

A romantic couple embracing in front of a Christmas tree. The man is wearing a blue jacket and the woman is wearing a red sweater. The tree is decorated with white and red ornaments.

A SMALL
TOWN LOVE
STORY

All I Want for
Christmas

A. J. WYNTER

ALL I WANT FOR
CHRISTMAS

A.J. WYNTER

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ABOUT ALL I WANT FOR CHRISTMAS

When an avalanche closes the roads, Henri finds herself trapped without a place to stay in her worst nightmare - a small town at Christmas.

They call me the Girl Grinch. And I like it.

Covering a small town Christmas movie for my newspaper is the worst assignment I've ever been given.

My grumpy editor has to be punishing me; because the only thing I hate more than Christmas - is small towns.

Luckily, he is letting me put my own spin on the story and I am going to expose that the movies have got it wrong.

I am going to show the world that sexy mountain men, quaint cupcake shops, and Christmas miracles aren't a thing.

If flannel shirts, frosty mountain men, and steamy sauna scenes are your jam, you will love All I Want for Christmas.

ONE

HENRI

THE AIR CONDITIONER in the office building must have been set to arctic. I shivered and held my leather moto jacket closed tight around my chest as I slipped into the one empty seat around the boardroom table.

“It looks like Christmas threw up in here,” I whispered to Janie. A fake tree covered in white lights blasted out thousands of lumens from the corner and plastic garlands hung over the doorway, loaded with candy cane lights. The whole thing was so hideous it had to be ironic. We were, after all, a biting, cynical news journal specializing in alternative views sprinkled with a little bit of farce.

Instead of riffing with me as our boss, Mike, droned on about numbers, Janie shot me a look that said shut up.

“Glad you could join us Henrietta,” Mike said. He flicked on the lights and the power point presentation dimmed behind him.

“The traffic...” I jutted my chin to the window and set my helmet on the table.

Mike sighed. “Henri, it’s Los Angeles, and you’ve lived here your whole life. You’d think you’d have learned to adjust your travel time accordingly.”

A quick glance at my watch told me I was only five minutes late. Mike must be in a mood. Our office was typically laid back and someone was always late to the meetings, today it just happened to be my turn.

“And, don’t you drive a motorcycle?” Marc with a c as he liked to correct anytime anyone spelled his name, muttered under his breath. Marc with a c was never late. “Can’t you just weave in and out of traffic?”

I shook my head and raised my eyebrows, stopping just short of an eye roll. “I’m not Tom Cruise.” Although, I had driven up the shoulder to sneak past the line of honking cars.

“Enough.” Mike sat in his chair and steepled his fingers. “Our advertising numbers are down and we’ve lost a major sponsor due to Janie’s article about the dangers of eating spinach.”

Janie shrugged and turned her palms up. “It was a joke... mostly.” She added with a smile. “Oxalates.”

“Well, the spinach burger company didn’t find it funny.” Mike crossed his arms. “For the next month, I’m calling the shots on your articles.”

A collective groan spread through the room of writers. One of the reasons I worked at *The Platypus* was it gave me the freedom to write about whatever I wanted to write about.

Marc sat upright and pulled out a spiral bound notebook. “Keener,” Janie whispered under her breath.

I elbowed her. “It’s your fault,” I hissed.

“Don’t blame me, blame the oxalates.” She pumped her eyebrows, obviously not taking Mike’s news seriously. Janie could write about the health benefits of sprinkling carpet fibers into your smoothie and not bat an eye. On the other hand, I

had to feel passionate about my subject matter. Or, at a bare minimum, interested. Passion was an emotion that had left my writing career the minute I walked through the doors of the Platypus office.

“Henrietta.” Mike cleared his throat as he scrolled through his laptop. “How about we start with you?” He looked at me over top of his horn-rimmed hipster glasses, “...since you were last to the party.”

“Fire away, boss.” I draped my arm over the back of my chair hoping that it wasn’t a sporting event. My bravado was a front, I was shaking in my motorcycle boots. I wasn’t sure if anyone else could feel it, but this assignment, it felt like a test.

Mike’s smile seemed slightly sinister and I knew that whatever gig he gave me wasn’t going to be a good one. “Since we all know how much you love Christmas...” everyone in the room murmured and there were some snickers. I was vocal about my hatred for the holiday. We were forced to do a secret Santa office gift exchange, and no one wanted me to pull their name, because, well, I exclusively gifted chunks of coal. I thought it was funny, I’m not sure last year’s recipient, Marc, agreed.

My breath caught in my throat. He was going to send me to cover a parade, or some kind of holiday five-mile run. “It’s growing on me.” I lied. Last year Janie had called me the Girl Grinch, and I’d liked it.

“Good.” Mike nodded. “I’m sending you to cover the filming of a movie.”

I leaned forward and put my elbows on the table, resting my chin on my knuckles. Hope coursed through me. I loved movies and the entire filming process. As though sensing my

interest, Mike grinned. “A Christmas movie. Like the kind from a greeting card company.”

“Oh fuck no.” I clapped my hand over my mouth.

Mike raised his eyebrows.

“I mean...” I struggled to find words that weren’t of the four-letter variety. “Come on, Mike. This isn’t the kind of stuff that we cover.”

“Right.” Mike chewed on the end of his pen and then pointed the gross mangled mess at me. “That’s why we’re going to put a Platypus spin on it.”

“How so?” I furrowed my brow, unsure how covering one of those cheesy and predictable holiday films was going to be edgy.

“I want you to tell the real story about small town holidays – break open the narrative that these companies have been cramming down people’s throats. Show us the real side of a small town at Christmas time.”

“Small town?” I tilted my head. The assignment was definitely interesting, but I had been born in a big city, and I would die in a big city. “You mean drunks with missing teeth reminiscing about their high school football glory years at the local bar while their wives sit at home with the teenage kids that they had when they dropped out of high school as a pregnant teenage kid themselves?” I was practically out of breath after my small-town stereotypes rant.

“Mike grinned. I knew you would get it.”

The leather in the chair creaked as I leaned back and crossed my ankle over my knee, already thinking about the different angles of the story. Mike wasn’t punishing me, this was the best assignment I’d ever been given. Taking a stab at

Christmas and the ridiculous sugar cookie bakery lumberjack stereotypes all at once? “I’m in.”

“I knew you’d be.” Mike tapped something into his computer and then turned his attention to Marc.

“Wait, Mike.” I held up my hand to stop him. “You said small town. Where exactly am I going?”



CHANCE RAPIDS. I’d never heard of it and had to zoom in a billion times on the computer screen to find it. Of course it was in the middle of nowhere. I booked my flight, the closest airport was six hours away, and filled out a booking request for a rental car. After closing up my tiny studio apartment and putting the cover on my café racer, I took a cab to the airport, my duffel bag stuffed with every piece of warm weather clothing I could find.

The heater in the rental car blasted louder than the radio, but I still couldn’t get the windshield of the tiny sedan to clear. When the rental car clerk asked me where I was going, he tried to upsell me on a gas guzzling SUV. But, I wasn’t falling for it, or the extra insurance for rock chips in the windshield – I knew that those were all unnecessary upsells.

But, as the city skyline disappeared behind me, and the first pebble on the road was launched directly into the windshield by the tire of a logging truck, I wondered whether I had made a terrible mistake. The mistake was confirmed as the tires spun and the engine whirred faster than a sewing machine, pickup trucks whizzed past me, even though I had the foot pedal stamped to the floor.

My heart pounded and my hands were sweaty as I gripped the steering wheel, my body feeling every little shimmy and shift as the car danced over the snow- and ice-covered roads. Maybe Mike wouldn't have to fire me at all, maybe this stupid road trip would take care of me for him.

My GPS said the trip would take six hours, but it took ten white knuckled, sweaty armpit hours of driving before I descended the steep hill into Chance Rapids. Just as I arrived, snowflakes started to fall; big, fat, swirling snow globe flakes – the kind that would swirl around the credits in the opening of romcom.

“Of course you're beautiful,” I reluctantly admitted as I turned onto the main street, named, I rolled my eyes, Main Street. Garlands of greenery were strung between wrought iron lampposts, each adorned with enormous wreaths dripping with red Christmas ornaments. Couples walked hand in hand down Main Street and, as if on cue, the man wrapped his arm around the woman and she giggled and leaned into him.

They stepped under the light of the streetlights and I involuntarily craned my neck to see what their faces looked like beneath their long scarves and colorful hats. When I saw past all the wool, my breath sucked in – their jaws were chiseled and their skin perfect, they looked like they had stepped off a runway in Paris.

I shook my head and chuckled. I hadn't just stumbled into the perfect mountain town, I must have made a mistake and turned onto the movie set.

My eyes met the woman's and she yelled something I couldn't hear. But – she was pointing. I turned my gaze forward one second too late and my body slammed against the steering wheel as I drove over a very big curb. On a

motorcycle, when you're skidding into trouble, the secret is more gas. As I heard the undercarriage of the car make a sickly scraping sound, I stamped my foot on the gas and was momentarily lifted from my seat as the rear wheels drove over the curb and then the trunk of the car slammed heavily to pavement.

“Oh my God. Oh my God.” I glanced in the rear view mirror, hoping that the couple hadn't seen me jump the curb. They stood frozen, looking stunned and then the man started to walk towards me. Mortified, I turned the wheel down the first side street and fishtailed away, hoping that I wouldn't run into the couple for the rest of my weekend stay.

Luckily, I'd executed my getaway onto Sycamore Street, home of the Sycamore Inn, and my room for the weekend. I glanced in the rear view mirror, luckily, the couple hadn't followed me. I sunk into the uncomfortable seat, thankful that the car was so crappy the airbags hadn't deployed into my chest.

My boots crunched in the fresh snow as I jogged to the front door of the Inn. I pressed the lever on the ornate handle, it didn't budge. I leaned my shoulder into the black door, the bells in the wreath jingling with my body slam. I rubbed my shoulder, there was no question. It wasn't stuck, the door was locked.

I looked for a doorbell, and when I couldn't find one, I lifted the brass knocker and rapped three times. And while I waited, I hugged my body and stamped my feet on the welcome mat to keep them warm.

“For fuck's sake.” I pulled my jacket closer together and shuffled to one of the frosty windows and peered into a dark lobby. My fingers shook as I found the Inn's phone number

and waited for someone to answer. An old answering machine clicked on and an old lady named Mabel asked me to leave a message.

Taking a deep breath helped to hold back the tidal wave of profanity I wanted to unleash on poor Mabel's answering machine. Through gritted teeth I explained to Mabel that I had booked the Inn through an online service and was due to check in that day. I walked backwards across the street, staring at the picturesque inn, hoping for any sign of life – a light, a curtain pulled back, anything.

“Great.” I muttered.

I dropped heavily into the driver's seat of the car and drummed my fingers on the steering wheel. After waiting another five minutes for either a return phone call, or someone to miraculously emerge from the sleepy Inn, I decided I needed to find a different place to stay. The car wasn't an option, the temperature had been steadily dropping and I was a warm climate creature. “I'm not cut out for this shit.” I huffed out a puff of steam as I turned the key to the ignition, my stomach clenching as a grinding shook the car. I relaxed when the little engine purred to life – it wasn't a healthy purr, more like a tabby cat on its deathbed, but it was something. I had to stomp on the gas pedal to keep the engine running. I must have broken something when I drove over that curb.

Omens weren't my thing, but something told me that this was an ominous start to my assignment. “Don't be gentle, it's a rental,” I muttered one of my mother's old sayings as I forced the lame car onto snowy Sycamore Street and returned to Main Street.

I made it to the one set of stoplights, luckily it was flashing yellow and the open sign in the window of the gas station was

the only sign of life on the main street. I wondered where the couple had gone, they were probably sitting in front of a fire, cozied up on a bear skin rug, clinking champagne glasses together in matching fair isle sweaters.

The bell jingled above my head as I stepped into the diner attached to the convenience store and slid into an orange vinyl booth.

“You look like you could use a coffee,” a woman who looked to be in her sixties sidled up to the table and shook a coffee carafe.

I inhaled and smiled at her. She had the kindest eyes I’d ever seen. “I could use more than a coffee.” I slid the white mug toward the woman, whose name tag read Muriel.

Without skipping a beat, the lady pulled a flask from her apron and added a glug of an amber liquid to my coffee. “Around here we call that a local’s pour.” She winked. “Now dear...” she paused and to my surprise, slid into the booth across from me and set the carafe on the formica table. “You look like you could use a hand.”

My recoil was microscopic, but the stranger sitting across from me seemed to be a psychic. Or, maybe I looked like I’d been run over by a logging truck, one of the many that had passed me on the drive to this god forsaken town. Instead of asking Muriel to leave me alone, maybe it was the local’s coffee, or maybe I just felt inexplicably comfortable with her, I heard my troubles falling out of my mouth. The Inn, the car, nowhere to sleep. It was below freezing and unless the diner was open all night, I was going to have to sleep in my car in her parking lot.

Muriel smiled and grasped my hand. “Oh...” her whole body shook as she chuckled. “I thought that there was

something seriously wrong.”

I tilted my head, wondering if Muriel was hard of hearing.

“We can fix both of those things. My husband is the mechanic here, he’s home now, but can look at your car in the morning.” She pointed to the parking lot. “And look, you left it in the perfect spot.”

The car was parked sideways blocking the entrance to the big garage door.

“And, I have a guest cabin that we usually rent out, you know like the Air Bee’s, or whatever they call it. But, it’s free for...” she tilted her head. “How long are you in town?”

“Just the weekend.” I breathed a sigh of relief. I had only been in Chance Rapids for an hour and I was already ready to leave.

