, and she looks like she knows how to have fun.”

His brow creased with concern. “Are you alright? I don’t want to—”

Jetta pushed her palm into his face. “Jack, stop. Yes, I may have naïvely fallen for a loser, but that’s ancient history now. You don’t have to be a dutiful brother because, in case you didn’t notice, that towering, hunky cowboy who went to get me a drink has a vested interest in my happiness.”

It felt good to tell Jack not to worry. Jetta had sorted out her problems—mostly—and had come out on top, higher than

she'd ever ascended with Chuck. Maverick was evidence that the sun would rise, even after a lonely, prolonged night.

“Go,” Jetta repeated, propelling him toward the vivacious blonde with a push. “I’ll catch up with you more later when we’re ready for a break from dancing.”

Jack accepted her permission to leave and with one of his charming smiles that showcased his dimple, he strutted to the blonde. The woman noticed him coming and didn’t even stop as she swept him up into her orbit. They disappeared into the middle of the crowd, feeding off the energy of the music and people around them.

Pleased that she’d abated Jack’s concerns as much as he’d wafted away hers, Jetta spun around to search for Maverick. He was at the front of the line at the bar, putting in a request for them. Jetta didn’t want to wait for him to come back. Five minutes apart was enough. She needled through patches of wedding guests to him. There was so much celebrating to do, and not a moment to lose.

A tray of bruschetta hors d’oeuvres circulated near Jetta’s trajectory, and as her stomach rumbled, she remembered she hadn’t eaten anything since her bowl of cereal that morning. If she was going to go the distance and last until Sterling and Darby exited in a limo for their tropical honeymoon trip, then she’d have to have some sustenance.

She skirted the border of a large conglomeration of people, all laughing and chatting, to reach the server she had her eye on. Jetta was nearly there, when she heard someone calling her name. The voice took a moment for her to place, but when it did, the hackles on the back of her neck stiffened. If she wasn’t mistaken, it sounded an awful lot like Chuck.

Spinning around, she hoped it was a figment of her imagination.

It wasn’t.

Chuck stood unmoving and unblinkingly staring at her. “Jetta, I’ve been looking for you.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



JETTA

Sweat oozed from Jetta's palms. Each breath was shallow and unnaturally quick. Her heart raced like a jackrabbit who spotted a hawk circling overhead and realized there was no place to hide on the open prairie. Her gaze cut side to side, looking for cover, and finding none. Even if she kicked off her heels and made a run for it, he could probably keep up. Chuck had seen her, and there would be no escape without confronting him.

For all her fantasies of wishing she could gallop away into the sunset, riding double with Maverick, she cursed herself for not making it happen sooner.

"Jetta," Chuck said her name tenderly, and it turned Jetta's once-hungry stomach to bile. "Why have you been hiding from me?"

He stepped toward her, and immediately, Jetta noticed the stagger in his gait. The disheveled hair, the bloodshot eyes... Chuck was drunk beyond his senses. That could be the only explanation for his boldness in crashing a wedding to find her.

Jetta ducked low and hissed like an angry snake at him. "What are you doing here?"

“I came to find you.” He took another unsteady step toward her, and she was hit by the smell of alcohol on his breath. “To tell you I’m sorry. I want you back.”

The middle of one of her best friend’s wedding was not the place Jetta wanted to rehash her relationship with Chuck and all its flaws, but when had he ever honored her wishes? If this would give her the chance to assert herself and tell him in no uncertain terms that they were over, then she was irritated enough to tell him right there.

If she was lucky, it’d be done and over with before Maverick brought her a chilled soda to sip.

Taking a fistful of Chuck’s blazer sleeve, she dragged him to the edge of the room where they’d have the maximum privacy available while still being in the line of sight of others. Jetta didn’t want to be alone with Chuck for a myriad of reasons. Giving him too much privacy might give him the wrong idea.

Jetta spoke through clenched teeth. “Did you not get the hint that I wasn’t interested when I didn’t answer your phone calls?”

“I figured you needed time.” Chuck struggled to focus on Jetta’s face, and his eyes kept slipping toward her chest. With so much alcohol in his system, his true nature was completely uninhibited. It disgusted her that she’d ever thought she adored him. “We both did.”

“You?” She scoffed. “What on earth did you need time for? To figure out a new way to sucker me into coming back to you? Read my lips, Chuck. Not gonna happen.”

In a snap, his sadness was replaced by irritation. “Why are you acting like you’re too good for me now?”

“Because I always have been.” Jetta mentally high-fived herself for her quick, witty, and stinging response. “I’ve moved on. There’s nothing left that I owe you.”

Chuck took another step closer and as Jetta retreated to keep her distance, her back pressed into a wall. Seeing an opportunity, Chuck planted both hands on either side, effectively trapping her. Adrenaline sped through her

circulatory system, and she plotted out all the ways this scenario could go. If it came to it, she'd knee him in the groin without an ounce of regret.

"I gave up my marriage for you," Chuck snarled.

"No, you didn't." Jetta defiantly jutted her chin toward him, like it was a weapon. "I'm guessing Victoria kicked you to the curb without a second thought. Don't blame me for what you deserved."

Without a solid way to refute Jetta, Chuck moved on. "I'm not married anymore. That unfortunate thorn in our relationship has been expelled. It leaves us free to explore the possibilities of what we might be without my nagging ex-wife screwing things up."

"Chuck, I said no."

He'd stopped listening to Jetta the second she opened her mouth. "Do you remember how many times you told me you wanted to make it big in New York? To have your art hanging in all the homes of prominent citizens. To be a household name. I don't believe for a second that you've given that up."

For a fraction of a second, Jetta searched herself to see if there was any lingering truth to his claims. Then, she thought about her painting, hung in an obscure home where the cowboy she loved lived. That filled her with more joy than she'd ever received trying to seek approval from a small sample of art enthusiasts.

"I have," Jetta said softly, for the first time pitying Chuck. "Dreams change. I'm happy with my life now. For all the time I spent humiliated by your betrayal, I've realized I was stuck in a fixed mindset. I judged myself unworthy of love because I couldn't have you. It turns out, after doing some soul searching and living outside of your sphere of influence, I've discovered I'm not worthless. Luckily, I also didn't have to give up on love, either. It hasn't been without work on both our parts, which has only made it more sure. Honestly, Chuck, I wish you well. I just don't have to be there while you figure out what's next."

The burden of guilt Jetta had been shouldering so long it had become normal to carry with her crumbled. She was lighter than she'd been in months.

Her monologue, releasing herself from everything that had transpired with Chuck, did not have the intended effect she'd hoped for. Instead of introspection and moving on, Chuck visibly shook. The immaturity of his character refused to let go of Jetta, as if she was a toy he wouldn't let anyone else play with.

Readying her knee to take aim, she was stopped short when Maverick appeared out of nowhere. With two drinks held in one of his big hands, he gripped Chuck's shoulder with the other. Chuck winced, removing his caging arms from around Jetta. She thought she could hear his bones crunching.

"Is this guy bothering you?" Maverick asked. If the growl in his tone wasn't intimidating enough, the glare under his lowered eyebrows was.

"He's..." Words failed her. She had been hoping to get rid of Chuck before Maverick saw them. It would have been so much easier to tell Maverick what had happened without Chuck there to run his mouth and cause a scene. "He's just leaving."

Chuck wrenched himself out of Maverick's grasp and straightened his blazer. "I'm not leaving without my girlfriend."

"I *was*." Pinching the bridge of her nose, Jetta forced an exhale through clenched teeth. "For the millionth time, I'm not your girlfriend, Chuck. It's over. Finished. No more. Goodbye."

Mentally answering the questions Jetta assumed he had, Maverick stepped protectively in front of Jetta. "You're the ex?"

"We haven't broken up," Chuck insisted, running his fingers over his greasy hair. "All I need to do is to make her see reason."

That made Maverick bark out a laugh. “You obviously don’t know Jetta at all. Nobody can *make* her do anything.”

“I can because I still love her. You see, after we had a minor blip, my career was ruined for what most people would consider a minor infraction.” Chuck spoke with his hands, a desperate look crossing his face. High in her throat, Jetta’s heart thudded like a drum and blood rushed in her ears. All of her secrets were precariously close to being exposed. “I deal in art, except now, I’ve been blacklisted from any gallery that’s worth my while.”

“I have a hard time seeing how that’s Jetta’s problem,” Maverick shot back.

“She’s the one who can help me get out of this funk.” The slur in Chuck’s words was more evident the faster he spoke. “After bumping into her brother, Jack gave me the hint I needed to track her down.”

If Jetta ever wanted to strangle her brother, it was right then. Her eyes darted around the room, trying to find him. When she spotted his head, bobbing along with the beat of the music, Jetta narrowed her eyes, hurling a wall of mental daggers at him. It had no effect on him, and he remained blissfully ignorant of Jetta’s predicament.

“I came to Peppermint Hollow a couple days ago.” Chuck paused as he stuttered with a high-pitched giggle. “Peppermint Hollow. Can you believe someone named a town something so ridiculous?”

That didn’t endear Chuck to Maverick, not that Chuck was coherent enough to recognize the way Maverick’s muscles were coiled.

“After snooping around and finding no sign of her,” Chuck continued, “I had a thought strike me like lightning. I needed to check the art gallery in town. Duh. Of course.”

He bounced his palm off his forehead, and Jetta wished it’d fall off and roll away, along with his dangerous, gossiping tongue.