“Perfect.” Muriel slid out of the booth and flicked off the ‘open’ sign. I noticed the hours posted below and realized that the kind waitress had stayed past closing so that I could drink my coffee. “You’re coming home with me.”

From anyone else’s mouth it would’ve sounded creepy. And, against all of my big city girl judgement, I let a complete stranger take me home.

TWO

JACK

THE WOODSTOVE CRACKLED, casting an orange light through the otherwise dark cabin. Lying under my mom's handmade quilt I watched the clouds blanket the sky, covering the almost full moon, darkening the field and pathway between the cabin and the main house.

Rolling over, I pulled the quilt tighter and let the babble of the half-frozen creek outside the window lull me to sleep. No need for a white noise machine, I thought as I drifted off. I don't know how long I was asleep, it could've been five minutes, or five hours, but I was jolted awake by a banging on the wooden door.

"Jack." My father's gruff voice yelled from the other side of the door. The wind whistled and a drift of snow tumbled onto the floorboards as my father stepped inside.

"What is it?" I bolted upright. My father respected my privacy, and as a thirty-year-old man, hadn't been woken by a parent in the middle of the night for over twenty years. "Is it mom?" I had pulled on my wool socks and shoved my feet into my big arctic boots that were beside the bed.

My father shook his head. "Your mother has lost her mind," he grumbled.

“What?” My father didn’t sound serious, he sounded pissed off.

Taking my plaid jacket from the hook next to the door, my father tossed it to me. “Your mom has brought home a stray. You’re going to have to sleep in the main house for the weekend.”

I glanced at the slept-in bed, the flannel sheets with snowflakes were rumped, and my wet socks hung over the woodstove. “I cancelled all of the vacation bookings.”

“Take that up with Muriel.” Dad turned and disappeared into the swirling snowstorm before I could ask him any more questions. I ran the vacation rental remotely for my parents. The little cabin next to the creek made more money for them than my dad’s mechanic business, so I felt a little guilty staying there while I was in Chance Rapids – but my mom insisted. Why pay rent to stay somewhere else when we have a perfectly good cabin here? She had crossed her arms, and there was no changing her mind. She said that she’d rather have me in the cabin than some city slicker. Now, I was getting kicked out in the middle of the night – for a stranger – likely a city slicker.

“This better be good.” I stoked the fire and braced myself for the cold winter night, wondering who the hell had convinced my mom to kick the oldest of her four sons out of his home in the middle of one of the coldest nights of the year.

Following my father’s snowy footprints along the well trodden pathway, I made my way to the main house, past the chicken coops, and barn, where the goats were all tucked away warm and cozy for the evening. My pajama pants, handmade by my aunt, fluttered in the arctic breeze. The flannel reindeer-printed pants were warm, but no match for the wind, and my

junk constricted into what felt like walnuts. Or maybe even chestnuts. I chuckled and picked up the pace, imagining warming my balls over a crackling fire, as suggested in the Christmas song. It sounded like part torture, part heaven.

Stamping off my boots in the mudroom, I glanced at the cuckoo clock just as that damn bird came out to yell at me one time. One o'clock in the fucking morning. I shook my head and stepped into the heat of the main house, the cookstove in the kitchen kept the main floor hot like a sauna and I started to thaw out – my balls thanking me for not subjecting them to any more inclement weather, or an open fire - returned to their normal state.

For one or two seconds.

“Jack.” My mom stepped aside so I could see the interloper. “This is Henrietta. Please take her to the cabin.”

I hoped that my coat was long enough to hide the instant attraction that surged to my cock. I cleared my throat. “Nice to meet you, Henrietta.”

“Henri,” she smiled and extended her hand. Against all the kitsch in my mom’s folk-art kitchen, the woman looked like a hot blond girl version of Edward Scissorhands – minus the scissor fingers. She was wearing all black, including her hat and fingerless gloves. The tips of her fingers were freezing, and her nails were painted a deep purple shade that almost matched her leather jacket. Henrietta Scissorhands was going to be a hard nickname to get out of my mind.

“Jack.” My mom snapped me back to reality. “Henrietta has had a long day. Please make sure the fire will last until morning.” Mom shoved a stack of towels and a set of sheets into my hands.

Dad had already disappeared upstairs and mom patted Henri on the back. “Jack will get you all settled.” Mom started up the creaky stairs then turned. “I’m sad to say that I won’t be here for breakfast, but if you can make it to the diner, they’ve got the best pancakes in town. Bob will do his best to have your car back on the road as soon as possible.”

“Thank you Muriel.” The girl’s voice was low and husky. And sexy.

“Right this way.” I made a showy gesture to the mud room.

“Concierge service?” Henri gave a sideways smile and I couldn’t tell if she was mocking me.

“Ha,” I laughed. “It looks like I’ve gotten a promotion from farm hand.”

Her eyes met mine and she furrowed her brow quizzically. It was her turn to wonder whether I was serious or not. “Farm hand?”

“And groundskeeper.” I opened the door and her hair whipped in the wind, and into my face.

“The cabin is...out there?” she pointed to the darkness.

“On a clear night you can see it from here, but it’s just on that ridge overlooking the river.” She paused on the bottom step of the mudroom and glanced into the house. She seemed nervous.

“I can give you the flashlight and the towels, if you’d rather get settled by yourself.”

She looked from me to the darkness. “It’s alright. I don’t want to take a wrong turn at the fence post and end up on the morning news. Unless you’re a serial killer.”

Her biting humor was as refreshing as the wind whipping in between us. “No. My job description only includes guide, farm hand, groundskeeper, and now, concierge.”

Her smile was wry and her eyes sparkled, even though they looked tired. “Lead the way Mr...”

“Lumber.”

“Mr. Lumber.” She scratched her cheek and I waited for a quip. It didn’t happen.

Her boots slipped and slid as she walked behind me, the light from her flashlight bobbing over the field as her arms swung wildly while she tried to keep her balance. As we reached the ridge, the clouds parted and the moon shone over the field.

She paused and turned in place a full circle. “Oh my God.”

I strained my eyes to see what she was looking at. Deer often made their way through the field and down to the creek, but I didn’t see any movement.

“It’s...beautiful.” She was breathing in steamy puffs. “It’s like diamonds.”

I had grown up in Chance Rapids, and even though I’d been away for years, I’d grown accustomed to the beauty in my own backyard. Seeing it through a newcomer’s eyes, I stopped to appreciate the raw beauty that I’d stopped seeing years ago.

I scooped up a layer of frozen crystals from the top of the snow. “They call this hoar frost.” I poked at the jagged snow on my glove.

“Well, then.” Henri stepped into the cabin. “I think I’ve got it from here.”

I chuckled. “Not whore-frost, hoar, like boar with an h.” It happens when the snow gets dehydrated, it’s beautiful, but it can be dangerous when you’re up in the mountains.

“Fascinating.” She murmured, clearly more interested in getting some sleep than learning about hazardous snow conditions. “I’ll remember that the next time I’m spelunking.”

Was she fucking with me? We either had great banter or both of us were idiots. I didn’t know her well enough to tell.

“You should see your face.” She grinned. “I might be a city girl, but I know what spelunking is.”

“Oh, thank God.” I shut the door behind me and put my other hand to my chest, as though greatly relieved.

“This is cute.” She sat on the bench beside the door to unlace her boots.

“I’ll get the fire and the sheets and then you can enjoy it. I left the curtains open, but if the moon shines too brightly, you can close them.” What a dumb thing to say, she didn’t need lessons on how curtains worked.

“That sounds like a song.” Henrietta reached into her jacket pocket and pulled out a tiny notebook and a silver pen. Then she scribbled something on its pages and tucked the notebook back into her coat. “I can do the sheets. Thank you, Jack Lumber.”

“You’re welcome, Henrietta...”

“Page.”

I made a mental note to replace Scissorhands with Page in my brain. “Page.” I nodded.

“Jack.”

“Yeah?” I paused with my hand on the latch to the door.

“Your last name, it...”

Here we go.

“Is it really Lumber?”

I nodded.

“So your name is Jack Lumber. Lumber comma Jack.” She sat on the rumpled bed with an amused look on her face. Her brow knit and she squinted her eyes. “You’re fucking with me.”

“You’ll have to find out.” Shit. That sounded so stupid. “Is your last name really Page?” That wasn’t much better. I needed some sleep.

“You’ll have to find out.” She stretched her hands over her head and her shirt lifted just above the waistband of her black jeans revealing a hint of skin.

I was flirting with the mysterious house guest. Someone who was just passing through. I was long past my one-night stand days, but there was something about Henri that made me want to go back in time to when I would’ve pulled that black tight shirt over her head and slipped into the flannel sheets with her, to see how many times I could make her come in the light of the full moon.

My cock twitched and I knew that was my sign to leave. “Good night, Henri Scissorhands.”

“What?”

“Until I ascertain the truth about your last name, that’s what I’m going to call you.”

She raised her eyebrows and looked like she was holding in a laugh. “I like it.” She yawned again. “Good night Lumberjack.”

I took a deep breath and headed to the main house and slipped into the bedroom I’d shared with my brother, the twin bedspring creaking with my weight. I’d only just met her, but Henrietta Scissorhands seemed different from any woman I’d ever met. She was witty and our banter came easily, and it didn’t hurt that she was hot, in an edgy kind of way.

But, I’d come home to Chance Rapids to rebuild my life, and I wanted a partner. A piece of apple pie girl that liked to chop wood, and go fly-fishing, not a cream filled delicacy, one that would taste incredible, but leave me full of regret the next day.

THREE

HENRI

I HADN'T DRAWN the curtains as Jack suggested, and had fallen asleep in the light of the moon, only to be awoken by the pink of the sun rising over the mountain peaks. Falling asleep had been tricky, the stress of the evening, mixed with the sensation of being so isolated and dependent upon absolute strangers, but most of all, the flutter of my heart kept me awake. Jack's dimples and his smile ran through my mind on a loop until sleep came for me, then I slept like one of the logs piled beside the woodstove.

In the early morning light, I added another log to the glowing embers and the wood crackled as the fire came to life.

The cabin had a tiny bathroom with a little shower, that exclusively supplied the iciest water I'd ever felt. Each stream of water felt like it was stabbing me, and after the fastest shower I'd ever taken in my life, I got dressed and warmed my hands over the stove.

After Jack had left, I'd crawled into the bed, forgetting that Muriel had provided me with fresh sheets. I was so exhausted I didn't care, and when my face hit the pillow all I could smell was Jack – and a twinge of desire, hell, not just a twinge, the sawdust and musky smell that I'd caught a whiff of when we stepped into the cabin, wrapped itself around me as I slept.

Now, slightly embarrassed, I quickly changed the sheets – it was a pointless exercise, but didn't want Muriel, or Jack, to know that I'd slept with his scent. Satisfied with the freshly made bed, I opened my backpack and opened my laptop – thankfully it was still fully charged. My first observations of Chance Rapids hadn't been great for my story – the damn town looked perfect. I wanted to crack open the small-town holiday stereotypes, but so far, it was like I'd stepped into my own perfect holiday movie – complete with a handsome lumberjack and a Mrs. Claus like figure who kept a flask of whiskey in her apron.

I sighed and tapped out some of the names and details of the people I'd met so far. Then I put on my warmest clothes and stepped outside. Jack was right. In the cold and crisp clear dawn light, I could see the top floor of the farmhouse peeking over the hill – and the lights were on.

“Good.” I gathered my things. As much as it would've been nice to curl up in the warmth of the manly smelling sheets and write by the crackling fire, I needed to get the assignment done – and the faster I worked, the sooner I'd be able to get back to the city. My flight was booked for the next night and I had some serious work to do in the next two days.

Chickens clucked from inside their coop, and some other barnyard animal made weird noises as I slipped and slid up the snowy pathway to the main house. By the time I reached the back porch, I was breathing steamy puffs of air. I could see movement inside the house and tapped on the single pane glass with my knuckle.

A man I didn't recognize opened the door. “You must be Henri.” His voice was gruff, but his eyes had the same warmth as Muriel, and his smile was the exact same as Jack's, but

hidden behind a huge snowy beard. "I'm Bob. Come in." He opened the door and gestured for me to come inside. I was met with the most delicious sweet baking smell and my stomach growled in response.

"Hi, Bob. Thank you for letting me stay here last night."

The man nodded. "Thank my wife for that." He pointed to the stove where a vintage glass coffee pot was percolating. "Help yourself to some coffee and the muffins are cooling on the counter."

Muffins. Could this family get anymore idealistic? Had the mountain pass doubled as a time warp and had I driven into the 1960s? "I will. Thank you, Bob." I unhooked one of the mugs that hung from the upper cupboards and the coffee steamed as I poured it full.

While I was busy pouring my coffee, Bob had put on his boots and was headed out the front door. I had assumed that he was taking me to the garage and rushed the back door to get my boots. "I'll be just a second." I slurped the black coffee.

"Sit." He ordered and pointed to the vintage table in the middle of the kitchen. "I've got some running around to do before I get to the garage. Jack will drive you into town after he's done his chores."

Chores? Zeesh. I had gone back in time.

I nodded and slipped into a chair, folding my foot underneath me. A shrill ring came from the stocky man's pocket and he pulled out a modern-day cellphone. It looked so out of place in the kitchen that could've been featured on one of those 'this house hasn't been touched in fifty years' kind of show on HGTV. I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror

beside the rotary phone that hung on the wall, and I looked as out of place in that kitchen as Bob Lumber's iPhone.

"Hello." Bob barked into the phone. "I told ya. I'm on my way." I wondered if he always sounded pissed off, or if it was just him. Gruff and to the point.

"Bye." I lifted my hand to wave, but Bob had already slammed the door behind him.

The coffee was the best I'd tasted in years, and I held the mug in both my hands as I peered through the frosty window, wondering if I'd be able to catch a glimpse of Jack doing his chores – whatever that meant. My stomach growled and reminded me that I hadn't eaten dinner the night before. The muffins were calling my name. I picked one from the cooling rack and held it to my nose and inhaled before peeling off the Christmas tree paper themed muffin paper accorded around the base.

"Stop." A voice boomed behind me as I was about to take a bite.

I turned to see Jack standing in the mudroom, kicking snow off his ridiculously huge boots. "What? Why?" I was confused.

"That's not how you do it." He stepped out of his boots and walked towards me, holding his hand like a traffic cop directing traffic.

"Do what?"

His dark brown hair flicked out from under his wool hat. I realized that he'd been wearing the hat the night before and I found myself wondering what his hair looked like underneath it. Was he balding prematurely or did he have a glorious head of hair to match the scruffy locks that I could see?

“Put down the muffin.” A grin spread across his face. I paused and gingerly set the muffin on the counter.

He padded next to me in his wool socks, and slid a dish across the counter. “You can’t eat one of those without butter.” He took the muffin I’d started to unwrap, cut it in half and tucked a pat of butter inside, then made up a second one in exactly the same way.

“Cheers.” He handed me the muffin and tapped his to mine.

I took a bite, and like the butter – melted. “Oh my God. You weren’t kidding. This butter, it’s incredible.”

“My mom churns it.”

I blinked and then set the muffin on its wrapper and washed down my bite with a sip of coffee. “Your mom what now?”

“The butter.” He held up his muffin. “She makes it.”

“I know what churning is.” I looked up at him over the top of my mug. “How does she have time? She works at the diner and is some kind of modern-day homesteader in her time off?”

Jack poured himself a cup of coffee and pulled out a chair, gesturing for me to sit. He slid a small plate in front of me with another muffin, set the butter dish in between us and joined me at the table. “My mom and dad own the diner and the garage. She fills in when staff need time off, and at Christmas, she fills in a lot.”

My respect for Muriel grew exponentially. I definitely couldn’t include her in my story. Unless she also murdered people on the side. Then I might be able to include her in my seedy small-town expose.

Jack's eyes were the same color as his icy blue t-shirt. Yet, for such a cool color, like his parent's eyes, his had a warmth to them. The crinkles next to Jack's eyes weren't as established as his mother's, but told me that he had done some smiling in the past... I guessed thirty or so years. But the weathered skin could've put him closer to forty – I couldn't tell.

“How did you sleep?” He leaned back in his chair and stretched his arms over his head.

“Better than you it would seem.”

He gave me a crooked smile. “Someone was in my bed.”

“I'm sorry about that. I could've slept on the sofa.”

“Ah,” he swatted my comment away with his stop sign hand and then poured himself another cup of coffee. He held up the carafe.

“Please.” I slid my mug across the table and he filled it up.

“What are you doing in Chance Rapids?” he asked as he sat down. “I'm guessing you're not here for opening day of the ski resort.”

“What makes you say that?” I gripped my mug and waited.

“The gloves.” He pointed to my bare fingertips.

I slipped the fingerless gloves under my thighs. “I didn't have a lot of time to buy winter gear, and I'm only here for a couple of days.”

“My mom would kill me if I let you leave here without warm hands.”

He disappeared into the mudroom and returned with a pair of hand knit mittens. “We don't have a black pair.”

“Thanks.” I patted the red and white striped mittens.

“At least your hat is practical.” I touched my wool hat that wasn’t too different from his. “If I gave you the matching hat, you’d look like Waldo.”

“I don’t think I’m going to blend in here.”

Jack cleared his throat. “I wouldn’t be so sure about that. There’s lots of city people here. Especially with the movie.”

My ears perked up, reminding me that I wasn’t in Chance Rapids to sit in a cozy kitchen sipping coffee with a farmhand named Jack. “That’s why I’m here. I’m doing a story on the movie.”

“Oh, you’re a writer?” His tone changed and he slugged back the rest of his coffee. “Well, then we better get you into town.” Jack took my empty mug and rinsed it in the sink. He couldn’t seem to shuffle me out of his mom’s kitchen fast enough. “Come with me.”

I slipped my gloves into my backpack and pulled on the red and white striped wool mitts. Jack strode ahead and I followed him to one of the barns. This one was newer looking than the others and when we stepped inside I realized it wasn’t a barn, but a garage. – filled with cars.

Shiny vintage pickup trucks sat next to classic corvettes. “Wow.” I stopped in the doorway. “I wasn’t expecting this.”

“What were you expecting?” Jack said, his tone now mirroring his father’s – gruff. “A rusty old pickup truck with chicken feathers stuck in the seats?”

Kind of. But I didn’t say that. “These are beautiful.” I took out my phone and snapped a couple of photos. Jack pushed a button and opened the garage door before starting up a classic Bronco painted the color of a pumpkin. The engine growled

and even though he seemed inexplicably pissed at me, Jack opened the passenger door for me. I tossed my backpack into the back seat and stepped inside. “It makes sense.” I touched the dials on the dashboard gently with a little reverence. “Your father owns a garage, of course he’s into cars.”

Jack furrowed his brow at me. “Yeah. A real enthusiast.” He grumbled as he put the collectible SUV into first gear and revved the engine before navigating out of the dark garage and into the light of day. I squinted and fished around in my bag for my sunglasses. The pink dawn had turned to a bluebird sky, the sun shining brightly, reflecting off the rolling white fields of snow.

Jack put on a pair of gold rimmed aviators that had been stored above his visor. For some reason I was surprised, for a farm guy the glasses seemed flashy.

When Muriel and I had driven to the farm, it had been dark, but in the daylight I could see glimpses of the side of Chance Rapids that would never make it into a movie. Dilapidated houses with blue tarps covering holes in the roof sat next to grand looking old homes. The downtown that I’d seen the night before was in stark contrast to the wrong side of the tracks section of town. Mobile homes sat crammed together, old sofas and trash pails overflowing with empty beer cans, and cars perched crookedly on blocks that had sunk into the ground over time.

It was the side of small town living that the movies left out. The people who lived in those homes wouldn’t be skipping into the local bakery or flower shop to run into the high school sweetheart who’d come home a billionaire.

Confused as to the hot and cold from Lumber comma Jack, I focused on studying the scenery as we made our way through

the downtown which was even more quaint in the daylight. Cute shops, a craft brewery, and a flower shop all sat next to each other. “Is this where they’re filming?” I asked. If I was a director, it’s where I would shoot.

“No, down at the far end, by the real estate office, the Last Chance, and Sugar Peaks Coffee Shop.” There wasn’t any warmth to his voice, and he wasn’t offering up any small-talk, but at least he was responsive.

“The Last Chance?” I squinted behind my glasses trying to see what he was talking about.

“It’s the local seedy bar. It doubles as the only...” he cleared his throat. “Gentleman’s club – on Tuesday’s.”

I couldn’t help but smile. I knew where I’d be spending the evening. That was the angle this story needed. I pointed to the curb that I’d hit. “That’s what wrecked my rental car. I drove right over it. Why are the curbs so big in this town?”

Jack geared the Bronco down and looked at me and then where I was pointing and then back at me. “You drove over that?” The sides of his mouth turned up and I could tell he was masking a smile. “That’s not a curb, it’s a snowbank – and no wonder the car stopped working, that frozen pile of snow would be a challenge even for Cindy.” He patted the dashboard of the Bronco.

“Cindy?”

“Yeah.” The growl was back. We crossed through the one stoplight in town, still flashing yellow, and into the parking lot of the garage. The rental car was visible through the windows in the garage, up on a hoist.

I clicked out of the seatbelt before Jack had come to a complete stop. “Well, thank you for the drive, and thank you

for your cabin. I really appreciate it.”

“Good luck with your story.” He didn’t look at me.

“Bye Jack.” I hopped out of the car, thankful that I didn’t have to spend any more time with a man who had gone from charming and sweet, to the town grouch.

As he pulled away, I muttered. “Jack. Ass.” If he could make up names, so could I.

FOUR

JACK

THE REAL ESTATE office in Chance Rapids had changed since I last lived there. The one-man office with the wood paneling and threadbare brown carpet had been replaced with a modern and sleek space. My real estate agent, Charlotte, or Billie Jo to her local friends, had been a few years older than me in high school. I had a hazy recollection of Billie Jo and her sister Lauren, and while I didn't trust many realtors, Charlotte was a true Rapidian, and for that reason, I trusted her.

"Jack." Charlotte waved from the loft space that overlooked the reception area. "Come up. The secretary isn't in yet."

I jogged up the open stairs and shook Charlotte's outstretched hand. She was wearing a pair of jeans and a black sweater. "Congratulations." She gestured to the seat across from her glass desk.

"Thank you," I smiled. "I can't believe it's all coming together."

She opened the file folder on her desk and turned it to face me, handing me a fancy looking pen. "Your brothers signed digitally; the last spot is yours."

I took a deep breath. "And then it's done?"

A sticker with an arrow pointed a blank line on the conditions page. The process had been stressful, and once I signed on that line, my entire life would change.

“As soon as you sign. The lodge is yours.”

Smiling at Charlotte, I scribbled my signature onto the line. “Well, here goes nothing.”

She took the papers. “I’ll have my secretary make copies, and scan these so you can have a digital copy. Do you have any questions?” Her hands were folded on her desk. I couldn’t believe that it was all done.

“And, it’s closed? It’s ours?”

“Yes.” She leaned back in her chair. “The world’s shortest closing date. The lawyers will have a few things to do on Monday, but they will call you as soon as the title is registered in your and your brother’s names.” She folded her hands on her desk.

Charlotte was part of the revival of city people who had moved away and then returned to Chance Rapids. Like me, and a lot of people, she had left after high school. There weren’t a lot of options to stay in Chance Rapids back then, and I needed to spread my wings a little. I assumed that she did too. She was married to another guy who left and came back too – Logan.

“Thanks again for all of your help with this, I know it wasn’t the easiest deal to put together.” I handed her the hefty pen.

“Stop.” She brushed off the comment. “I’ve had way more complicated deals than yours. The hardest part was dealing with your globetrotting brothers.”

This made me chuckle. “I have a hard time keeping track of them too.”

My head turned as I heard the sound of the front door opening. “That’s my secretary. I’ll get her to make you a copy now. If you have any questions, please call.”

“I will.” As I followed Charlotte down the handmade staircase, I wondered what her reception had been like when she’d returned to Chance Rapids. She was a very wealthy woman, and most of the people who grew up in town and never left, were not. At least not to Charlotte’s degree- she owned one of the mountain mansions at the base of the ski hill that had to be worth at least five million bucks.

The ski resort had brought a new kind of local to town, and they were the ones I was hoping to capitalize on with my new business.

With a copy of the agreement in my hands, I was about to leave when Charlotte stopped me.

“Wait.” She held up her index finger. “The lawyer left the keys here. And, it’s unorthodox to give them out before official closing, but I’m pretty sure they don’t do anything. It’s more symbolic.” She reached over the reception desk and handed me a wrought iron key that looked like it would open a castle, not a mountain lodge.

“Congratulations, Mr. Lumber. You and your brothers now own the most derelict building within thirty miles of Chance Rapids.”

I laughed and felt the weight of the key in my hand before slipping it into the pocket of my jacket. The secretary made a loud groan from a little kitchenette. “Charlotte, the coffee maker is on the fritz again.”

Charlotte shook her head. “Technology.” She pulled a coat from a hook by the front door, “I’ll go get some,” she shouted. Then she looked at me. “Can I buy you a coffee to celebrate?”

It would be the perfect time to ask Charlotte some questions about my future business, questions that weren’t directly related to the transaction. There was nothing flirtatious about my realtor, and since moving home I’d become friendly with her husband, Logan. I tried to stick to my one cup a day rule, but I’d already broken that with Henrietta Scissorhands. “Sure. It’s too early for beer isn’t it?”

Charlotte shot me a grin, and from behind her oversized sunglasses pumped her eyebrows. “We could always go get a local’s coffee from your mom.”

From the door of Charlotte’s office, I had a clear view down Main Street to the garage. The big bay door was open and Henrietta’s crappy rental was still on the hoist.

“Actually, if it’s okay with you, I’d love to hit up Sugar Peaks for one of the croissants.”

Charlotte laughed. “I was only joking,” but she pulled down her glasses and winked. Next to Charlotte I must have looked a mess. I was still in my barn clothes, mud caked on the toes of my work boots, and my patched Carhart pants had oil stains on them. But I would rather sit in the trendy café amongst all the wealthy skiers, than make small talk with Henri the writer.

Henri.

She was the sexiest woman I’d met in years. But, other than that, everything else about her was wrong. I had already made mistakes in my life, and with Henri I’d be repeating the

past. I'd been involved with a writer before, and it had cost me everything.

No. The best way to avoid trouble was to avoid trouble.

The smell of fresh baked bread, icing sugar, and freshly ground coffee beans met us as I opened the door to the café for Charlotte.

“Thank you.” She stepped inside and waved to someone behind the counter. “Jack, do you know Megan?”

I didn't recognize the woman behind the counter, but I did recognize the one in the black hat and red and white striped mittens who was ordering. My plan had backfired. I hadn't avoided Henri- we'd run right into her.

“Jack? Are you alright?” I felt Charlotte's hand on my arm.

The sound of spoons on saucers and espresso machines whirring came into focus. “Yeah.” I couldn't bail on Charlotte now. What was the questions she'd asked?

I avoided looking at the woman in black who was now shaking cinnamon into her black coffee. The barista behind the counter smiled at me.