Still guarding Jetta, Maverick shrugged. “Good for you. You found her and heard from her own lips that she doesn’t want you anymore. Now, you might want to get going and sleep off your overindulgence before you do anything really stupid.”

It was like Chuck had wax balled in his ears. Nothing anyone said to him was registering, and he kept babbling, aiming all his words at Jetta. “I recognized your paintings the second I walked in the door. The gallery owner told me about some of the success you’ve been having. You should have heard her rave, like a handful of canvases amounted to anything. All I had to do was pretend I was an admirer hoping to talk to you about your art in person, and she gladly told me where you were staying. Today, all I had to do was follow the crowd, and ta-da! Here we are, together again.”

For all the nervous sweat pouring from her, Jetta was chilled. She pinched her eyes shut. This had to be a nightmare. Nothing so preposterous could possibly be real.

“That’s a nice story,” Maverick said. “Like I said, though, I think it’s time to leave now. Jetta and I intended on enjoying ourselves celebrating our friends’ wedding this evening, and you’re standing in the way of that.”

Maverick clapped his hand on Chuck’s shoulder and began guiding him toward the exit. Chuck planted his feet. “Who are you?”

Finally, Chuck was returning to the real world.

Straightening his shoulders, Maverick asserted, “I’m Jetta’s boyfriend.”

Wagging his finger between him and Jetta, Chuck started to laugh hysterically. Tears streamed from the corners of his eyes until he succumbed to a coughing fit. The concerned glances thrown their way made Jetta feel worse. Now, not only was her past haunting her like a persistent poltergeist, Chuck was bothering other people, too.

“You’re her boyfriend?” Chuck asked, to which Maverick nodded. “But I’m her boyfriend. Are you two-timing me like I was unfaithful to my wife with you?” Another snorting giggle

interrupted him. “Who’s the cheater now? I only did it once. You’ve been deceitful twice. Does that mean I get to look down my nose at you? Hmm?”

For an eternity, the world seemed to be at a standstill. The malice in Chuck’s dark eyes was nothing compared to the shock that was only beginning to register on Maverick’s face. Even though the accusation had come from a disgruntled and drunk ex-boyfriend, Jetta would not call him an outright liar. If Maverick would grant her some grace, she’d sort it all out for him. Then, if he never wanted to see her again, she at least could cling to the reassurance that she’d left no secrets between them.

The comfort of that thought was as thin and brittle as rice paper.

“Chuck! What a surprise to see you here.” Out of nowhere, Jack swooped in to help disarm Chuck. It worked. Chuck’s face brightened when he realized who had his arm around him, and was edging him to the exit.

“Jack! I’ve been meaning to thank you for helping me find my sister.” With a hiccup, Chuck laughed and ran his hand down his face. “I mean, *your* sister.”

Jack apologized to Jetta with his eyes, though it was unnecessary. His was a minor indiscretion. Jetta was the one who would need to wear holes in her dress as she got down on her knees to beg Maverick for forgiveness.

“Here’s the thing,” Jack said, his voice becoming lost in the din of the reception the farther away he pushed Chuck. “When I told you where she was, it wasn’t an invitation to stalk her out here.”

“But—” Chuck protested, trying in vain to stay put as Jack scooted him outside.

“I’m going to take you on a trip to the airport and make sure you fly home. How does that sound?”

The doors closed behind Jack and Chuck, though Jetta continued to stare. Maybe it would have been better if Jack had shoved her out into the snow. Then she wouldn’t have to

hear what Maverick thought of her. Of her deception and depravity.

When Jetta brought herself to peek at Maverick, he was staring at his boots, hands on hips and face obscured by his cowboy hat. She wished she'd have told him not to wear it, so she'd have some clue to what he was thinking.

Her voice was barely a tentative squeak when she spoke his name. "Maverick?"

Without a word, he put his hand on her lower back, ushering her to a door near the exit. Opening it up, Maverick followed Jetta into a stairwell. Their footsteps echoed as they climbed several flights of stairs to the top, where a steel door guarded the entrance to a large terrace used as an entertaining space in the warmer months. Pushing it open, Maverick took a gasping breath of air when the cold hit them. He undid the top button of his shirt and tugged loose his bowtie. Walking several strides ahead of Jetta, Maverick tipped his face to the navy blue sky.

Jetta wanted to dive into his arms, and feel his reassurance that everything would be alright. Instinctively, she knew that wasn't an option. She had betrayed him. Maybe not as severely as he was imagining, but a knife in the back was a knife in the back.

"Maverick?" she asked, her pulse still thudding in her ears.

He spun around, his face devoid of all expression. "Is what Chuck said true?"

Jetta gulped, trying to move the lump in her throat. It wouldn't budge. "Sort of."

"Can you please explain how a person can *sort of* be a cheater?"

His words were hard, and even as they wounded Jetta, they also offended her. He was taking Chuck's side before she even told her version of the story.

"It's true that I dated Chuck for a couple of months before coming to Peppermint Hollow," Jetta said, trying to keep the

words from quavering, either from distress or anger. “During our last date, I found out that Chuck was married.”

“So you were seeing a married man?”

“It wasn’t so black and white, Maverick. Yes, I dated him while he was married. No, I didn’t *know* he was married.”

The scoff that Maverick let out was another blow. “How do you not know a person’s married?”

“It’s called lying. Chuck took off his ring, never invited me to his apartment, rarely held my hand in public... New York City is a big place. It’s possible for people to live double lives there. Call me a bad person for believing someone at face value.”

His hands still on his hips, Maverick stared across the fields and forests between The Pinewood Barn and where his house was nestled between the trees. It wasn’t that much of a stretch to guess he wished he was there instead of hashing out Jetta’s sordid past.

“Chuck had me fooled. I cannot tell you how ridiculously stupid I feel for not seeing any of the signs,” Jetta lamented. “I guess that’s what I get for being so smug, thinking I deserved a guy like him. I thought he was the one good thing in my life... an inkling of hope that I wouldn’t always be struggling to get my footing. It hurt worse than you can imagine finding out I was the other woman. Do you know how embarrassing it was? If I could have crawled under a rock and hid the rest of my life, I would have.”

Maverick said nothing, though Jetta could see his jaw working by the pale moon and starlight. On any other night, she would have wondered at the expanse of the universe, except right then, her problems seemed bigger than it all.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Maverick asked. The thread of hurt in his tone made Jetta wince. It was part of what had kept her silent on the subject, knowing it might kill their relationship if he found out. “You know what my father did...”

“I think that’s *why* I didn’t. Not only was I ashamed of what had happened, I was afraid it’d trip you up if you knew.

Maybe you wouldn't see my side, and would dismiss me before you even gave me a chance."

Maverick swung his eyes to hers, pinning her in place. "So you misled me because you don't think I'm capable of forgiving?"

That was the knockout punch. The world spun, and Jetta saw stars, and not the kind twinkling in the heavens. He was absolutely right. She had tried to push him into a box of her making so she wouldn't have to be uncomfortable. None of this would have happened if she had given Maverick the benefit of the doubt even in the slightest.

Jetta moved toward him. "I'm sorry, Maverick. I—"

He held up a hand, keeping a barrier between them. "I appreciate your honesty. I don't know if I can say I'm glad Chuck was overstating what happened, but I can see how he could have tricked you."

There was a caveat coming. Jetta could feel it, and preemptively, her heart ached.

"But I need a while to think this through." His face still neutral, Jetta felt like a stranger to him as he stared at her.

Tears swarmed her eyes, and her vision went fuzzy until they began falling. She hated herself for giving away how much this fiasco messed with her. Maverick barely seemed annoyed with his cool indifference while Jetta was sure her world was ready to come crashing down.

A stubbornness born of anger put starch back in her posture. She dried her tears and glowered at Maverick. "Take all the time you need."

Wrenching open the steel door, she let it slam shut behind her without a backward glance at Maverick and everything she was knowingly leaving behind.

CHAPTER NINETEEN



MAVERICK

Maverick knew before dawn the next morning that he'd made a mistake.

A big one.

Actually, it'd been hours before when he began to comprehend the gravity of the situation. After cooling off on the terrace of The Pinewood Barn, he'd gone to find Jetta. He searched for her in all the places he could think she might hide out during the reception, but she'd vanished. When he asked, and no one had seen her, dread seeped in and poisoned him. The ultimate confirmation that he'd screwed up was her absence from the bouquet toss.

While taking photos as a wedding party, Amelia had matter-of-factly stated that she'd never caught a bouquet in her life, so Jetta had challenged her to try this time. Technically, Amelia was a guest at the wedding first, and a wedding specialist second. With a look of sheer determination, Amelia vowed she'd snatch that bouquet before anyone else even saw it coming.

As Maverick watched sullenly from the shadows of the room, Amelia indeed won the bouquet. Wryly, Maverick knew Jetta wouldn't have let her triumph so easily if she was there.

But she wasn't. The thought slammed into him like an angry bull on the run. His last exchange with Jetta played on constant repeat, and each replay, he picked apart his reaction with increasing bitterness. Yes, he'd been blindsided, but he'd let the pain of his past shape his response. He was looking for a reason to be hurt, and he'd found it, never mind that Jetta was nursing wounds, too.

It had taken all Maverick's courage, bolstered by his absolute humility, to knock on her door in the lodge. He was met with deafening silence. If she was inside, she refused to see him grovel and stayed silent. If she wasn't staring at the ceiling, trying to numb the pain Maverick had inflicted, then where had she gone?

The creeping panic that he'd done irrevocable harm to the woman he loved tangled up his insides and when he'd finally resolved to go home, praying for a miracle come morning, he couldn't shrug off the fear that Jetta's disappearance was final.

Going to bed was out of a robotic habit more than his desire to sleep. Tucking one arm behind his head, he stared into the inky blackness permeating his room. All this time, he'd thought he was better than his father. Maverick huffed a humorless laugh at himself. Turns out, he was *exactly* like his father. Hurting a woman was hurting a woman, no matter what form it took.

Even though he had stayed in his bed all night, sleep had not been his companion at all. Every time Maverick shut his eyes, all he could see was the pain on Jetta's face and hear himself stubbornly refuse to listen to her side of the story. Maverick had turned her into the villain instead of empathizing with her as the victim.

If Jetta refused to take him back, he would deserve every iota of ire she populated for him. After hours of letting her feelings multiply, it was possible she'd never want to see his face again.

If he was going to have any luck at improving his chances of convincing Jetta he wasn't a scoundrel, he would have to find her first. Kicking off the sheets, his feet hit the rug under his

bed, making the old floorboards squeak in protest. Winning her back wouldn't happen because he hoped it would. It would require work. Thankfully, Maverick's momma had ensured he had a good work ethic. There was nothing he wouldn't do to express his heartfelt regret and unending love for her, even if it meant giving away all his stubborn pride. It had crept up on him, how much he needed Jetta, and since she was so unexpectedly torn from him, the contrast of his lack was exceedingly stark to the abundance he'd had only yesterday morning.

Maverick pulled on his jeans over his long johns. The snow was sticking around, and it was looking likely that the ranch would enjoy a white Christmas in a few weeks' time. He pondered how Christmas might look different this year than it had in the past. Though he'd been content to pass the day with friends, Jetta would be the tipping point this year. If she was back in his arms, preferably long before the holidays, he promised himself he'd never make another Christmas wish ever again. She was his miracle, his dream come wonderfully alive. The beating heart of all his Christmas cheer.

After a quick breakfast of fried eggs, sausage, and orange juice, he opened the back door. Making kissy noises, he called Queenie over for her morning oat mash. "Come and get it while it's warm, girl!"

Queenie's hooves crunched over the snow as she briskly trotted to the door. Without a second glance at Maverick, she plunged her head into her bucket.

"Nice to see you, too." Stroking her neck, fuzzy and staticy with her thick winter coat, Maverick double checked that all her blanket clips were latched. "I'm going to be gone for a good part of today, alright? I messed up with Jetta, and I have to make it right."

Queenie pricked her ears and lifted her head, her jaw working in a sideways grind. She sniffed at his cheek, slobbering bits of the oats and molasses she was sucking down. Laughing, Maverick ran the back of his wrist across his face and rinsed it off in the sink.

“Is that supposed to be for good luck?” He scratched Queenie’s ears before she dove in for more sweet-smelling mash. “You just finish up your breakfast, and I’ll be back later tonight to give you more. Have to keep meat on those old bones of yours.”

If only people were as easy to talk to as horses.

He shut the door, slung on his heaviest coat, and took off in his truck. Driving slowly around the more populous parts of Peppermint Hollow Ranch, there was no initial sign of Jetta. He hadn’t really expected her to be out in the cold, rubbing snow angels into the ground with the kids whose families were staying at the lodge and surrounding cabins, though it would have made it easier to approach her if she was.

Then, Maverick spotted Jack. They’d only met once the night before, but Maverick knew it would be foolish if he passed up the opportunity to ask him if he’d seen Jetta.

Parking his truck off the side of the road, Maverick jogged over to where Jack was loading his suitcase into the trunk of his rental car. “Good morning, Jack.”

Jack turned around, and his face hardened, almost imperceptibly. He had *definitely* seen Jetta after their squabble. “Hey, man. Maverick, right?”

He knew plenty well what Maverick’s name was. If he was going to use indifference to put a roadblock between his sister and Maverick, he wouldn’t fall for the trap. Drawing on his usual patient temperament, he ignored Jack’s low-key barb.

“Hey, have you seen Jetta lately?” he asked.

“Yep.”

For several seconds, the men stared at each other. Jack’s hands slid into his pockets, and he rocked on and off his heels, his face turned upward in a devious smirk. Maverick never had a little brother, but the annoyance Maverick was feeling for Jack was universally understood. At least he was doing it to protect Jetta.

“Mind telling me where she is?” Maverick asked, keeping his voice calm and unthreatening. “We had a... I need to talk

to her. Sort some things out.”

“Like how you called her a liar?”

Maverick’s heart turned into a lump of coal. Jetta had *definitely* told Jack what a loser Maverick had been.

He cleared his throat. “In my defense, I never actually called Jetta a liar.”

“Implication makes any synonym effective, don’t you think?”

“Sure. I can see your point, although I’m not here to argue semantics with you. There were some things that caught me off-guard, and I reacted poorly. I admit I was wrong, and I want to tell Jetta what an idiot I’ve been. It was unfair of me. I want to make it right.”

“That’s noble of you.”

“I’m not trying to be noble. I made a mistake, and I’m trying to own up to it. I’m not perfect, and this is my attempt to make amends.”

Jack folded his arms, and instead of the pesky younger brother, he took on the stance of concerned and doting father figure. As frustrating as Jack was being, Maverick liked that he cared so much about his sister. “That’s a good start.”

“I tried her room last night, but she didn’t answer.”

“That’s because she slept on the couch in my cabin.” Jack tipped his head to the small, classically rustic cabin he’d stayed in for the wedding. “After making sure Chuck got a ticket to the first flight back to New York, I came back to find her sitting on my front step.”

“Makes sense. I bet she had a few choice words about your unintentional invitation for Chuck to come visit you.”

The speed of Jack’s higher processes glitched, and his mouth fell open as he blinked. Maverick had beaten him at his own game. “How did you—?”

“Lucky guess. More than one of us disappointed Jetta last night.”

Chuckling, Jack slammed shut the trunk of his car and rubbed the back of his neck. “Point taken. We both put ourselves in the metaphorical doghouse last night.”

“I’m sure you can appreciate how awful it feels, then.”

Jack’s hands found his hips, and he stared at the cabin as he considered his options. “She told me not to tell you anything.”

Unexpectedly, Maverick’s heart leapt into his throat, rattling around like it was trying to escape. “Why?”

Amused at the obviousness of Maverick’s question, Jack shook his shaggy hair, only a shade lighter than Queenie’s furry coat. “I thought you already knew she was ticked at you, bro.”

“I know. But I mean why won’t she let you talk to me?”

“Because she’s afraid.”

That made Maverick perk up. Anger, Maverick could understand. But fear? “What’s she afraid of?”

“Honestly? I think she’s afraid that she’ll fall so madly in love with you that she won’t be able to extricate herself if you ever broke up. Like, she won’t remember where she ended, and you began.”

“I don’t ever want to break up with her.”

Jack snorted. “You have a funny way of showing it.”

The humiliation of messing up so badly, and so soon after they’d both bravely tread into the unknown, with all its thin ice and pitfalls, reaffirmed how much he needed Jetta.

With a forceful sigh through clenched teeth, Jack hung his head. He muttered under his breath, “She’s going to kill me for this.”

Maverick held stone still, afraid to scare off the one chance he might have to elicit Jack’s help. His patience was rewarded when Jack caved and met his eyes.

“I know I should respect Jetta’s wishes, especially since I let slip where she was to Chuck, and he turned into a creepy stalker, but I think you’re different. Not only do you matter

more to Jetta, I have a hunch that you love her more than anything, too.”

A snaking clench encircled Maverick’s throat. He swallowed to loosen it. “The man I was before I met Jetta is barely a memory.”

“Dude,” Jack groaned. “Save the mushy stuff for my sister.”

“I will if you tell me where she’s at. I won’t even mention that you made me jump through flaming hoops to find her.”

“Can’t.” Jack’s shrug bordered on unceremonious. He didn’t seem to understand the life or death predicament Maverick was in. Perhaps not of his mortal existence, though if Jetta discarded him, it might be as dire.

“Why not?” Maverick snapped.

“She left.”

“What? When?”

“Early this morning. *Unnaturally* early. I told her it should be illegal to wake up after a wedding reception before noon. People need time to recuperate after that level of partying. But does she ever listen to me? Nope.”

Maverick clapped a hand over his eyes, trying to stave off the instant headache his brain was currently suffering because of Jack’s news. “She’s not gone permanently, is she?”

Permanent. The word burned on his tongue worse than vinegar doused on a blistering sunburn.

“Nah. Didn’t she tell you? She’s attending an artist retreat for the next month.”

There was an even split in Maverick between relief and chagrin. Jetta wasn’t gone forever, though she was definitely out of reach. He tried to remember all the places and artists she was slated to visit. Was she traveling south first, then east? Or maybe she was going southeast altogether.

“Chill, Maverick. You look like death,” Jack quipped.

“So, she’s planning on coming back? Here?” Maverick pointed to the ground under his cowboy boots to make certain

Jack understood what was being asked.

“She’s going to have to. Sometime during our heart to heart last night, she asked if I’d drive her stuff back to New York and store it at my place until she figured out where she was going.”

That wasn’t a good sign.

“You told her no?” Maverick asked, keeping his hands busy scraping the loose hay along the edges of his coat pockets. He was dangerously close to clasp them and falling to his knees otherwise. For Jetta, he would, but not Jack.