“No. I haven't had the pleasure of meeting Megan yet.” Luckily her name was on her nametag. Even though Charlotte had said it seconds before, I'd been so distracted by Henri, that I'd instantly forgotten.

There were things that were great about living in a small town. Running into your neighbors was one of the things that people either loved or hated – and I usually loved it – but not that day. How many times was I going to have to see Henri before she got her story and left town.

FIVE

HENRI

WITH THE CAR in the shop, I headed onto the street in the direction of the film set. One half of Main Street was open to traffic, the other was roped off. Heavy machinery was dumping piles of snow onto the street and film crew were working on what looked to be a snow machine.

“Extras on set in an hour.” A man with green hair rushed by me, shoving a lanyard with a tag into my hand as he passed. “No, don’t put that there.” He shouted and rushed away before I could explain that I wasn’t an extra, I was the press.

While the Main Street I had seen when I first arrived to Chance Rapids was tastefully decorated, this section looked like someone had dumped the entire inventory of the local department store’s Christmas aisle onto the street. I snapped a photo of the set and tucked the extra’s pass into my pocket, not believing my unbelievable luck. I strolled off the set, back into the real world of Chance Rapids, snapping photos of the street. I could picture a second chance romance unfolding in front of my eyes more realistically there, than on the set of the actual movie.

Remembering the divey area across the tracks, I decided to get a coffee for the walk to the literal ‘wrong side of the tracks.’ There’d be no holiday magic happening there.

The Sugar Peaks café was bustling. A pretty barista smiled at me from behind the counter. “What can I get for you, sweetheart?” She made eye contact with me, her kindness seeming so genuine it made me uncomfortable.

“A black coffee. Large. To go.” I recited my usual order while I scrolled through my phone.

“Are you in town for the movie?” she asked, as she handed me the paper cup of steaming coffee.

I didn’t feel like correcting her, and it also would be better for people to think I was there for the movie and not to expose the dark side of their town. “I am.” I smiled through the lie, but had a sick feeling in the pit of my stomach.

“Welcome.” She took my cash and handed me my change. “Cute mittens.”

I realized that I was still wearing the Waldo inspired mitts. “Thank you.” I tucked the mittens into my pocket.

People watching at Sugar Peaks was fascinating. There seemed to be three distinct groups of people. As I sprinkled cinnamon into my cup, I decided to take a seat in the corner and watch the interactions of everyone around me.

I paused with the jar of cinnamon in my hand. A gust of cold air had rushed through the café and suddenly I felt someone’s eyes on me. I don’t know how I knew, but all of a sudden I didn’t want to turn around. It’s a weird feeling that I sometimes got, an intuition or something. My heart pounded against my chest, but I took a breath and told myself that I was being ridiculous. Dropping the stir stick into the trash can, I turned.

I wasn’t wrong.

Jack Lumber was standing next to a drop-dead gorgeous woman in a camel cashmere coat. The woman's diamond ring glinted in the sun's rays as she rested her hand on Jack's arm.

Holy shit. I whispered under my breath. Was Jack Lumber married? Or engaged? Was that the reason he turned to ice this morning?

Our eyes met and I wasn't sure who looked away first, him or me. I thought about leaving the café, but then changed my mind. I wasn't going let Jack Ass change my plans. A young couple waved to the woman behind the counter and I slipped into their empty table behind them. It was the perfect spot- I could watch people on the street, and I could see everyone in the coffee shop.

Jack's back was to me and I studied him and the dark-haired, giant ring woman. Their body language seemed friendly to each other, but I'd bet my motorcycle that they weren't together. Diamond lady clearly knew the barista and I watched as she introduced her to Jack.

"Interesting," I said, under my breath. How does Jack, who lives in town, not know the woman who knew everyone in front of me in line. Jack and Miss Five Carat scanned the room. I took a deep breath and sighed. The only free table was the one right beside me. Diamond lady pointed it out and was headed my way.

Miss Diamond looked directly at me. She had the confidence of a professional tennis player at a community pickleball tournament. And, surprisingly Jack gave me a curt nod of acknowledgement.

I responded with an equally curt nod. Miss Diamond looked between the two of us and then Jack's shoulders rose as he took in a deep breath. I didn't know Jack well, but I knew

he'd had a traditional upbringing and Muriel would smack his hand with a wooden spoon if he wasn't a gentleman.

"Hello Henrietta."

"Hi." I waved and blew on the steaming hot coffee.

Jack placed his hand on Charlotte's back. "This is Charlotte O'Hare. Charlotte, this is Henrietta...Page." He was still doubting my last name.

"Pleased to meet you, Charlotte." I stood and shook Charlotte's hand.

Jack pulled out the chair for Charlotte. "If you decide that you'd like to give up the big city life, Charlotte is the best realtor in town."

Charlotte smiled. "I'm the only realtor in town, thank you for the kind introduction, Jack."

"I'll keep that in mind." I smiled over my cup, knowing that I could never live in a small town.

"Are you buying a house, Jack? I flipped a page in one of the local news magazines as Jack and Charlotte got settled into their chairs, biting my tongue from making a comment about him leaving the nest. I had been on my own since I was a teenager, and Jack, a full-grown man with a beard and muscles for days, was still living with his mom and dad.

Jack cleared his throat. "I'm buying coffee."

Touché. Charlotte gave a microscopic head tilt. If she was a perceptive woman, she'd be able to pick up on the weirdo energy exchange in front of her. A sexual charge mixed with an undercurrent of not quite hatred, but dislike, for a reason I still hadn't figured out. But, if Jack was going to dish it out, I was going to dig in and give it right back to him.

I nodded. “Enjoy your coffee. It was a pleasure to meet you, Charlotte. Actually, I will take your card if you’ve got one.”

Charlotte produced a business card with all of her information within a flash, but I didn’t need it. Two pages into the Chance Rapids newspaper, there was a full page ad filled with real estate listings, the gorgeous Charlotte O’Hare’s photo at the bottom.

The coffee shop was getting busier, and as much as I tried to listen in on Charlotte and Jack’s conversation, the buzz around me made it difficult. Instead, I pulled out my notebook and started jotting down trends, or stereotypes that I saw in the coffee shop. There were definitely three types of people. One was definitely the film crew – they were the ones wearing boots that weren’t insulated and shivering in their impractical jackets. No wonder I’d been lumped in with them. The other two groups, well, they were more subtle. One had Prada handbags and brand new sustainable sourced sportswear, the other had worn in sportswear with duct tape patches.

But they all seemed to mingle together.

When I realized that Sugar Peaks wasn’t going to give me the dirt I was looking for, I slipped my notebook into my pocket and stood to leave. There had to be someone in town I could interview that would tell me the truth. Charlotte and Jack were deep in conversation although Jack cast a glance at me as I slung my backpack over my shoulder. Tingles ran up my spine as I realized he had been hyper aware of my presence in the café.

Like I had been to his. The body language between Jack and Charlotte seemed to go between professional and friendly.

There definitely wasn't any hanky panky going on between the two of them.

I shook my head. Hanky panky. Zeesh. I'd already spent too much time in this town.

"Have a nice day, Henrietta." Charlotte noticed I was leaving and she waved while looking over Jack's shoulder.

A mom with a double-wide stroller had parked behind me and that meant I'd have to shimmy past Jack and Charlotte anyway.

"Thank you. It was great to meet you." I sucked in and tiptoed behind Jack, even though it wasn't necessary.

Jack turned and gave a perfunctory wave that said, I'd rather not be waving, but it would be rude not to acknowledge your presence. His cold demeanor was perplexing, but I couldn't let it bother me. I had a story to write.

In an effort to walk away with a little attitude, I spun on the ball of my foot. If that was the last time Jack saw me, I was going to give him a lasting impression of the girl he was rude to for absolutely no reason.

"Eeeek."

As soon as I heard the woman's voice screech, I knew that it wasn't going to be my runway walk-out that Jack remembered, it was going to be the impending coffee tsunami disaster. Megan had a tray of coffee in her hands and as I whirled around, I ran right into her.

Instinct took over. I grasped Megan's forearms, and we locked eyes over top of the five paper cups stuffed into the cardboard cup holder, four nestled securely in their spots, the fifth bobbling precariously on top.

Time seemed to slow and the Christmas music disappeared. The top cup teetered toward the stroller.

“Shit.” Coffee burns be damned, I grabbed the cup, no baby was getting scalded on my watch. But, the adrenaline in my body must have given me super human strength because the lid popped off, flipping in the air above us as the fountain of coffee followed. Right onto Jack’s lap.

He dropped his head, but didn’t yelp or acknowledge the disaster.

“Oh my God. Jack, are you alright?” Charlotte jumped up.

I grabbed a handful of paper napkins from the counter and threw some on the medium roast lake that had formed on the table and then started dabbing at the coffee...on Jack’s lap.

He cleared his throat. “Ahem. I think I can handle that.” His eyes met mine and I realized that I had just been dabbing Jack’s legs, dangerously close to the zipper on his work pants.

“Are you alright Jack? Did it burn you?” Megan was right beside me, she set the tray of surviving coffees on the table.

Jack took the rest of the napkins from my hand and wiped at the front of his pants. “Nothing gets through these pants. I wouldn’t have known anything had happened if Henri here hadn’t come to my rescue.”

Was I blushing? Heat travelled along my jawbone and Mariah Carey’s voice came back into focus. Jack and I had just skipped first base and gone straight to second, kind of.

“I’m so sorry Jack.”

Jack cleared his throat and stood. “Like I said, don’t worry. These pants are bulletproof.”

I raised my eyebrows. What was he doing wearing bulletproof pants? I had special pants for my motorcycle, but they were nowhere near bulletproof.

As though sensing my confusion, the corners of his lips lifted into a whisper of a smile. “Not literally, they’re designed for cutting wood, so chainsaw and now, coffee proof.”

Feeling like an idiot, I searched the depths of my brain for a snappy comeback. “You’ll have to let the company know – maybe they can add coffee protection to their marketing.” I studied my boots, so thankful that in my rush to get out of the coffee shop, no innocent bystanders had been scalded, and the only casualty had been Jack’s oil-stained work pants.

“I’ll be sure to let them know.”

Charlotte reached to touch my forearm. “Are you alright?”

“I just need a little air.” And to get away from Jack, the man whose presence had turned me into someone who stammered, searching for the right words for a comeback.

Charlotte accompanied me to the front deck of the café and I took a seat on a pretty wrought iron bench with a plaque that read ‘Sharon’s Spot.’ I wondered who Sharon was and I was thankful for her, because I needed to sit. What was happening to me? Why was I so nervous around Jack?

“Feeling better?” Charlotte gestured to the door of the café with her thumb, “I could get you a glass of water.”

I held onto the seat of the bench and stretched tall, inhaling the crisp mountain air. “I’m fine now. Thank you.”

“You said you’re a journalist? Are you writing a story about someone in town?” She crossed her arms. Charlotte’s voice sounded protective, even a little leery, making me wonder if someone in Chance Rapids had a secret.

“Not a person. I’m writing a story about...”

From across the street the lights from the movie set clicked on, and all of a sudden, it felt like we were bathing on a beach in the mid-day sun. I shielded my eyes with my hand. “The Small-Town Christmas movie scene.” It wasn’t a complete lie.

Charlotte’s arms dropped from their protective cross and she put her fists on her hips. “It’s certainly brought a different feel to the town this year.” Charlotte’s tone told me that the different ‘feel’ wasn’t a good one.

“Would you be interested in telling me about your experience with the movie being shot in your town?”

Gnawing on her lip, contemplating, Charlotte stared across the street at the flurry of activity. “Sure. But I have a busy day.” She pulled her cashmere coat tight around her body as Jack joined us with a tray full of coffee. “I know...” She stretched her leather gloves over her fingers and then took the tray of coffee from Jack. “I’ve invited Jack to the Last Chance Tavern tonight to meet some of my friends, you should join us.”

The air seemed to freeze. I needed interviews, and Charlotte seemed to have the right edge for my story, she wasn’t all lollipops and sugar drop candies. Jack’s eyes were fixed on me and I knew he wanted me to decline.

“That sounds great.” I smiled at her and avoided looking at Jack. “I’ll bring my notebook.” I added, hoping to signal to Jack that it was business only. But, if I were being truthful, the comment was more for myself.

Jack grunted. “What’s the story with your car?” He pointed down the street to the garage.

I let out a relieved sigh. “It looks like it’s all done.” I shoved my hands into my mittens, thankful that I wasn’t going to be traipsing around town all day long.

With a renewed spring in my step. I hustled down the steps and waved. “See you tonight.”

The reporter in me was intrigued with Jack’s turn from welcoming and flirty to cold and distant. Putting aside my ego, I was determined to solve the mystery of why Jack had turned frosty. But the woman in me, the primal uncontrollable part wondered, could Jack Frost be melted?

SIX

JACK

AFTER WALKING Charlotte back to her office I needed to change my pants. Sure, the hot coffee didn't burn me, but the cold coffee that had soaked through to my thermal long underwear didn't feel very...pleasant.

I hopped in my car and carefully set the folder with the paperwork for the property on the passenger seat.

To Henri I probably looked like a thirty-year-old bum who still lived with his parents. And, I didn't care. The truth, that I'd sold everything I owned, well, almost everything, to buy a remote ski lodge with my brothers would've sounded more impressive.

But I wasn't in the business of trying to impress other people. Except my Mom and Dad. The bell dinged as I drove over the old-fashioned strips, letting the gas station attendant know that I'd pulled into the pumps. One of the young guys who worked at the station, a kid named Taye, jogged out the door. "Fill 'er up Jack?"

"You got it Taye." The hinges groaned as I opened the door and got out.

"I can grease those hinges too if you'd like."

“Why not?” I smiled. I wasn’t getting special treatment because my parents owned the garage, the crew that worked at the station were serious go-getters. Something that seemed to be lacking in kids these days.

Kids these days.

I couldn’t believe I’d even had that thought. I was turning into a grumpy old man. Glancing around the parking lot I was relieved to see that Henri’s car wasn’t anywhere in sight. “Phew,” I said out loud as I walked into the diner.

The morning rush was in full swing, and unlike Sugar Peaks, this was a more blue-collar crowd. Old retired miners and railway men met for morning coffee and the diner’s signature pastry, a deep-fried flattened donut sprinkled in cinnamon and sugar.

“Jack.” My mom smiled and kissed me on the cheek. “I was wondering if I’d see you this morning. How did everything go with...” she glanced around like a secret agent “the paperwork,” she whispered.

I laughed, thankful that she wasn’t referring to my morning with the cabin stealer. “It’s done.” I slid into the one free booth and my mom didn’t even ask, she poured a glug of whiskey into the coffee mug and topped it up with the very strong morning brew. “Mom. I’ve had so much coffee already, and I’m even wearing some.”

“This isn’t a coffee.” She winked. “It’s a celebratory drink, until we can pop some champers to celebrate your new business.”

“Champers?” I raised my eyebrows at my mother and took a sip of her ‘local’s coffee’.

“Champagne, honey.” She rested her hand on my shoulder. “That’s what the kids are calling it these days.”

That was it. I was officially getting old. My mom was hipper with the next generation’s lingo than me.

“I’d have a drink with you, honey, but that will have to wait until later. These guys are running me off my feet.”

“We can get a bottle or two of champers when all of us are together and the renovations are finished.”

“I’m so proud of my boys.”

Me and my brothers had all moved away from Chance Rapids, and I was the only one to come back. Joey, Will, and Riley had contributed finances to the project, but my role was on the ground as the general contractor.

“Do they know it’s done? And when do you get the key?” My mom glanced around the room, always checking to make sure everyone had at least a half a cup of coffee in front of them. Satisfied that no one was going to go into caffeine withdrawals she returned her gaze to me. There were tears in her eyes and she swiped them away with the back of her hand.

I already had the key, but technically I had to wait for the lawyers to do some stuff on Monday.

My mom grasped the carafe with both hands. “All my boys, back in Chance Rapids.” She had a far-off dreamy look and I didn’t have the heart to remind her that her other three sons had no intention of ever moving back to Chance Rapids.

“I wanted you to be the first to know.” I smiled and held mom’s hand. “Thank you for everything you’ve done for me.”

“Oh my God. Jackson Lumber, don’t you dare thank me. Having you home to help take care of the animals has helped

us more than we've helped you. And, we did kick you out of your cozy cabin last night. That Henrietta seems like a nice girl." There was a hinting tone in her voice. Ever since I'd come home mom had been trying to set me up, but I'd kept to myself, always finding excuses not to go to the square-dancing sessions, or any of the other old lady stuff she seemed to think my soulmate would also appreciate.

"She seems alright." I shrugged, the warmth from the whiskey running through my body, reminding me that I was still soaked in coffee thanks to that 'nice' girl. "But, she's only here for the weekend, and she's a journalist."

"Oh," Muriel gave a tsk sound, but then shook her head. "You never know, once Chance Rapids gets under your skin, it's hard to leave, maybe she'll stick around a little longer. And, Jackson, just because...your ex was a journalist, doesn't mean that they're all bad."

She's almost said Marnie's name and then thought twice.

"They're all more interested in jet setting and chasing the high of the story, Ma. There's no way a woman like Henrietta would be happy living in Chance Rapids, covering the winners of the dahlia contest at the fall fair."

Mom went to top up my coffee, but I held my hand over the mug. "If I have any more coffee today, I'm going to jitter the Bronco off the road. "I stood and left a five-dollar bill on the table. "I just came in to tell you the good news. Now. Where's dad?"

Mom took the five and folded it into my chest pocket. "He's dealing with Henri's car."

"Henri's car?" I screwed up my forehead. "I thought it was gone."

Mom shrugged. “Talk to your father. I think it needs a part or something.”

Her eyes lit up as the bell over the door tinkled. “Well, speak of the devil. You can find out the details for yourself.”

“Henri,” my mom gestured a wild come over here motion with her whole arm. “There’s a free table here.”

“Mom...” I hissed under my breath.

“Jack is looking for an update on your car.”

To my surprise, Henri flopped into the booth opposite me, squishing in a giant duffel bag along with the backpack I recognized from the farmhouse.

“Coffee?”

Henri shook her head. “I think I’m going to stay away from coffee for the rest of the day. There are too many innocent bystanders in here.”

My mom knitted her brow.

“But...” Henri sighed. “Could I get a local’s coffee – hold the coffee?”

It wasn’t even noon. Mom gave Henri a conspiratorial wink and poured a couple of glugs into her mug. “I’ll leave you two to...catch up.”

My mom seemed flustered and hustled away from the table to keep pushing caffeine on the patrons.

“What’s the deal with your car?” I felt obligated to ask.

“Your father has to order a part, it’s coming from a place called Wind Goose or something.”

“Windswan.” I chuckled. “That’s not too far.”

“Yeah, he said that it should be here later this afternoon.”

That meant that she was without a car for the majority of the day. I could feel my mom’s eyes boring into the back of my head. “Do you need a car? You could borrow mine for the day. The only thing on my agenda is getting into some dry clothes.”

Her cheeks turned the same color red as the stripes on her mittens. I wasn’t sure if it was the straight whiskey or straight embarrassment. “Don’t you need it?” she asked. “Never mind.” She held up her hand. “I’ve already imposed way too much on you and your family. I can do most of my research on foot today.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’m sure.” She nodded. “And I wouldn’t want to keep you from getting out of those pants. I mean, I want you to get out of those pants...”

She clapped her hand over her mouth and I couldn’t help but laugh. It was such a childish and sweet gesture, that didn’t seem to fit with her rough and tumble I wear all black persona. “I’m going to stop talking now.”

When Henri smiled, her eyes lit up and her entire face changed. It went from hard and angular, with eyes that seemed to be searching for something deeper, to dimpled with eyes that hinted of mischief, rather than suspicion. And that smile warmed my heart.

“That’s a good idea. I don’t need you verbally undressing me in front of my dad’s buddies.”

Henri’s cheeks flushed even redder. “No, I guess that wouldn’t be appropriate.”

“Are you kidding? These old codgers? It would be the highlight of their year to misinterpret what you’re saying.”

Henri’s eyes scanned the room. “Why are they all here?”

“What do you mean?” I asked. “They’re here every day. It’s part of the retirement program in Chance Rapids. Meet at the diner to drink coffee and catch up with your friends.”

“Really?”

I nodded. “Really. Their wives get together for quilting bees, bingo, and square dancing.”

Henri shook her head. “And, I haven’t time travelled?”

“Oh, you have. Trust me, time runs differently here in Chance Rapids. It slows down.”

“Ugh.” Henri took a sip of her whiskey and blinked her eyes hard. “Whoa. This is strong without the coffee.” She took a breath and then slugged back the rest of the mixture, her eyes watering as she hacked out a cough. “Jack. Can I ask you something?”

“Shoot.” I replied, wondering if she was going to ask why I’d been such an asshole all day. And, it wasn’t even lunchtime.

“Are you fucking with me?”

I was confused. “Fucking with you? How so?”

The square dancing, the retired men’s coffee club, the quilting bee. That all sounds like it’s straight from the Christmas movie they’re filming right over there. Where’s the meddling matchmaker? The baker who has to recruit her friends to fulfill a butter tart order? I mean, this stuff doesn’t actually happen here. Does it?”

Trying not to smile was a challenge. My mom could qualify as the meddling matchmaker. “I don’t think there’s been a tart emergency in years.” I drummed my fingers on my jaw as though thinking.

Her smile spread across her face and I saw the dimples return for the first time since I’d decided to be a jerk. Not a jerk, per se, I just couldn’t let myself get close to Henri. She was the first woman since Marnie that had caught my eye, and woken up other parts of my body too.

“No tart emergency?” She gripped the edge of the table dramatically. “What about the big city girl who is engaged to a slick wall street kind of guy who comes home for the holidays and runs into her plaid shirt wearing high school sweetheart?”

I rubbed my neck and tilted my head. I was about to bring up the big city reporter who wears all black getting stuck in a mountain town at Christmas, but in that story, I think that I would be the plaid wearing mountain man. And as funny as it would be to joke about it, part of me wished that it was a story that could come true. But this wasn’t a Christmas movie, or even a fairy tale. It was real life and Henri wasn’t going to fall in love with me, or the town, and give up her big city life.

And, I was going to make sure of it. “Let me drive you to drop your bag off at the Inn.” I totally changed the subject away from Christmas movie stereotypes, and brought us back to reality.

“You got it.” Henri slid out of the booth and dragged the duffel bag out behind her. Before it could thud to the floor, I grabbed it and slung it over my shoulder. I’d come back and tell my father about the lodge after I got Henri out of my personal space. I opened the door for her and waved to mom.

“Bye Jacky, bye Henri.” She waved the tea towel that was slung over her shoulder.

The forecast had called for snow to start falling late in the afternoon, but as we left the diner the wind direction changed and a fat flake fell heavily in front of me. “Smell that?”

Henri sniffed. “Bacon grease?”

“No.” I chuckled. “Although, yes, I smell that too. There’s a storm coming.”

Henri stopped and put her hands on her hips. “You can tell by the way the air smells? Jack Lumber, I never know when you’re making stuff up.”

“I’m not making it up. Although, the big red bulletin on the weather app also told me about it.”

Henri leaned into me in a playful way. “I have street smarts, Mr. Lumber, but you’re a hard country boy to read.”

I handed Taye the cash for the fill-up and opened the passenger door for Henri. I tossed the giant duffel bag in the back seat and got in. “Maybe that’s where you went wrong. I’m not a country boy.”

The SUV started with a grumble and the door closed without a creak thanks to Taye. Henri took her Ray Bans off and carefully placed them in the case. “Says the man wearing flannel, a wool hat, chainsaw pants, and...” she pointed at each part of me as she listed the items I was wearing.

I stopped her. “Maybe you need to start looking deeper than clothes.”

“Humph,” she crossed her arms. “You can tell a lot about someone by their steel toe Blundstones.”

Shifting into first gear we lurched onto Main Street. “Maybe.” The gears ground slightly, like they always did as I shifted into second. “But I think that there’s a lot more to you than a tough streetwise journalist.”

Henri bit her lip and she appeared to be holding in a response.

“What, no witty comeback?”

“That’s exactly who I am.”

Was she hinting that I wasn’t anything more than an uneducated hick? The air fell silent between us.

The Sycamore Inn’s door was open and I waited in the car while Henri checked in. She hadn’t smiled since we’d turned off Main Street but as she walked toward me, she looked even more sour. I opened the door and pulled out her duffel bag.

She took it and let it drop to the ground. “There’s no record of my reservation. And, she doesn’t have any rooms left – the film crew has booked them all.”

“I thought you said you booked it.” In one of our conversations, I could’ve sworn she told me that she’d booked a room at the Sycamore Inn.

Henri seemed to deflate and sunk to sit on top of her bag. “I did. But apparently the online booking system crashed a couple of days ago and no one has fixed it yet. Mavis, the owner,” she pointed to the quaint Inn’s door, called around to all the other hotels. They’re all booked because of that damn movie. Unless, I want to pay over a thousand dollars a night to stay at the Sugar Peaks Lodge.”

She looked like she was going to cry. It was very un-Henri-like. Even though I’d only known her for a day, I knew that she was the type who didn’t like to cry. She buried her

face in her hands, but instead of crying, took a huge inhale in through her nose and then stood powerfully. “Jack, please take me to the Sugar Peaks Lodge. If that’s my only option, then I will spend my rent for next month on the rest of this Platypus assignment.”

Platypus? I didn’t know what the hell she was talking about. “Or, you could stay one more night at the cabin.”

Henri’s head tilted. “No. Jack, I couldn’t.”

“Why not? It’s only one more night.”

“Are you sure?” There weren’t tears, but there definitely was a tremble to her voice. “I’m sure. And I know that my mom would never forgive me if I let you stay across the bridge.”

“Across the bridge?”

I tossed the bag into the back seat of my car for what felt like the millionth time that day. Henri beat me to the passenger seat of the car and let herself in. The driver’s seat was still warm and the car rumbled as I turned the key. “Yeah, you’ll hear a few local colloquialisms, over the bridge, means the rich people who have multi-million-dollar homes with heli pads in their backyards.”

“Like Charlotte.” I mused.

“Exactly. Like Charlotte. And over the tracks, well, that’s the rougher side of town.”

“I haven’t met any over the tracks people yet.”

I shouldn’t have said anything, but I couldn’t stop myself. “Yes, you have. Me.”

SEVEN

HENRI

THE ONLY THING that surprised me more than Jack offering to let me stay in the cabin for one more night, was the fact that he had grown up as he put it, on the wrong side of the tracks.

“I thought that your parents were doing well. The house, the animals, the garage.”

“Sure.” Jack navigated his SUV along the snowy streets. The vintage windshield wipers having a hard time keeping up with the snow that was falling heavier by the second. “They are doing great now. But as a kid we needed those chickens and goats. That’s what kept us fed. The farmhouse was freezing cold in the winter, and there were days that I skipped school to help my dad chop wood to keep that woodstove in the kitchen running. It heated and fed us.”

My childhood hadn’t been bright and sunny either. “I’m sorry to hear that Jack, that must have been tough.”