“*Pfft.* Of course I did. I flew in, and even if I had space in my car for all her artistic hoarding tendencies, I don’t care to live tiptoeing around all of her stuff in my apartment for who knows how long. She was thinking about skipping the retreat altogether and heading to New York this morning because she’s seriously doubting that anything she does matters, including her art. It’s been a struggle for her to measure her meaning and impact on the world through her creativity.”

“This is all my fault,” Maverick grumbled through locked teeth.

“Not all of it, but a pretty sizeable portion of the pie, yeah,” said Jack. “I talked her out of skipping.”

“How?”

“I gave her practical advice, like that she shouldn’t make any rash decisions while she was upset, and reminded her she’d told me no less than a dozen times how excited she was to go. There was no way I would let her heap on another regret.” Jack flashed a haughty glance at Maverick, suggesting he might be lumped in that mess, too. “She already has enough of those.”

Taking a step, and then another, backward, Maverick rested against his truck. Adrenaline made his body quake, and even with the throbbing pulse in his head, his mind raced, trying to discern the best possible way to get to Jetta. Ideally, she wouldn’t have slipped through his fingers, but he’s the one who loosened his grip when he hurt her. Kicking himself now

wouldn't bring her back, and would stunt his ability to think rationally and figure out how he was going to convince Jetta to give him another chance. Selfishly, Maverick wanted her here, though even if he found her, he knew how important this creative excursion was for her. Distance was a minor inconvenience to getting to the woman he loved, but he couldn't ask for the time she'd already planned to invest in her talent.

"I can see you're thinking this through," Jack said sagely. "Can I give you a word of advice?"

"I'd gladly accept it."

"Don't chase her. Sometimes, Jetta gets wound so tightly that the only thing keeping her from exploding is distance from whatever triggered her. And after Chuck kicked off the ruination of her evening by unexpectedly showing up, she was adamant that she wasn't interested in being pursued by you."

The suggestion would have been crippling if he didn't believe Jack, as tough as he'd been on Maverick, had Jetta's best interest in mind. Sorting through his other options, Maverick patted his pockets, feeling for his phone.

Again, Jack read his mind. "I wouldn't try calling either. At least not yet. Remember how calling and leaving voicemails went for Chuck?" Maverick nodded, remembering the loathsome expression on Jetta's face when Chuck had called during their lassoing practice. "She's already proven that she's not above blocking numbers to maintain her sanity and make a point."

For all his scrambling, Maverick was still firmly in square one. "What do you think I should do?"

Contemplating for a second, Jack's face brightened when he figured out what Maverick might try. "How much do you know about the romance genre?"

"Like, books?"

"Sure. Books, movies, people's love stories."

"Not a lot."

“The reason I’m asking is because a girl I dated once told me about grand gestures. They’re the special acts people do for someone they love.”

“Like proposing?”

Jack barked a laugh. “That’d be one of the most extreme examples, though if you tried that on Jetta, I guarantee she’d hightail it to New York.”

The patience that was so often a part of Maverick’s personality was waning. He wanted Jetta back, and the longer he waited, the more of his heart necrosed. “So, what would be a grand gesture?”

“Think breakfast in bed or doing her chores for her. Whatever you think might help her remember why she fell in love with you in the first place.”

At first, the mental digging Maverick did yielded few results. Nothing worthy of his admiration of Jetta. Then, a tiny ember lit up the darkness. It burned brighter the more Maverick cultivated it until the hoofbeats of his heart were pounding against his ribs. He couldn’t completely envision the scope of what he hoped to achieve, but he knew there would be no doubt for anyone how much he loved Jetta.

“Thanks.” Maverick offered a handshake to Jack, who accepted with a firm grasp. “That helps.”

“Good. Like I said, give her time to cool off, and if you play it right, I won’t have to run you off, too, like I did with Chuck.” Opening the driver’s side door, Jack grinned at Maverick before he got in. “I’m rooting for you, man. Jetta loves you. You just have to make her remember why she does.”

CHAPTER TWENTY



JETTA

If it was possible, Peppermint Hollow Ranch was more stunning than when Jetta left. A fresh powdery snow made the ground appear to be a carpet of crushed diamonds, and though there had already been oversized Christmas tree ornaments in nearly every evergreen tree when Jetta had left in a huff, she was positive Mary and Nick had found more to put on display. The colorful baubles swayed merrily in the breeze, making the pliant branches wave like they were welcoming Jetta back.

Hope, comfort, and a sense of home clashed with anxiety, uncertainty, and a mildly simmering anger. Jetta knew she'd left Maverick without explanation, but after she had time to collect her thoughts and calm down enough to be rational, she fully expected to hear from him.

Not a peep.

Jetta wrestled her suitcase out of the trunk brusquely, as if it was responsible for her floundering love life.

"It's only one day, then you can move along," Jetta muttered through tightened teeth.

Except, what did moving on entail? The thought of returning to New York was almost laughable. She was no longer the

woman who craved that crowded and fast-paced lifestyle, and the spider web of attraction at the idea of returning had frayed. Staying in Peppermint Hollow was even more impossible. She would have to find her purpose and calling in the world without Maverick as her tall, broody, cowboy muse.

More conflicting emotions ran headlong into each other. Jetta imagined two snorting bighorn rams slamming their foreheads into one another at full speed. A huff of laughter was all she could manage at the comical visualization of her tedious emotional state.

With her suitcase out, the rest of the contents of Jetta's trunk would have to wait. Her legs were in a hurry to carry her to the safety of her room, away from Maverick's potential notice. He could be anywhere, and she wasn't sure if she would prefer to see him angry at her, bereft and consequently repentant, or indifferent. Jetta herself wasn't sure how she might react if they came face to face.

Slamming the trunk, Jetta turned to reach for her suitcase. It had drifted several feet away from where she had set it. Strange. The snow must have lubricated its wheels, causing it to slide down the miniscule slope of the drive. Slinging her purse strap crosswise over her body, she walked to retrieve it. With her hand extended to grasp the extended telescoping handle, the suitcase inexplicably lurched a few more feet, like she was a repelling magnet.

Blinking in triplet, Jetta wondered if her eyes were deceiving her. "What on earth...?"

The hackles of Jetta's neck stood on end. Something wasn't right here. The hill wasn't steep enough for her suitcase's erratic behavior, and nothing else was the obvious cause. Cautiously, she tried again. Her suitcase twitched like it was dancing awkwardly farther away.

This prank reeked of Porter and Cooper, who probably saw an opportunity to laugh at Jetta from their hiding spot somewhere beyond in the burly evergreens that hugged around the lodge and cabins. With her feathers thoroughly ruffled, Jetta wasn't about to let them get the better of her. Pouncing

toward the suitcase, she missed and landed belly-side down in the snow. The sting of cold invading her skin between her untucked shirt and waistband almost distracted her enough that she nearly missed a vital clue in the mystery—wrapped around the lower part of the suitcase and previously concealed by snow, she spied a lasso.

She had discovered the means of propulsion for her suitcase, and as the unnerving fear ebbed, it was replaced by frustration that welled up in her gut like a bubbling, stinking bog. She was not in the mood for this puerile game.

“Porter? Cooper? If you think you’re being funny, I will hunt you down and make you pay!”

Her voice was a snarl, and it rebounded between the evergreen needles. Mercifully, she was out of the line of sight of anyone else, sparing her any raised eyebrows, though she wasn’t positive guests at Peppermint Hollow Ranch wouldn’t hear her. No matter. She would be gone by the following morning, and whatever anyone thought of her would be of no consequence. Standing to her full height, Jetta stalked after her luggage as it rounded a blue spruce and disappeared.

“So childish,” Jetta griped. “And I thought Jack was annoying.”

She stomped footprints into the snow as she stormed after her suitcase, stopping abruptly when she passed the curve of the tree and noticed something unusual. What appeared to be one of her paintings was prominently displayed in front of the thickly packed needles. Yes, it was one of her creations, though it had been transposed onto cardstock, not canvas, and was hung on a line, like a banner. The memory of the original creation transported her back in time, recalling each stroke of the brush that brought it to life. Jetta had ventured out to the creek one oppressively hot summer evening and set up her easel in the center of the gurgling water, atop a sturdy table top of blue slate. She’d wanted to catch the unique colors of the rock and the way the dipping sunlight sparkled against the water.

Attached to the paper replica of her artwork was a photo of a smiling middle-aged couple, and a handwritten note in scrawling cursive. They identified themselves as the owners of the painting and briefly shared what had attracted them to purchasing it. Apparently, they'd fallen in love with the whimsical, ethereal flow of fluid water over hard rock, almost like they could feel the difference in texture with just their eyes.

Turning about-face, Jetta recognized another of her paintings. A recreated sunset as the sun eased below the distant treeline, west of the Peppermint Hollow Ranch lodge. The painting had been one of her favorites due to all the color Mother Nature provided so readily. According to the attached photo and letter of explanation and gratitude, a family had bought it. The mother had grown up in Peppermint Hollow, and Jetta's painting made her nostalgic for her childhood when she'd sit on the porch swing with her parents, sipping lemonade at the close of the day.

Jetta's hand trembled as she covered her agape mouth. Whoever had lured her into this temporary display of her work had collected dozens of similar stories, each attached to a painting that had been born of her work and talent. Reading each note from the owners of her paintings satiated a part of her wonder. She had spent hours trying to imagine where her paintings were ending up.

Now she knew.

Jetta's heart staccatoed in her ribcage, fueled by excitement. The suitcase she'd been chasing had come to a stop, though she walked right past it, still following the trail of her impromptu outdoor gallery. It led her to a grove of trees—the same one she'd been hiding behind, waiting to spy on Sterling's proposal to Darby—where Jetta's breath hitched.