“Not really,” he shrugged. “I didn’t know we were poor until someone told me. I had a great childhood. And, I’m so proud of my parents for what they’ve built. They deserve to retire and relax. It bothers me that they are still working the way they are. I’m actually hoping...” His voice faded out and he seemed focused on parallel parking in front of the flower shop.

“What are you hoping?” I pressed.

He shook his head. “Nothing.”

I knew that it was pushing the boundaries of our tenuous relationship, but I took a guess. “That you could help them retire?”

He put the truck in park and turned to me with a questioning look on his face. “How did you know?”

“I felt the same way with my mom. Before she passed.”

“Oh, Henri. I’m sorry. I forget how lucky I am sometimes. You know, that my parents are still with me.”

“Yeah. I never had the chance to help her.”

The wipers squeaked in the silence between us. “What about your...”

“Father?” I shook my head. “You mean the man who disappeared when I was two? The man who has a new family and lives in a perfect little town like this one.” I choked the last words out.

Jack nodded and there was a new softness in his eyes. He took my hand in his. “I’m sorry you had to go through that Henri.”

I slid my hand from his and he squeezed my fingers before releasing them. “I’ll drop your bag off at the cabin. Are you sure you’re okay on your own for the afternoon?”

“It should only be a few hours until my car is ready. Your father promised me he’d have it done today. I’m looking forward to exploring.” I pulled out the extras pass from my pocket. “I am going to spend some time on the set too.”

“How did you get that?” He took the laminated pass from my hand but I snatched it back and shoved it into my pocket.

“A lady never shares her secrets.” I put on the mittens and opened the door. “I’ll see you at the Beardog.”

Jack groaned. “I already forgot that I agreed to that. Yes, I’ll see you there. And Henri, I’m going to give you some names of people to talk to for your story. Charlotte is a little jaded when it comes to this town.”

Perfect. I thought to myself. I knew that I was right about her.

“That would be great.” I hopped out of the truck, but before I could shut the door, Jack held up his hand.

“You have to promise me one thing.”

“What’s that?” I was already cold and the snow had started to accumulate on my shoulders.

He shrugged out of his canvas jacket and tossed it to me. “That you’ll buy a better pair of boots. The outfitter is right there.” He had to duck to look out the windshield to point at the storefront of an outdoors store that looked like it sold fishing poles and ski boots at the same time.

“I can’t take this.” I tried to hand the jacket back to him.

“I’ve got three more at home. I’m going there right now to change out of these pants. Remember?”

My face burned as I remembered the coffee incident.

“See, your cheeks look like they’re already getting cold.” It was almost imperceptible, and slight enough for me to wonder if I’d been hallucinating, and maybe I was, but I could’ve sworn that Jack Lumber, Jack Ass, Jack Frost, had winked at me.

Shrugging into the jacket, I was surprised by its warmth. “If you insist.”

Jack put the gear shift into gear. “I insist. Now, I need to get out of these pants.”

I wasn’t hallucinating. Jack Lumber had definitely just winked at me.



THE INSULATED BOOTS crunched on the snow as I wandered around the downtown of Chance Rapids. The town couldn’t have been more of a cliché if it tried. The red and white striped mittens fit over top of my fingerless gloves, but I had to take them off every time I made a voice note about each business and local person, Rapidian, I corrected myself in the recording. So far, my angle was falling flat.

Everyone in this town seemed to be cast from a movie – and with the exception of Jack’s frosty-ness, were all incredibly kind and welcoming to me – a complete stranger.

I kept checking my phone to see if I’d missed a call from Bob. The fuzzy winter boots had helped, but if I was going to get to the farther reaches of town, I’d prefer to drive.

As the early afternoon shifted into late afternoon, I decided to slip onto the movie set. It had been snowing all afternoon, yet the fake snow machines swirled whatever the fake snow was made of. It looked like cotton candy over the section of the street that was blocked off from traffic.

The director was talking to the actors and I joined a group of extras, huddled to the side, snow real and fake, accumulating on the colorful handknit hats and matching long

scarves with tassels. I crossed my arms, hoping that it showcased the red and white mittens that I was wearing, as though I totally belonged on the set.

“Have you met Bradley Stern yet?” One of the extras next to me, a girl who looked to be about twenty, whispered to the girl next to her.

“No.” The other girl was rubbing her arms and bobbing up and down to keep warm. “He’s cuter in real life, isn’t he?” There was a sweet excitement to her voice.

The taller girl whispered. “Don’t get your hopes up. I’ve heard he likes older women.”

The salacious gossip was entertaining, and I stepped a little closer, hoping to get some dirt. The male actor, Bradley Stern, was a B-list actor who starred on soap operas. This was his first holiday film. His love interest in the production, *All I Want for Christmas*, was another B-list actor named Jennifer East.

“What? Like how old?”

The tall girl took off her hat, a red fair isle with the biggest white fur pompom I’d ever seen, brushed off the snow and carefully pulled it over her perfectly brunette ringlets. “Like our mom’s age.”

“Ewww.” The girl sounded disappointed, but kept her gaze on the star. “Maybe it’s just a rumor.”

The brunette shrugged. “I’ve heard from more than one person that he was seen together at the Last Chance, and leaving Stacy’s house yesterday.”

“Brandon’s mom? I see her every day at the after-school program.” The girl looked at Bradley and shook her head. “I don’t buy it.”

The brunette gave another shrug. “Come with me to the Last Chance tonight. See for yourself.”

This was what I needed. I had already planned a stop in at the Last Chance Tavern, but the gossip girls in front of me confirmed that’s where I was going to find the drama. One of the crew, a young man named Harrison, came over and gave us instructions on how to walk down the street.

“You.” My heart dropped when Harrison pointed to me. I thought that I’d been pulling off my role as an extra.

I pointed to my chest with my striped mitten.

“Yeah, you in the giant coat. I don’t know who in wardrobe approved that.”

Jake’s insulated canvas coat had kept me toasty all afternoon, and I’d forgotten that I was wearing it. “I’m just wearing this until the take.” I hoped that I’d gotten the lingo right.

“Fine.” He shook his head. Harrison looked like he’d come straight from an emo goth concert, his black and green dyed hair poking out from under his slouchy hat. “Take your places everyone.” He herded the group onto the snowy street. I tailed towards the back of the pack and he fell into stride beside me. “I like the coat. That’s what people actually wear here. But, you know, this is not just a romance movie, it’s also a fantasy. “He held out his hand. “I can hang it up in the extras trailer for you.”

As soon as Harrison disappeared with Jack’s coat, I froze. It was as though Jack, and the same smell from his bedsheets, had wrapped itself around me all day, protecting me from the climate of Chance Rapids. Harrison had returned and tilted his head and stared as I zipped the motorcycle jacket tightly to my

throat. “What the fuck is up with wardrobe?” He rolled his eyes and then strode away, giving off an I don’t get paid enough to care vibe. It was clear that he would rather be working on a thriller where the act of trusting strangers in a strange town didn’t lead to wedding bells, but to shallow burials in the woods.

For the next two hours I walked up and down the fake main street while Bradley and Jennifer’s characters ate chocolate chip cookies and participated in a snowball fight. My teeth were chattering and even with the mittens, my fingertips were frozen by the time the director yelled ‘cut.’

My phone had been in the pocket of Jack’s coat. I found Harrison and reminded him of the jacket. I squeezed my hands open and closed several times and blew my hot breath onto them, hoping that I hadn’t just gotten frostbite. Other than the gossip about Bradley and some local woman named Stacy, the set hadn’t given me any details for my story.

Next stop was the Last Chance Tavern. My stomach growled, and I realized that I hadn’t eaten anything since the morning muffins with Jack. Harrison’s green hair flashed between members of the festive looking crowd as he dodged carolers to deliver Jack’s coat to me.

“This fell out of the pocket.” He handed me an antique key that was bigger than my hand. “There’s got to be a story behind that.” He eyed up the rusty relic.

“Wouldn’t you like to know.” I tried to play it sly with him. There definitely was a story behind the key, I just didn’t know it. Worried that the key would fall out again, I zipped it into the inside pocket of my leather jacket.

“Maybe I’ll get it out of you later.” He winked. His was much more obvious than Jack’s, his whole face was involved

in the not subtle gesture. “The whole crew is going to the tavern for drinks. You should join us.”

“I’ll see what the others want to do.” I jutted my chin toward the group of extras.

“They’re all coming.” Harrison pointed his fingers at me like guns, grinned, and then jogged away, disappearing into the throng of actors and crew.

I shook my head and was about to walk away when an arm slid through mine. It made me jump a little until I realized it was the tall brunette with the pompom. “How did you get on Oscar’s good side?” she whispered.

“Oscar? I think his name is—”

Miss ringlet interrupted. “Harrison, but he reminds us of the grouch, you know, Oscar.”

I extricated my arm from hers. “I suppose the hair is the same color, but he seems sweet.” Perhaps if I could get miss ringlet to focus her attention on Harrison, he’d be less inclined to wink at me again.

She leaned in so close I could feel the warmth of her breath on my cheek. “Apparently he’s the one that can get you more screen time.”

“Ah.” I nodded, understanding what was going on. “I’m fine with being in the background.”

Miss Ringlet tucked one of the twirling brown strands behind her ear. “I’m not.”

“Amelia.” The other girl that I’d seen with Miss Ringlet earlier rushed to her side. “They’re all going to the Last Chance.” She was out of breath and her cheeks were pink.

“The Last Chance?” Amelia screwed up her face. “Really? It’s so gross in there.”

“We’ve gotta go.”

“Join us.” Amelia gestured for me to come with them.

I felt my phone buzz in the pocket of Jack’s coat. “I’ll meet you there. I’ve got a few things to do first.” I waved goodbye to the girls and turned to answer my phone.

“No phones on set.” A man holding an overhead microphone growled.

“But we’re not shooting.”

The man turned up his palms, the stand to the microphone propped on his shoulder. “I don’t make the rules. That’s part of the contract you signed.” The man’s eyes were a crystal blue and he had a bushy white beard. “If you really need to take that, you can stand behind me.” His eyes sparkled and he pointed behind him with chin.

“Really?” I rushed behind him, but was too late. “Dammit.” I hissed. Stepping from behind my stocky shield I held out my hand to shake his. “I missed the call, but thank you for your bulk.”

He chuckled and his huge hand enveloped mine. “You’re welcome. I think.”

“Have you ever been told that you look like—”

He held out his free hand like a stop sign. “Don’t even say it. The director has been trying to get me to play him for years. I’m a grip, not an actor, and I’m definitely not Santa.”

“I was going to say Kurt Russell.” I smiled.

“Kurt Russell in Tombstone or Kurt Russell in The Christmas Chronicles?” I knew the right answer, and I also knew the best answer.

“Tombstone, of course.” I grinned.

“You’re a sweet kid.” He laughed. “I didn’t get your name.”

“Henri.” I thought about using a fake name, but I didn’t think that the Santa Claus grip would care that I’d trespassed on the set. It was also cute that he called me a kid. “And you are?”

“Shawn O’Barber. Grip extraordinaire.” He bowed dramatically. The crew of the movie were proving to be an interesting bunch of characters.

The phone buzzed in my pocket. Shawn pointed to the pocket. “Someone is trying to reach you.”

“It was nice to meet you Shawn O’Barber.” I pulled the phone from my pocket and waved with it in my mittened hand as I jogged off set in order to answer it.

“Hello?” I was slightly breathless as I answered.

Bob was on the other end and he didn’t have good news for me. In fact, the news was way worse than I ever could have imagined.

EIGHT

JACK

CHANGING into fresh workpants was kind of pointless. The coffee pants were almost dry and I was going to be working in the garage anyway, but I pulled on new thermal long underwear and a clean pair of Carhart work pants anyway. They only had stains of the oil variety, not coffee. The drive home had been slow, the snow had accumulated to the running boards of the Bronco, but when I pulled into the driveway, the clouds cleared and the sun even made an appearance.

The sound of the helicopters echoed across the valley before I saw them. “Oh my God.” I whispered to myself when I saw they weren’t heli-skiing choppers, they were search and rescue, along with a medevac. They flew over the peaks to the west, the thwapping of their blades cutting through the air. That many choppers meant something big had happened. I waded through the knee-deep snow to the garage, where I tuned into Search and Rescue’s channel on the radio. Voices crackled through the speakers and I heard another round of choppers flying low overhead, this group headed east.

I listened in as the dispatcher, a woman with a calm voice, described the emergency – two avalanches, one on each side of Chance Rapids, had slammed over the highway. Several car accidents had been reported, but not one had been caught up in

the river of snow that had released from high up in the mountains.

“Holy shit,” I whispered to the border collie named Lucky, who was sprawled on his side on the warmth of the heated garage floor in front of the woodstove. Avalanches happened from time to time, but most were intentional, done by professionals to keep the highway or the ski hill safe. Two natural avalanches on each side of town meant Chance Rapids was cut off from the world until they could be cleared.

My thoughts were interrupted by my phone buzzing in my pocket.

“Jack.” My father’s matter of fact voice barked out through the speaker. “Where are you?”

“I’m at home, Dad.”

There was a pause and I heard my father exhale. “Good.”

I waited for him to continue. “Is that why you called?”

“Yeah.” There was some shuffling in the background. “There’s been an avalanche and I was just making sure...” my father’s voice trailed off. “That you weren’t out on the roads, that’s all.”

Feeling like a fifteen-year-old again, I assured my father that I was alright. “Can you check on the animals? Something like that might have spooked them.”

“I will, dad. How bad is the situation on the roads? Do they need any volunteers up there?”

“No, it’s under control. From everything I’ve heard, there weren’t any fatalities, and they’re turning all the cars around to send them to Windswan for the night. It’s a good thing you weren’t on the other side of it though, it’s probably going to be

a few days before they can get it cleared. And, your mother said you came in today and wanted to tell me something?”

I couldn't stop myself from smiling at the phone. “Dad, the deal is done. On Monday, we will be the owners of the Snow Ghost Lodge.”

“Congratulations, Jack. It's going to be a lot of work, but I know you can do it.”

If there was anything my father had instilled in me, it was his work ethic. “Thanks Dad. I can't wait to get started. In the meantime, I'll go check on the animals and make sure they haven't gone crazy and hopped any fences.”

After hanging up with my dad, I felt oddly emotional. I hadn't lived at home for years, and when I did, my father had been so busy working that he hadn't seemed to even notice me. Now, I was starting to realize how important it was to spend time with him.

“Are you coming with me?” I patted my thigh and whistled at Lucky. I swear he rolled his eyes at me, but stood, yawned, and after an extended stretch of both downward and upward facing dog, he trotted to my side.

The goats were huddled in the corner of the barn, and they seemed a little out of sorts, but the alpacas munched straw and the apples that I'd brought with me, as though it was any other day. The chickens didn't give a damn, and clucked as though swearing at me for letting the cold air to their coop.

I spent the rest of the afternoon studying the architectural plans for the lodge and making a list of all the permits I was going to need to get in order to turn the abandoned lodge into something special. It was going to be a big project, my biggest as a carpenter, and the added challenge of the lodge being

completely off-grid, was going to make the project all that much more difficult. But it was going to be worth it. I hoped. I had sold everything, given up my entire life for the project. Including Marnie, who decided that she didn't want to live in a small town with a broke carpenter.

My phone pinged with a text message and I felt a twinge of disappointment when I saw Charlotte's name on the screen. Henri was busy working on her story, and she didn't have any reason to text me, so why had I hoped it was her?

It read: Beardog Brewery 9 p.m.

Why had I agreed? I wished that there was a way I could cancel without being rude – but short of being on the other side of that avalanche, I couldn't think of an excuse not to meet up with Charlotte and her friends. Including her new friend – Henri.

Every time Henri popped into my mind, I had to literally shake my head to get her out. So what if I felt something when I was near her, it didn't matter. She was leaving. I found myself wondering what she'd think of the lodge, and if she was adventurous, and what she liked to eat for dinner. "Shit, Lucky. I need to do something to get her out of my mind."

Lucky tilted his head, but didn't offer me any suggestions.

"Well, she'll be gone tomorrow." I rolled up the plans and realized that I was wrong about two things –I wasn't going to be able to forget about Henrietta Page, and thanks to mother nature, she wasn't leaving the next day.

NINE

HENRI

AS I LEFT Bob's garage, I wondered, *could this assignment be cursed?* The parts for the rental car hadn't come in that afternoon. I tried to be an optimist, but everything was going wrong. The booking at the Inn, driving over the snowbank, meeting a sexy mountain man who ran hot and cold, struggling to find the dark side of Chance Rapids, and then bam, a mother effing avalanche. Not one, no – two avalanches closing the road on EITHER side of the town.

It was as though Chance Rapids wanted me to be as miserable as possible and trap me in that state. I caught a glimpse of myself in the window of the cute flower shop. Tasteful white Christmas lights wound around cedar boughs that lined the frosty window. I looked...homeless. My hair had been soaked from the snow. It had frozen and melted at least three times that day leaving a mess of frizzy waves squashed down by my wool hat. They definitely weren't beach waves, they were more like icicle waves. Jack's coat sleeves hung six inches past the tips of the red mittens, its hem almost hitting my knees and after all the walking I'd done, my legs felt like blocks of ice, not cold, but tired – the practical winter boots were warm, but heavy.

The Main Street of Chance Rapids felt sleepy. The snow had stopped falling and I stepped out of the way as a machine

trundled by, clearing the foot of freshly fallen snow from the sidewalk. The driver inside the small yellow machine smiled and waved at me.

Something that everyone seemed to do here. Wave. And smile.

And, as I brushed my icy hair behind my ear, a pretty blond face smiled back at me from inside the flower shop. And then I did something unexpected. I lifted my hand and waved at her. She grinned, adjusted some of the greenery and then waved back at me.

It felt good. And weird. I was used to avoiding eye contact at all costs. Walking down the street at home, I was more likely to get bumped or shoved by someone on their cell phone. Where were all the rednecks? Where were all the women strutting around in fashion from twenty years ago?

The sign above the Last Chance Tavern looked like it was on its last chance. A yellowed lightbulb was barely bright enough for me to read the words above the door.

“Well, here goes.” I took a breath, pulled open the door and was met with a wall of classic rock, the smell of stale beer, and a sea of plaid flannel coats interspersed with tight tops trimmed with lace.

Finally. This was the scene I was going to write about.

But, as I took a closer look, the redneck party scene was diluted with the film crew. Expensive puffy coats and artsy haircuts gave them away.

“Henri!”

There were only a handful of Rapidians that knew my name. It wasn't Jack, or Charlotte, or even grip extraordinaire Shawn – it was my new BFF Amelia.

“You made it.” Her cheeks were flushed and she was holding a pint of beer in her hand. She hooked her arm through mine and pointed across the room to where Harrison was standing with Bradley Stern. “Let’s go say hi to Harrison.”

I planted my feet and resisted her pull. “I’m going to get a drink first. Is there somewhere to check my coat?”

Amelia pointed to a chair in the corner. “You can put it over there.”

“Seriously?” The stack of coats teetered high above the table. I shrugged out of Jack’s coat, but couldn’t bring myself to leave it unattended. It seemed – wrong, and irresponsible. He’d been kind enough to literally give me the clothes off his back, I couldn’t just toss it into the corner. I looped the heavy coat over my arm.

“I’ll keep it with me.”

The bar had to be a million degrees and the windows that were above street level dripped with condensation. I unzipped my leather jacket for the first time that day and patted the inside pocket to make sure Jack’s weird key was still safely in my pocket. There were two bartenders, a trashy looking woman in an extremely low-cut top, years of sun damage had faded the tattoo on her chest; and a younger man in the same plaid flannel shirt I’d seen three times since I walked into the bar. The woman snapped her gum and then crossed her arms, pushing up her cleavage. I couldn’t help but try to decipher the letters inside the faded heart tattoo on her breast, MILF. “Are you going to order or just stand there and look like an idiot?” She didn’t hide her eye roll.

I was so startled; I actually took a step back. The bartender put her hands on the bar and then gestured for the man behind me to come ahead of me. He smelled like body odor and

whiskey, and it made sense, because that's what he ordered – a double, with a splash of coke.

Rude waitstaff were not new to me, but after the fairy tale day that I'd had, the MILF behind the bar's attitude had caught me off guard. It brought me back down to earth and made me remember who I was, a hard-hitting cynical journalist who grew up around people just like Mrs. MILF.

“Make that two.” I held up my fingers and stepped to the bar, squaring my shoulders with authority. The man in front of me turned and smiled, he was weaving on his feet and when he smiled he was missing at least three teeth. “Let me get yours, sir.”

“Sir?” The man's glazed eyes glanced around the room until he realized I was talking to him. “Mary.” He knew the bartender by name. “Don't you dare let this pretty lady pay for my drink – put it on my tab.”

“It's alright.” I smiled.

“No. It's not.” He put his hands on his hips. “Maybe where you're from it's fine and dandy for a man to be rude. But, not here. You keep your money and enjoy your drink.”

The drink that Mary had poured for me sloshed dangerously in the glass as he handed it to me. I was ready for the next pickup line, but he tipped his un-ironic trucker hat and stepped around me. “Have a nice night Miss. Watch out for those movie people. Trouble.” He muttered the last word and wove into the crowd.

Mary leaned on the bar and beckoned for me to lean in with her index finger. I could smell her hairspray and cinnamon gum. “That's Ralph. He's harmless, and a little old-fashioned. Don't pay him any mind.”

“Old fashioned, or sexist?” I raised my eyebrows.

“A little bit of both I guess,” Mary shrugged.

I slid a twenty across the bar. “How about you put this on his tab, but don’t tell him.” I was doing it more for Susan than for Ralph. A bartender like her could definitely give me some salacious stuff for my story.

“Sure honey.” Mary picked up the twenty and tucked it into her bra, just below her tattoo. “But remember, there’s nothing wrong with a man opening a door for you from time to time.” It seemed like odd advice coming from a woman who blatantly advertised that she was into younger men.

Knowing that I was going to come back and try to sweet talk Mary into giving me an interview, I thrust my hand across the bar. “I’m Henri.”

“Hi Henri,” her hand was strong as she shook mine. “I’m Mary. Mary Irene Fisher.”

“Ohhh.” I wished that the surprised realization hadn’t come out verbally. I was willing to bet that there was another middle name in there starting with an L. “It’s nice to meet you Mary Irene Fisher.” I felt like an asshole.

“Are you here with the film crew? I don’t think I’ve seen you before.”

For some reason, I didn’t want to lie to Mary. “No. Well, not really. I’m a writer.”

The bartender raised her eyebrows. Was everyone in this town suspicious of writers? “Oh yeah, what are you writing about?”

I took a sip of my drink, the whiskey was definitely not top shelf and made me cough. I pounded at my chest with my fist.

Mary had an entertained look on her face. “Yeah, it’s not very good.” She laughed.

“No kidding.”

Mary took the glass from my hand and dumped the drink down the sink. She took a bottle from the top shelf, poured me a glass over ice. “On the house.”

“What’s this for?” I asked.

“You seem alright.” Mary said, through chomping on her gum. “So what’s your story about?” She leaned her elbows on the bar and stared at me.

“Well...” I swirled the whiskey in the glass. “I’m writing a story about Christmas in a small town. And, how it compares to a Christmas movie.”

The band returned from their warmup and started tinkering with their guitars. I knew I would be drowned out by their music in a matter of seconds.

Mary tilted her head as though processing what I’d said. “Life in this town ain’t nothing like those movies...” she paused. “But you know that already don’t you.”

I was busted.

“I’m just trying to put forward a more truthful version.”

“Mary,” the other bartender shouted and raised his arms in the universal, what the fuck are you doing, gesture. He had been taking all the orders while Mary chatted with me. Instead of cutting the conversation short, Mary ignored him.

It made me like her even more. The band started to play something I recognized but couldn’t quite place – it was definitely by the Rolling Stones though. Mary leaned on her elbow and curled her finger for me to lean towards her. “Henri.

That doesn't make sense. The movie is fake, this is real life. People don't want real life at Christmas time. They want to forget about theirs and pretend that everything is perfect for a minute or two."

She was right. And my cheeks burned with the realization that my assignment was kind of bullshit. When I first saw her, I didn't think that she'd be the one to make me question the project. Now, there was no way I was going to ask Mary for an interview for my snarky Platypus article. The singer had started belting out the lyrics to Satisfaction, and if I hadn't been able to see that he was a twenty-year-old with a red beard, I would've sworn Mick Jagger himself was at the Last Chance Saloon. I held the glass of whiskey up in a gesture of thanks. "I'll keep that in mind." I shouted.

Mary nodded and gave me a little salute gesture. I was going to have to get my dirt from somewhere else. The lady behind the bar was far too sage of a woman for my fluff piece article. I had to weave through the crowded dance floor to find Amelia. She was on the edge of the dance floor, eyes focused on Bradley Stern, who was twirling an older woman around on the dance floor.

"Hi."

I jumped as Harrison shouted in my ear.

"Where did you come from?" I took a sip of the whiskey - it was smooth and warmed my entire body. The crowded bar had to be a million degrees and I was carrying Jack's coat while still wearing my leather jacket.

"I've been waiting for you to show up." Harrison's voice had a slur to it. His eyes went to the jacket in my arms. "Drop that and let's dance."

“You want to dance...to this?” I pointed to the band.
“Classic rock?”

“I love classic rock.” He grinned. “Don’t judge a book by its cover.” He sang along with the lyrics proving that he wasn’t faking it.

“How do you even know this song?” Harrison might have been drinking age, but he looked a lot younger.

“It reminds me of my grandma. She used to sing this while she was vacuuming.”

“Wow.” I almost choked on my whiskey. Bradley and the woman in leopard print were looking quite cozy, he had his arms around her and she giggled as he whispered something into her ear. She looked to be in her late forties or maybe even early fifties. “Who is that?” I pointed to the couple.

Harrison turned to see what I was pointing at and then focused his attention back on me. “That’s some local chick Bradley is banging. She’s married, but her husband is sleeping with her friend over there. And that woman’s husband is sleeping with some woman from Windswan. It’s really hard to keep track, actually.” He added. “But, it’s a secret, so don’t tell anyone.”

“She’s a little bit older than him...” I observed out loud. Internally, I noted that if I looked up cougar in the dictionary, the woman’s picture would’ve been beside it.

Harrison winked. “There’s nothing wrong with that.”

And I realized that he was talking about me. I was twenty-eight years old.

“Come on, let’s dance.” Harrison was more intoxicated than I’d first realized. “Put down your coat.” He moved to take the coat from my arms.

“It’s not my coat.” I protectively squeezed Jack’s coat against my body. “It’s my boyfriend’s.” I said it a little louder than necessary. Harrison looked like he could be a persistent guy, like that one lone mosquito buzzing around a bedroom in the middle of the night.

“Oh.” Harrison took a step backwards. “I’m sorry. I didn’t know.”

“How could you?” I finished my drink and slipped into Jack’s coat. I’d had enough of the scene at the Last Chance. “I’m going to go now, but I think that Amelia is single.” I didn’t feel guilty pointing Amelia out to Harrison, it was what she wanted after all.