Maverick stood motionless, looking more handsome than she remembered with his three-day beard, oiled cowboy hat, and jeans that emphasized his long, muscular legs. All her rehearsed lines had long fled her mind. Words congealed on her tongue, and all she could do was stare. His face was unreadable, and a thread of worry snaked through her. Was this

a cruel joke? A final good riddance from him? Fight or flight cues rose within her until she saw the movement at the corner of his mouth.

A grin hitched one side, changing the entire landscape of his face. He was glad she was there, if also diminutively unsure.

She licked her dry lips, which still remembered how it felt to be pressed against his. That memory was a particular challenge to keep out of her mind, especially with his kissable mouth in the flesh, right in front of her. “You did this?”

He nodded, his rich brown eyes never leaving hers. “I wanted to talk with you, and knew that might not happen unless I could convince you to give me a chance. One conversation can change the trajectory of a lot of things, and this one is especially important.”

An unexpected and rueful smile hoisted Jetta’s countenance, ever so slightly. She had a vague recollection of Chuck imparting the very same wisdom before, the night she found out he was a scoundrel. It remained to be seen whether or not Maverick would resurrect himself from the depths of his errors. Jetta, too, though for all her faults she had *tried* to speak to him before he made it clear he wasn’t interested.

Her wounded heart closed and became steely.

“What took you so long?” Jetta raised her chin parallel to the powdery snow beneath her feet. “You kind of waited until the eleventh hour. I’m leaving. Tomorrow.”

“I didn’t wait. I’ve been planning this conversation since the morning you took off on your retreat.”

His cryptic answer and the jovial twinkle sparked something within Jetta. Even after a month of swearing she’d never forgive Maverick, her resolve was already as unstable as a newborn fawn stumbling on a sheet of ice. He spoke with confidence, as if he already knew how this conversation was going to end.

Jetta’s curiosity propelled her into talking. “Planning what?”

“Jack and I had a good long talk right after you left.”

“How? Did he threaten you? That’s what he’s always telling me he does to guys who bother me.”

Maverick’s head tipped side to side, and his eyes narrowed as if he was reliving their talk. “Tried to. That’s what a good brother is supposed to do, isn’t it?”

“I told him if you two crossed paths before he left, that I didn’t want to see you.”

“I know,” said Maverick. “That was the only thing that kept me from driving all over the country to find you. You needed your space, and I respect that.”

“Then why didn’t you call?”

Apparently, Maverick was wrestling a similar battle with his sentiments as sadness and a simultaneous amusement morphed his expression. “I’ve witnessed firsthand what lengths you’re willing to go to when you’re angry at someone. You ignored Chuck when he called and ultimately blocked his number to disarm him. I couldn’t risk you doing that in case I needed to call you as a last resort.”

“Fair point.” Jetta protectively folded her arms. Maverick wouldn’t crack her open to extract her feelings without her permission. “I might have made it unduly difficult to communicate with me.”

He shook his head and grinned. Drawing her lips in between her teeth, she knew his smile had the uncanny ability to prevent her from denying him. The last thing she needed was for Maverick to coax words she wasn’t sure she wanted to say right out of her mouth.

“I kept in touch the whole time,” he said.

Wrinkling her nose, Jetta stared quizzically at him. “What are you talking about? I didn’t hear a peep from you.”

Maverick adjusted the brim of his hat, and not for the first time, Jetta appreciated the stereotypically masculine cowboy look on him. He was delicious, no matter how he presented himself, though there was nothing in the world that would convince Jetta that any look could outshine Maverick in his natural state as a born and bred cowboy. “When Jack and I

spoke, he told me what he had noticed about all the romance movies he'd seen."

Unexpectedly, a snickering laugh popped out of Jetta. "Jack's been watching romance movies? My brother... the macho guy who I've never seen put on anything that doesn't have at least five explosions in it?"

"I think he's been learning to compromise through the women he's dated." Jetta grunted, accepting Maverick's observation as reasonable. "Jack schooled me about the grand gesture."

"The grand gesture?" Jetta parroted. "What are you talking about?"

"In movies and literature, it's when one love interest does something special for the other. Sometimes, it's small, like a card for no reason, or doing the dishes so the other person can take a load off. Sometimes, it's bigger than that."

"You're not going to propose, are you?"

Momentarily, Maverick was stunned by her question, and Jetta enjoyed the triumphant feeling of being on top. It wasn't long before Maverick sorted through his confusion, realizing they were at the spot where Sterling had secured Darby's hand.

"Not yet." Maverick flipped Jetta's question, leaving her speechless and flushed. "I wouldn't throw away a perfectly good opportunity, knowing what the outcome would be."

"Then what is it?" The hard lump that had taken up residence in her throat after Maverick had refused her upon learning of her past mistakes returned. No amount of swallowing would release it, and she was tired of crying. "You already made it clear that I'm damaged goods. The mistakes I've made make me irredeemable."

Sorrow tilted Maverick's brow, tightening them together. "That was a mistake, Jetta. One I will work to correct until you know how much I regret hurting you."

Staring at her boots, half covered in snow, Jetta wiped away a round of pesky tears leaking from her eyes. "You know I'm sorry, too. It was wrong of me to keep what I'd done secret

from you, especially knowing what you'd gone through as a boy. I was afraid that you wouldn't give me a chance because I had hurt people the same way that you had been injured. The irony of my failings wasn't lost on me."

"I appreciate you were conscious of that, except you shouldn't be apologizing for what Chuck tricked you into." Maverick walked toward her, his boots crunching in the dry snow. He hooked his finger under her chin, beckoning her eyes up to his. "You do not need to bear that burden. It's done and gone, and if I haven't made it clear, I want you more than anything. I will gladly give away my hurt and my stubborn clinging to the past for the hope of a future with you."

His words were sweeter than hot maple syrup on a stack of Mary's pancakes. For all of the possible outcomes of her return to Peppermint Hollow Ranch, she hadn't allowed herself to hope that this might happen. Hope—dare she say love—fizzed in her veins. It was an awakening from the hibernation of the joy she had felt when she was sure Maverick adored her. While she was away, Jetta was unsure how she had survived the bleak possibility of starting life again without his steady presence.

Maverick continued. "I can't go back to the way things were. Everything has changed for the better because of you. Me. My attitude. My outlook on life. My *house*."

Jetta pressed her fingers to her lips as she giggled. "It was oddly satisfying and domestic to decorate your home for you."

"That's what I mean. *Every* part of my life has improved exponentially because I have you in it." Maverick stopped, his cheeks turning the color of fresh tulips triumphantly pushing their way through a late season snow, and he stalled. "Had you in it?"

The question made Jetta feel both a blistering blush and swelling tears. It was all up to her. Whatever she said, Maverick would accept. If he didn't know, there was only one answer on Jetta's tongue. "You have me, Maverick."

That was all that was needed to shatter the final barrier between them. Maverick drew her into his embrace, trembling

as his mouth crashed into hers. Their kiss was a medley of healing and desire, love and hope. It sent hot bolts through Jetta's extremities, and she wondered if there had ever been a kiss so superior in the whole of existence. The sweetness of his lips on hers, the press of his hands on her back, the erratic thud of his heart completed her in a way she had never felt before. With Maverick, Jetta was elevated to new heights. There was no way she could go back to the way things had been.

"I love you, Maverick," she murmured, burrowing into his arms.

He groaned. "You have no idea how happy that makes me. To know that you love me. Do you know how much I love you? Really? I never want you to doubt it ever again."

"I have to say you've done a phenomenal job reminding me." He kissed Jetta's cheekbone, her forehead, her chin. She sighed, her breath coming out in a steaming swirl. "The only thing I wish is that we wouldn't have wasted so much time. Christmas should be a season of joy. We've both spent the past month being miserable."

"For one, it's not Christmas yet. We have time to make up for what's been lost. Or maybe I should say, make out?" The way Maverick made his eyebrows jiggle pulled a laugh out of Jetta. "Our time apart wasn't all bad, was it? I bet you learned a ton on your retreat."

"I did." Jetta curled her hair around her ear. "I learned some new techniques, networked with some fantastic artists. There were a few bright spots almost every day, too."

"Yeah?"

"Once, I came into my room at night to find the most beautiful bouquet waiting for me at the front desk. Another time, I found a couple of brand new brushes I'd been wanting to get in my bag. Then, there was a fresh tin of cookies waiting for me on my bed. If I didn't know better, I would have thought they were straight from Mary's kitchen." Jetta traced her finger along Maverick's sharp jawline, remembering how

much she missed the curve of his face. “I think I had a secret admirer.”

“You did.”

By the pointed look in Maverick’s eyes, an epiphany struck Jetta like a sledgehammer. Her secret admirer hadn’t been random. Somehow, Maverick had made it all happen.

Jetta drove her finger into his chest. “You...?”

He simpered, confirming her suspicions. “Remember what I was saying about grand gestures? Since I couldn’t call, and I didn’t want to take a page from Chuck’s playbook and show up unexpectedly, I had to warm you up to me somehow. It took some planning, and calling in a few favors from the other artists, but mostly, it went off without a hitch.”

Not for the first time, Jetta was agog at all Maverick had done to win her back. A stab of guilt propelled her into another furious apology. “You did all of this for me? And I haven’t done a single thing in return for you. I—”

Gently, Maverick stopped her by pressing his warm fingertips to her lips. “This wasn’t a contest or a comparison, Jetta. I didn’t do any of it so you’d be in my debt. All I wanted it to be was a reminder of all the amazing things you’ve done to bring light and beauty into the world. I’m sorry I didn’t honor that in you before. All I want is for you to know that you’re amazing, and that I will love you with everything that I have as long as you’ll allow me to.”

The sincerity of his confession made Jetta’s heart ache, pining for Maverick in a way it had never done for another man. It was the confirmation Jetta sought. The final blow, silencing her doubts. They had made it through this challenge, stronger than before, and trying to quantify her happiness would have been as useless as trying to hold the sun in her arms.

“How did you know all of this would pay off?” she asked. “That I wouldn’t snub you?”

He shrugged, one strong hand sliding along the back of her neck to pull her in for a deep and intimate kiss before looking

longingly into her eyes. “I knew you’d come around.”

EPILOGUE



JETTA

“Does everyone have a seat?” Mary asked, clapping her hands to get the room’s attention. There was a murmur of agreement as people snuggled into couches and squeezed into nooks and crannies. Jetta smiled, reflecting every other beaming face in the lodge’s living room space. “Everyone knows how a white elephant gift exchange works, right?”

Jetta was barely listening as Nick used his booming voice to review the rules. She was too distracted by the swirl of Maverick’s thumb on the back of her neck and how it hypnotized her. Melting against him, she sighed contentedly. To think she might have spent Christmas any other way than snuggled next to him was inconceivable. She was right where she was meant to be, with the man she was destined to love. Things had a way of coming full circle in the end, and she loved that about life.

Maverick swept Jetta’s hair out of the way to whisper into her ear. “Which one did you bring?”

A full body shiver shimmied through her, and Jetta smirked deviously. “Wouldn’t you like to know?”

He mirrored her expression, and Jetta's nervous system went haywire. How he could drive her wild with a single look never failed to thrill her. His look of desire was all for her.

"Everyone take a number from the bowl," Mary said, fluffing the folded numbers like she was salting popcorn.

"Yes!" Cooper pumped his fist. "I'm first."

"That just means everyone will steal from you," Harlow pointed out.

"Except, according to Nick and Mary's rules, the first person gets the last chance to steal at the end if they don't have something," Cooper countered.

Jetta noticed how mysterious Harlow's gaze was and wondered what she might be up to. "We'll see."

"I'm seventh." Jetta pinched the paper from Maverick's grasp. "Second? Better luck next time."

Maverick leaned in again, nuzzling his face into her neck. "You know I already got exactly what I wanted for Christmas, right?"

His breath was warm on the delicate parts of her skin, and she had to bite her lip as he worked kisses across her collarbone. Whenever he worked his magic on her, she could barely remember her own name, much less any details about silly games like white elephant gift exchanges. If he wanted, she'd gladly leave right then and go kiss under the mistletoe Mary had hung at the back door. Ironically, it was in the same room where Jetta and Maverick had enthusiastically succumbed to the first kiss that completely changed the trajectory of their relationship.

The series of wholehearted, passionate kisses that followed were equally, if not more so, exciting and satisfying. Jetta had long understood there was something potent and surreal about connecting with Maverick through his lips.

"Who's first?" Amelia asked, bouncing eagerly in her spot on the couch opposite Jetta's.

Cooper held his shred of paper triumphantly over his head. “Me.”

Standing, he accidentally stepped on Sterling’s pinkie and almost tripped over Nori on his way to the gift pile. Selecting a large box wrapped in red, white, and green flannel print paper, he shredded it as he tore it eagerly off.

“What is it?” Clara asked, weaving her head side to side to see what was in the box. “I can’t see. Who brought it?”

Harlow snorted, which started her shoulders shaking in a silent giggle. Her face went beet red, while Cooper stared blankly into the box he’d torn open. Through gasping breaths, Harlow raised her hand. “It’s mine. I brought it.”

Reaching inside, Cooper let the box fall away as he held an elaborate basket full of bathroom essentials—lotions, a scented candle, bath bombs, a loofah, and a mini manicure set.

“You’re going to be the best smelling cowboy on the ranch,” Porter quipped.

“I *knew* you’d pick mine,” Harlow said with a snicker. “It was a social experiment, picking something humongous and wrapping it in masculine paper. And you fell for it!”

Cooper arranged his features into a haughty expression, taking his basket with him back to his spot. Sitting down, he opened a tube of hand lotion and squirted a glob on his palm. Rubbing it in, he sniffed at it. “Not bad, actually.”

Jetta moved to extract herself from Maverick’s lap, except he tightened his hold around her. “Where do you think you’re going?”

“It’s your turn to go pick a gift,” Jetta answered.

He shook his head subtly. “Stay put. I’m rather comfortable, aren’t you?”

Jetta relaxed back into him, enjoying how his firm torso made an excellent recliner, and Maverick pointed to a festive gift bag exploding with glittering tissue paper. It was surfed over the crowded room to Maverick, who dug through to the

bottom and pulled out a sampler box of fine chocolates. Jetta's mouth watered.

"There's a shop that sells them near my grandmother's house," Nori said. "They're the best chocolate you'll ever taste. Pure chocolate *heaven*."

"Then I want them," Darby said, revealing she had the third place spot.

Before Jetta could bemoan the loss of the chocolate, Maverick kissed her cheek and promised to buy her weight in the delectable chocolate, with expedited shipping.

The game continued, both raucous and enjoyable, with gifts being coveted and swapped as fast as they were unwrapped. Warmth glowed within Jetta, and she intentionally identified the feeling so she would always remember it. Christmas was so often reserved for children, with its wonder and gleeful anticipation, except right then, with Maverick holding her, surrounded by some of the best people she had the privilege of associating with, the joy barely contained within Jetta exceeded anything she had ever experienced. Maverick was the shining star atop it all. He was what made the holiday merry and bright, and what made Jetta look forward to what every day might bring for the two of them.

As if reading her mind, Maverick's arms tightened around her, and he kissed her cheek. Butterflies took flight within her, and her heart clattered along happily in her chest.

"If anyone's feeling snacky, Nick's brought out the last of the cookies from the oven." Mary pointed to her husband, carefully transporting the gingersnap cookies from the kitchen. "Get 'em while they're hot."

Jetta didn't even have time to lick her lips before Maverick was up, heading for the plate with the promise that he'd bring a cookie back for her.

"Who's number seven?" Nori asked.

Jetta raised her hand. "Me."

Padding as carefully as a cat around the remaining gifts, there was still a variation of sizes and shapes to choose from,

none of which she could guess. With all eyes expectantly on her, she dug to the bottom of the pile, picking up a large, if flat, box carefully wrapped in paper printed with geometric Christmas trees.

The sound of paper tearing was satisfying, and her gaze flitted to Maverick. Her smile widened as her eyes caught on his, feeling like they were sharing a secret without a single soul being the wiser to it. With the paper off, revealing an unmarked box, Jetta's mind tried to solve the mystery. She shook it, wondering if it was an oversized puzzle. The resulting sound was indistinguishable, though it moved as one rather than a thousand scattered pieces. A canvas print, perhaps?

Porter offered her a pocketknife to cut the tape. "Here. Be careful, though. I just sharpened the blade."

"Who brought that one?" Nori asked.

No one answered.

Porter's blade slid through the tape like a hot knife put to butter. Closing it carefully, Jetta returned it to Porter, and opened the flap. She turned the box over and caught the familiar, stiff feeling of lariat rope in her hand.

"It's a lasso," she said. While a hiccuping giggle reverberated from her mouth, her vision was blurred by welling tears. "I have my own lasso."

She blinked, pardoning the tears as she looked at Maverick, who grinned boyishly. "Never know when a good lasso might come in handy."

Jetta sniggered again, her fingers running along the knots in the rope as she freshened the loops. So much had happened since Maverick had taken the time to teach her a skill she'd never thought she'd have any actual use for. Months later, she was eternally grateful she hadn't balked at his invitation. It had been the start of something special between them. A stepping stone across otherwise impassable terrain to where Jetta existed with Maverick now, in green pastures that stretched into a bright, promising future.

“Do you even know how to use one of those?” Cooper asked incredulously. “Here. Pass it over and I’ll—”

Twirling the rope in a tight, quick circle, Jetta aimed it at Maverick. It landed on its intended target, and without even knocking a cookie off his plate, Jetta cinched the rope around him. The gathering was momentarily shocked into silence.

“I don’t think Jetta needs any instruction from you,” Clara hissed in a stage whisper to Cooper.

Mary started the applause, and was quickly joined by Darby, then Harlow and Nick, until the entire room was commending Jetta’s impressive roping skills. Her favorite prize was the grin on Maverick’s face, the same one that made her heart stumble over itself whenever Maverick aimed it at her.

Tightening the remaining slack on her rope, Jetta drew Maverick over to her. He didn’t resist in the slightest. When he closed the distance, Jetta ran one hand around the back of his neck, her fingers tracing the edge of his hairline. He took off his cowboy hat and used it for privacy as he kissed Jetta until she was dizzy from desire. The shrill whistles and rollicking catcalls from their friends only made her smile stretch wider.

“And you thought there wasn’t any practical use for lassoes,” Maverick teased, his mouth so close to her ear that his lips brushed across her lobe before he pressed them to the delicate skin right below. She had to bite her lip to keep her pleasure to herself.

“I’m certainly seeing the benefit of them now,” Jetta said. “Silly me, thinking they were only useful for wrangling escaped cows.”

“Can’t say I’ve ever had one used on me before,” Maverick said. “Not gonna lie. I thoroughly enjoyed it.”

“Same.”

Unable to resist another kiss, Jetta stood on her toes and pressed her mouth onto his. Wriggling out of the rope’s restraint, Maverick encircled his free arm around Jetta, holding her firmly against him. She responded in kind, throwing both arms around his neck, forgetting where she ended and he

began. It was her favorite sort of kiss with Maverick, and she knew she wouldn't ever grow tired of them.

When Maverick pulled away, their breath mingling as they rested foreheads against each other, Jetta hoped Maverick could sense how grateful she was to him. For everything. His willingness to see past her pride. His bold pursuit. His stubborn refusal to give up on her, even when she'd messed up. His wholehearted and unflinching love.

"Best Christmas *ever*," Maverick said, eyes still pinned exclusively on Jetta as they hid behind his hat. "I love you, Jetta."

"Thank you for giving me the best gift ever." Jetta glowed, happiness the fuel that ignited the heat blossoming on her cheeks and burning on her lips. "Because I love you, too, Maverick."

AMELIA



FOUR DAYS LATER

“**Y**ou’ve outdone yourself, Amelia,” Darby gushed. “This is just... *wow*. Maybe we should have held out for a Christmas wedding. Huh, Sterling?”

Sliding his hand low on her waist, Sterling drew Darby in close and whispered, “I don’t have any regrets about our wedding day. Do you?”

Amelia noticed a shiver ripple through Darby, and though Amelia’s face was half obscured by a glittering gold and black Colombina mask for the masquerade ball she’d been commissioned to run, she didn’t doubt her eyebrows were so high they were peeking over the top.

“No.” Darby’s grin took over her face. “I don’t suppose I do.”

Sterling kissed her neck, but before they were too far gone, Amelia held up her palm to them and in a stern voice, gave them a warning. “You two are married. Go get a room if you’re going to indulge in that kind of P.D.A.”

Darby tipped her head back and cackled. She and her newly minted husband were still very much in the honeymoon phase of their relationship. While the majority of Amelia’s senses were wildly happy for their successful love story, particularly

her hand in helping them reach that point, there was a crumb of Amelia that wished she could indulge in that type of relationship. Her heart pinched.

It wasn't a totally unexpected pain. She had witnessed hundreds of couples come into her life, thoroughly in love, during her time at Peppermint Hollow Ranch, and her lack of personal romance often threatened to chasm into sadness. Not that anyone else was to blame for her being single. It had been a conscientious choice to remain unattached, promising to herself that she was waiting for the perfect man to come along before she would allow herself to love. That was the only way to remain safe. To preserve her heart in a single, complete entity.

It was an unrealistic expectation, sure, but one she would adhere to after years of watching her mother's heart break time and time again. In Amelia's world, picking her mother up off the bathroom floor to dry her sobbing, mascara-dripping eyes had been a regular enough occurrence that it'd become normal. It'd also been scary and traumatic.

Without Sterling's lips on her person, Darby remembered what she'd been talking about before their brief escapade. "I've only ever been to a handful of black tie events in my life, and this has to top them all. Christmas, a masquerade ball, *and* a charity event? Your job is so amazing. You're amazing *at* your job."

"Thanks." Amelia simpered and clasped her hands. "These kinds of parties have always been my favorite."

Sterling cocked his head and narrowed his eyes behind his bronze Venetian mask. "Not weddings? I would have thought for sure you would be all swoony over people tying the knot. *Especially* people who you helped get together."

Amelia's eyes swept the dance floor, to where Jetta and Maverick were fused together, turning in slow circles as they swayed to a ballad the live band was performing. It was only a matter of time before Maverick dropped on a knee with a ring for Jetta. There was another assault on Amelia's heart, though it was replaced by hope that she'd be the one to help Jetta and

Maverick navigate their wedding. If Amelia couldn't find the man for her, then she'd be perfectly content helping others make the commencement of their unions spectacular and memorable.

"Weddings are fun," Amelia confessed. "Very romantic, most of the time."

"But not your favorite?" Darby pressed.

"No." A hefty sigh preceded Amelia's full confession. "Too often, they're so fraught with drama and stress that by the end of the night, I'm usually nursing a tension headache. Few families can allow themselves to celebrate the pairing of their loved ones without either fretting about everything being ridiculously, ultra meticulously perfect. Worse, there are people who see weddings as opportunities to rehash past hurts. Do you know how many people I've heard accusing their cousin of being a cheat after their grandma died, or who never got over their sister stealing their high school boyfriend, like it was an acceptable topic in the middle of the bride and groom cutting the cake? Way too many times."

"Whoa." Darby was wide-eyed. "I'm glad none of our guests were like that."

"It's not all weddings, but enough." With a snap of her fingers, Amelia remembered another of her least favorite events she had to plan. "Same for high school reunions. Nothing worse than witnessing forty-somethings act as petty as their teenage selves."

"Oh, man." Sterling shook his head and chuckled. "Maybe you should write books about all the crazy stuff you've seen."

"It'd be a bestseller." Amelia was distant as she superficially considered Sterling's suggestion. The things she had seen and heard were enough to fill volumes. "Although I don't know when I'd find the time. My job keeps me busy enough as it is."

A curl from the pile knotted on the top of Darby's head tumbled down when she vigorously nodded. "I know it does. I have zero clue how on earth you find the energy to do this week after week. I'd run out of ideas."

So far, Amelia had never stumbled into a creative rut. Entertaining was satisfying. It gave her purpose and warded off any sneaking loneliness that might spring on her like a snake slithering from under a bush. Exceeding her clients' expectations with her lavish parties also bolstered her pride in her work and reputation. Amelia was born to entertain and delight people. It was her small contribution to make the world a better place. An evening of delectable food, delightful music, and an ambiance that made patrons gasp when they walked in the door could do wonders helping people forget their troubles, even if only for an evening.

"Don't get me started, or I'll never stop talking about table arrangements and the benefits of a live band versus a DJ," Amelia said, adjusting the fit of her mask higher on her nose. "You two should go enjoy yourselves. I need to check on a few things to make sure they're running smoothly. And don't forget to bid on the silent auction. It's for a good cause. You won't regret emptying your pockets for the children in the state's foster care system."

"I already told Sterling I want to win that couple's spa package," Darby said.

With a groan, Sterling's knees crumpled a few inches. "You know I'm not big on letting people *other* than you massage me."

"Who said I was taking you with me?" Darby's silky dress cascaded like a waterfall as she playfully kicked up a heel. "Maybe I was thinking of inviting Jetta to go with me. She'd appreciate a spa day."

As Darby grabbed Sterling's hand, he laughed at her tease, and the two of them sank effortlessly into the swirl of dancers at the center of the room.

Amelia smiled and ignored the dull ache in her chest. It was better than being strewn on the floor, sobbing into a bath mat over a man who'd pulverized her heart. Her happiness for her friends was more than enough to sustain her.

She only had to repeat it to herself six more times before it stiffened her resolve.

Amelia strolled through The Pinewood Barn, checking that the kitchen staff had everything they needed to keep the food coming for a crowd of two hundred and fifty. The women's bathroom trash was almost overflowing, so she hauled it to the garbage herself. After washing up, Amelia continued to skirt the edge of the room, surveying the handiwork of her hours of preparation for this particular party. A combination of the warm, dim lighting, emanating primarily from fairy lights dangling from the ceiling, aided by Christmas lights hugging the outer beams and swooping from the rafters was cozy. The bonus anonymity of wearing masks was enough to put all the guests at ease. She watched people laugh and make connections, lick the last crumbs of food off their lips, and serenade one another to the music.

If there was such a thing as perfection, Amelia thought a night like this might be it.

At the entrance to the venue, two Christmas trees stood like sentinels at either side of the doorway, decked out with warm white lights and oversized red and cream baubles. She stared at the trees, admiring how cozy and Christmas-y they were, when someone bumped hard into her shoulder.

She spun around, careful to keep her face neutral. Even an inebriated guest merited politeness. Amelia was an ambassador of Peppermint Hollow Ranch, and the way she treated people influenced their opinions of the place. It was the least Amelia could do to honor Nick and Mary, who'd been some of her favorite people of all time.

"Beg your pardon," said a man, standing a head taller than Amelia. "I didn't mean to run into you."

The impeccability of his manners set him apart. *Beg your pardon?* Who spoke like that? The thought lifted the corners of Amelia's lips. He seemed like a man with a story.

Unlike a majority of the guests, who were wearing the half-faced Colombina masks, the man had chosen a square-jawed Bauta mask that concealed his entire visage. Even with it on, Amelia could tell he had a firm, defined jaw. That and gorgeous, sea-blue eyes that were as inviting as a private

tropical beach. She could almost feel her toes wriggling into the warm sand.

You're happy being single, remember?

Amelia recovered from the possibly awkward pause in her response by polishing her smile until she was sure it was dazzling. "No worries. We're pretty packed in here tonight."

"Yes, but for a worthy cause. I have renewed hope in humanity when I see how many people will part with their hard-earned money to help others."

The man *definitely* had a story.

"I like your mask," Amelia said. "Where'd you get it?"

The man's eyes shifted uneasily. He wasn't totally focused on Amelia, almost as if he was looking for someone without wanting to be caught. Odd.

His fingers touched the smooth cheek of the mask. "Uh, I think it came from Italy. I'm not entirely sure."

"You're not sure?" Amelia readjusted her mask again. Her eyelashes were bumping into the rims of the eyeholes, making them tickle. "Are you one of those impulse buyers that one-clicks everything without doing any research?"

It had been meant as a quip, though Amelia cringed when she realized how rude it might come off. Fortunately, the man's eyes crinkled, and he chuckled. "Not exactly. My assistant got it for me. I would have been fine with a cheaper one. This one's metal and is heavier than I expected. My ears are tired from the weight."

As Amelia studied the intricate details of his mask, awed by the craftsmanship of it, she again noticed the uncomfortable shifting of his eyes. Was he concerned he'd be caught talking to another woman? Amelia had met a few of those types of people in her career, too. Insecure women who were sure everyone else was out to steal their man and were obnoxiously loud about it.

Normally, she would have graciously excused herself to let him off the hook, but something about his desperation

softened her heart. If he needed to hide, she'd be his accomplice.

“Want to dance?” she asked.

The man's shifting eyes zeroed in on her, holding her gaze in a way that made her stomach do acrobatics. If he wasn't grinning behind his mask, she'd give up her favorite pair of shoes. “I'd be honored.”

He held out his hands, letting her arrange herself in his grip as she saw fit, and in a sweeping motion, he whisked them to the center of the room. Where most couples swayed side to side in an intimate if forgettable dance style, Amelia's partner twirled and dipped and spun her around the room. She held to his firm shoulder muscles, and with his hand spread across her lower back, Amelia felt his complete, steady control.

“You're an excellent dancer,” Amelia said breathlessly. “I'm going to get in my steps today for sure.”

He chuckled lightly. “We're probably being too conspicuous, aren't we?”

“I don't know. You're the one trying to hide, not me.”

Amelia's bold assertion tripped him up, and it slowed their dance to a more reserved style, similar to the other couples. “How did you—”

“Your eyes. Your mask can't totally hide how expressive they are. Now the real question is who are you running from? A scorned lover? An obsessed stalker?”

“Worse,” the man said gruffly. “My girlfriend.”

That wasn't what Amelia had expected. “Come again? You don't want your *girlfriend* to find you?”

“It's ridiculous, I admit.” He ran his hand through his hair, the right juxtaposition of controlled and unruly. “Have you ever had a beautiful woman who should be everything you want, but just... isn't?”

“Not exactly, no.”

The man realized who he was asking, though his laugh was flat as he shook his head. “On paper, we should be a great couple, but I can’t get on board with it. I’m beginning to be skeptical that there is such a thing as love. Maybe it’s more that people find someone they’re okay with, and get comfortable, so they stick around.”

“What’s wrong with comfortable?”

“It’s alright once in a while, but I tend to associate it with laziness. Nothing particularly exciting about being idle. Where’s the growth? The passion?”

The smirk caused by his complaint was evidence of Amelia’s amusement. Her dance partner—whoever he was—was as tortured a soul as she, though instead of championing love, he was teetering on becoming a romantic pessimist.

“On the contrary. I’d argue one of the strongest attributes about love is its ambiguity. Sometimes, it manifests as comfort and ease, while other times, it’s more of the passionate whirlwind you’re craving. It should be two people who are unapologetically fierce about their loyalty and concern for one another’s well-being. Love can be so many things if it’s done right.”

“Isn’t love supposed to be easy?”

“I don’t know about easy...”

“I know we don’t know each other, but let me guess...” He dipped Amelia and while her red hair nearly swept the floor, his hand firmly held onto her hips and braced her between her shoulder blades. The foreign feel of a thrill sped erratically through her. “You’re a hopeless romantic?”

“You say it like it’s a bad thing.”

He huffed as he righted Amelia onto her strappy black heels. “I think romance has caused more trouble than it’s worth.”

Amelia could have hardly guessed what a hearty debate she’d be sucked into when asking the stranger if he wanted to dance, but the questions he posed gave her ample fodder for her consideration. “Let’s back up. You were lamenting that love shouldn’t be so hard, right? I’d contend that lots of stuff

that's worthwhile still requires work. Running a marathon, securing a promotion, mastering a new skill."

Several measures of upbeat music passed as he meditated over her question. "I'd say that's true, yes."

"Then I don't know why you'd expect love to be any different. Sure, fireworks might signal the initial attraction. That's the easy stuff, following your physical senses to a certain person. It's like saying chocolate is yummy. *Duh*. But to turn that chocolate into a masterful chocolate cake with delicious ganache and chocolate curls takes effort. Same with love, if it's going to pan out. I truly believe it has to be a partnership where both people are willing to put in an honest effort, even if it isn't always pretty. It doesn't mean you're pulling equally all the time. It should mean that you're trying by cheering each other on, and prioritizing one another's happiness, though."

Amelia couldn't see his mouth, but she knew a slow grin was cracking his stubborn resolve. His invisible smile was tied to her own, and her own lips lifted.

"I'm supposed to insert myself into that pep talk, aren't I?" he said.

"Hey, it's free advice. Take it or leave it."

A slim man in a porcelain and feather mask rushed toward them, and whoever he was, Amelia's dance partner appeared to recognize him. With his hand shielding his mouth, the interloper whispered to Amelia's temporary counterpart. Again, his eyes were the key. They widened, then narrowed, and finally grew dim as the sparkle corroded. Amelia never knew anyone to be so expressive with so little of his face actually showing.

When the informant left, Amelia's partner twirled her once and let go of his hold. Bowing formally, he kept his arms stiffly at his side.

"It seems like I've been found," he said. "My girlfriend has arrived."

It would have been wise of Amelia to end her involvement in the mystery man's dilemma then and there, and she would have if his plight wasn't so riveting. Amelia's gaze bounced faster than a grasshopper with a famished hen on her heels around the room. While there was some concealment from the myriad of masks, Amelia still recognized most of the guests. They were people she'd known ever since she arrived in Peppermint Hollow. Her friends. Some, she would consider family. It would take a lot more than a sparkling partial face covering to disguise them. Then, she saw her. A woman in a snugly fit red dress with a silver mask that was as cool as she was poised at the entrance. It was one of those Cinderella moments, when the woman knew all eyes were on her.

"Is that her?" Amelia asked.

He nodded solemnly. "The very one."

"She's prettier than a decked out, lit up Christmas tree."

The rumble of his chuckle was as satisfying as a faraway thunderstorm. "I'll be sure to give her your compliments."

"Please do." Self-consciously, she wrapped her arms around the middle, tucking her hands into her elbows. "You'd better get going. And don't forget about what we talked about."

"That relationships require work."

"That, or you should be gallant enough to break up so she's not wasting time trying to win you over."

One nod was his offering before turning his back to Amelia and strolling across the room like he owned the place. Amelia watched them for a moment as they greeted one another with a prolonged hug. Whatever he said next made his girlfriend tip her head back and laugh, her ruby red lips stretched over her pearly teeth.

"Who was that?" Clara asked, shimmying up beside Amelia.

She shrugged as much to appear casual as to work the inexplicable tightness out of her shoulders. "Don't know."

"You didn't get his name?" Harlow asked, appearing on Amelia's other side. "You danced with one of the hottest guys

in the room and know nothing about him?”

“How do you know he’s hot?” Raising her eyebrow so high she might lose it in her hairline, Amelia challenged Harlow.

“Trust me,” said Harlow. “There’s not a mask in this world that could hide how handsome he is. I mean, look at the rest of him.”

Amelia’s ridiculous brain took Harlow’s suggestion as an order and studied him. He did make a tux look delicious.

“I never said I didn’t know anything about him,” Amelia said, corralling the conversation back to something other than ogling the man. “I got him talking, and he was telling me about the trials and tribulations of having a perfect girlfriend that he’s not sure he loves.”

Clara gasped. “You got all of that out of him that fast? *How?*”

“Asked the right questions and challenged some of his beliefs,” Amelia answered.

Oscillating her head while she laughed, Harlow poked Amelia. “Why does this sound familiar?”

“What?” Amelia asked, genuinely confused.

“It’s because it sort of sounds like your problem,” Clara volunteered. “How you’re desperately clinging to the hope that you won’t fall in love until the perfect man shows up. Well, look at that couple. They’re literally as close to perfection as is humanly possible, and they aren’t without trouble.”

“I—” Amelia protested.

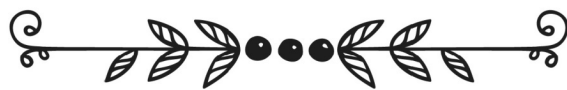
“She hit the nail on the head,” Harlow agreed. Amelia’s face flushed. She hated when she was ganged up on, and unaware it was coming. “The moral of the story is that there are no perfect men, only imperfect beings who *want* to love each other so fiercely it hurts to be without them. Sometimes, we get it right. Sometimes we mess up. Isn’t it time you quit hiding behind the ruse of wanting a perfect man, and let yourself love some lucky man?”

Clara breathed a sigh with a smile painted on her pretty lips. “Love makes me so happy.”

“Same,” agreed Harlow.

Amelia fastened her gaze to her former partner, wishing she was still discussing the merits of his relationship than being hounded for not having one of her own. It would make things so much less complicated if she wasn’t terrified of love. Then, her resounding answer would be yes.

“Someday, maybe I’ll make you both ecstatic.”



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ABOUT RACHAEL

Rachael E liker lives in Indiana with her husband and children on their own slice of paradise. When she's not writing, she's probably running lonely stretches of country road, riding her old horse, or working on a home improvement project. She enjoys reading just about anything, having a good laugh, and making memories with friends and family most of all.

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