Without waiting for Harrison to protest, I set a path to the restroom across the rowdy dance floor. Just as I reached the bathrooms, a balding man with a beer belly stormed into the bar. His face was as red as the spotlight on the band. He pushed aside anyone in his way, leaving a wake of disgruntled people behind him as he lunged to the dance floor, pulling the leopard print lady off Bradley. She tried to hold the man’s arms, but his nostrils flared like a bull, his eyes focused intently on Bradley. The man shook her off and knocked Bradley off his feet with one sweeping punch to his jaw.

The punch seemed to set off something in the bar, and all of a sudden, fists were being thrown all around me. I heard the sound of a bottle smashing and knew that I had to get out of the Last Chance. It was exactly how I’d imagined a small-town brawl, but scarier.

I burst onto the street; the silence of the night was a stark contrast to the mayhem inside the bar. I took a deep breath; that scene definitely wouldn’t have happened in the Christmas movie. I shook off the adrenaline that was rushing through my

body, then headed north on the main street to the pub where I was to meet Charlotte.

My stomach flip flopped and I realized that I still hadn't eaten anything since breakfast, but it wasn't hunger that was churning in my stomach. It was butterflies. I was on my way to interview Charlotte at the Beardog Brewery, but that wasn't the reason the whiskey was threatening to make an appearance.

It was nerves and excitement wrapped into a ball that was bouncing around in my stomach.

It was the man whose jacket had protected me from the elements, and humans all day long. Jack. I was going to see Jack again, and I felt like I was going to puke.

TEN

JACK

THE BEARDOG BREWERY was new in town. At least new to me. When I grew up there was only one bar in town, The Last Chance. It had been a dive fifteen years ago and it was even worse now, so the trendy new bar was a welcome addition to the sleepy Chance Rapids scene.

I'd been so preoccupied with the business deal, and helping out at my parent's house, that I hadn't had a chance to visit the Brewery. When I stepped inside, I felt like I'd gone back to the city, but in a good way. Where the Last Chance had faded linoleum floors and smelled like stale beer, the Beardog had trendy exposed brick walls, gorgeous hand carved chairs and tables, and soaring glass panels that gave a full view of the microbrewery next door.

A man I didn't recognize was playing the acoustic guitar on a small stage in the corner.

"Jack!" Charlotte waved from a table near the back. She stood as I reached the table and introduced me to the group of her friends. "You know Logan," she put her hand on his back.

"Of course, nice to see you again, Logan." I shook his hand. Charlotte went around the table and I tried to think of a way to remember each person she'd introduced. Logan was easy, he was a retired NHL player and I'd already met him. I

remembered Freddie from high school, and he was with a beautiful blond woman who looked like Taylor Swift, named Serena. Charlotte's sister Lauren was there with her husband, a man named Baxter, and Emma, who I recognized from the flower shop, was there too.

I sat in the empty seat across from Charlotte while she ordered a round of pitchers for the table. "I think that everyone is here, except Henri." Charlotte checked her watch. "Josh got called out with Search and Rescue, so Megan had to stay home with the baby."

Henri wouldn't bail, would she? I had been a bit of jerk to her earlier, but I felt like we cleared the air in the afternoon. "Have you heard from Henri?" Charlotte asked as though reading my mind.

"No. The last time I saw her she was heading out on foot to work on her story. Her car is in the shop."

"Who's Henri?" Freddie asked. "And what's with her name?"

I laughed. "Her name is Henrietta. She showed up in town yesterday for some writing assignment and wrecked her car. My mom is letting her stay out at the farm while she's here."

A man wearing a plaid shirt and suspenders with a man bun delivered two huge pitchers of beer to the table. Then, he leaned down and kissed Emma, the florist. "Charlie," she held onto his forearm before he could rush back to the bar. "Have you met Jack? He grew up here and just moved back."

Charlie shook my hand. "Nice to meet you, and welcome home." He had a big genuine smile with bright white teeth. "I've gotta get back behind the bar. The cops showed up at the Last Chance and we're about to get slammed."

“Do you need my help?” Emma asked him.

“I’ve got it babe.” He kissed her before rushing off. I felt a pang of jealousy at the ease and obvious love in their relationship. Then, looking around the table, I realized that all of the other couples seemed perfect too.

I reminded myself that things aren’t always what they seemed. Maybe they were all pretending to be ridiculously in love with each other, but it didn’t seem like anyone was pretending.

Freddie filled us in on the details from the avalanches. He knew one of the plow truck drivers and apparently the road to the east wasn’t going to be open for a couple of days, and the road to the west might be closed even be longer. “I still can’t believe not one person was hurt when all that snow came down.” He shook his head in disbelief. “That would’ve been a Christmas nightmare.”

“There are people who are stuck on the other side though. Families who are separated right now.” Serena pointed out.

“I guess that’s better than the alternative. I mean, temporarily being stuck on the other side of a pile of snow is better than being permanently stuck underneath it.” Lauren’s voice was very matter-of-fact.

Charlotte picked up one of the heavy leather-bound menus. “There’s my dark sister.”

“Your pragmatic sister.” Lauren smiled. “Charlotte, I’m starving, are we going to wait for this Henrietta?”

Charlotte looked up from her menu and then waved wildly. “She’s here. I’ll go get her.”

My back was to the door, so I didn’t see Henri until she was at the table. Her face looked a little pale and she seemed

smaller than I remembered, then I realized that she was wearing my coat. A warmth rushed through me, seeing Henri in my clothes – it felt...good. Like I'd staked my claim on her, but not in a creepy way. I shook my head trying to rid myself of that thought - she wasn't a gold claim in the woods, and I wasn't a prospector.

Charlotte did the round of introductions, saving me for the end. "And, of course, you know Jack."

"I do know Jack." She gave me a wave. "His mom has been my guardian angel."

"That's Muriel." Freddie chimed in and everyone at the table murmured in agreement.

Henri took the seat across from me and as she sat her eyes met mine. My heartbeat pounded in my eardrums and I think I stopped breathing for a second. Had she gotten more beautiful? Or, had I forgotten that she was the most stunning woman I'd ever seen. Hell, I was sitting at a table of gorgeous women, but there was something different about her. I couldn't figure out what it was, but as soon as she was near me, it felt like my body temperature went up a half a degree and my skin became more sensitive. When she looked at me, I could FEEL it all over my body.

What was wrong with me?

Freddie poured me a glass of beer and Charlotte ordered small plates of appetizers for the table. "How does it feel to be back in town?" Freddie asked.

"Great. I mean, a lot has changed and nothing has changed." I laughed. "And, I've been meaning to talk to you. Charlotte told me that you were THE guy to talk to about

electrical work. I don't want to ruin your night talking about business, though."

Freddie had a goofy grin. "Are you kidding? I love talking about work."

"Really?" I was surprised.

"Hell no." Freddie laughed and handed me a business card. "I'm pretty booked, but I've heard about your project and I'd love to help you out."

"How have you heard about the lodge?" I glanced to Charlotte, who was deep in conversation with Henri.

"Not from Charlotte, don't worry, that woman is all business. Come on man, it's a small town. You didn't think that you were going to be able to come in and buy the Snow Ghost Lodge without any of us knowing about it?"

I'd forgotten what it felt like to be the subject of small-town gossip. "Let me guess, the helicopter pilot?" I had flown in a few times to check out the property.

"I'll never reveal my source." Freddie grinned. "But yeah, it was Corey." Freddie's eyes glinted. He clearly played the role of the town jester, or he'd had one too many IPA's.

"Loose lips sink ships." I gave him an exaggerated eye roll, but followed it up with a smile so he knew that I was joking. We'd only just met, but I could already tell he was the kind of guy I'd want as a friend.

"Or crash choppers." Freddie added.

Freddie asked me some questions about the lodge and by the end of the conversation he'd convinced me to join the volunteer fire department. Search and Rescue was going to be

too much of a time commitment, but the schedule for the fire department would work for me.

“What do you think they’re talking about?” Freddie eyed Charlotte and Henri. Henri had taken out a little voice recorder and set it on the table between them.

I realized that I still didn’t know any details about Henri’s work – or what she was planning to write about. “Who knows? I think that she’s writing a story on the town or the movie, or something.” I tried to make it sound like I didn’t really know, or care.

Freddie inhaled sharply. “Ooh, Charlotte might not be the best person to interview. She had a tough time with this town.”

Charlotte and Henri were laughing and Charlotte was gesturing wildly. “It doesn’t look too bad.” I brushed off Freddie’s comment.

“Dude. They were so cruel to her she changed her name.”

I knew that she’d changed her name, but I didn’t know why.

Charlie arrived at the table with another server, their arms laden with plates of calamari, canapes, oysters, and cheese sticks. “Those are mine.” Freddie raised his hand like a kindergartener when Charlie went to set down the cheese sticks.

Serena shook her head. “Freddie could live on cheese sticks and beaver tails.”

Freddie’s eyes lit up. “Ooh, we’ll have to stop by the G-spot on the way home and get one of those too.”

I almost choked on my beer. “I forgot about that nickname.”

“What nickname?” Henri and Charlotte had emerged from their one on one and joined in the group conversation.

Serena answered. “The Diner’s nickname.”

“Ah,” Charlotte laughed. “The G-Spot.”

Henri looked at me and then at Charlotte with a quizzical look on her face. I sighed loudly and explained. “Way back in the day, when the diner was part of the general store, someone shortened the general store to the G-store. Which then, probably due to some immature high school kids...” I raised my eyebrows and jerked my chin towards Freddie, “it morphed into the G-Spot. And, it looks like the nickname has stood the test of time.”

“Does your mom know?” Henri gasped.

“That’s the worst part. She thinks it’s hilarious. My dad, not so much, since his garage is attached and gets lumped in with it too.”

Henri smiled and dimples dented her cheeks. “I can totally see your mom laughing – and your dad being a grump about it.”

“It looks like you’ve nailed the family dynamics.” Henri looked at me and I looked at her. There was a connection between us, no doubt about it. And I was thankful for my beard, because the burning in my cheeks told me that they were likely turning the same shade of red as Henri’s.

Charlotte glanced at Henri and then at me with eyebrows raised, with a look on her face that told me I wasn’t the only one who could feel the tension.

I tried to focus on the conversation around me as we went through three rounds of appetizers and another round of beer. The Beardog Brewery was bustling and it seemed like

everyone in town was crammed into the bar, along with everyone from the movie set.

The band switched from acoustic indie folk, to covering pop songs, the first, Madonna's *Like a Virgin*. "Come on Logan, let's dance." Charlotte stood.

"No way." Logan crossed his arms. "You're on your own with this one."

"Serena?" Charlotte asked while pulling Henri up from her seat. "You're coming too Henri."

Emma had already jumped up and didn't need any convincing. The dance floor was full and as much as I tried to focus on Freddie's tales of his volunteer firefighter calls, and Logan's stories about the hockey team he coached, my brain only seemed capable of focusing on one thing, or rather, one person – Henri.

She was magnetic.

The upbeat music set segued into a slower one, and before I knew what I was doing. I stood and strode across the dance floor. It was like I was on autopilot and Henri was the destination.

I tapped Henri on the shoulder. "Would you like to dance?"

She turned, slowly, her eyes wide. I held out my hand and she slipped hers into it. "Sure." Henri let me lead her to the middle of the crowded dance floor.

The band played, and the singer crooned out the haunting opening lyrics to Elvis' *I Can't Help Falling in Love with You*. A song I thought was cheesy as hell - until I had Henri in my arms. I realized I'd never been close enough to notice the vanilla smell in her hair. Soon, Logan and Charlotte had joined

us on the dance floor amongst the crowd of people swaying to the music.

We danced like a couple from the sixties- one of her hands on my shoulder, the other clasped in mine. Our bodies spoke to each other, and when I stepped away from her, she turned and did slow twirl before we were drawn back to each other. This time our bodies were a little closer, and I'm sure she could feel my heart bashing at my ribcage. We repeated the move two more times until finally our bodies were pressed together. Henri rested her cheek on my chest and I dropped the formal dance posture and wrapped my arms around her back.

When the song ended, she didn't break away. Then the next song started and I didn't have to ask if she wanted to dance, we just kept going. The world around me disappeared until all I could hear was the music, all I could smell was Henri's hair, and all I could feel was how perfect her body felt in my arms.

The spell was broken when the music changed, and the crowd around us went wild as the band's mandolin player broke out into the opening riffs of ACDC's Thunderstruck. I opened my eyes and reality came crashing back to me. The attraction to Henri was undeniable, but she was only in town for a few more days, and I liked her too much to have a one-or two-night stand. *My eighteen-year-old self would be so disappointed in me*, I thought, as Henri and I broke apart and returned to the table.

A young dude with green hair stepped in front of Henri, stopping her before she could take her seat. My spidey senses kicked in; something was off and I stepped to Henri's side.

"Is everything alright?" I asked.

Henri rested her hand on my forearm, as if she could sense I was ready to defend her. “Everything is fine.”

“Is this your boyfriend?” The green haired kid looked to be about twenty, and he looked as though he’d had that many drinks. His voice slurred and he seemed uneasy on his feet.

“Yes.” Henri replied. “He is.”

Green Hair looked me up and down and then took a step back. “Well shiiiiit. I thought that you were making him up.”

“Well, I wasn’t. This is Jack, my...”

“Pissed off boyfriend,” I growled.

“Easy, big guy.” The kid took a further step back. “Your girl is something else. You can’t blame a guy for trying.”

“I CAN blame a guy for not taking the hint though.” I stepped in between Henri and Green Hair. I didn’t think that the kid was going to cause any problems, and Henri was tough enough to handle the situation on her own, but I didn’t want her to have to deal with it.

Not on my watch.

I didn’t know whether he was stupid or drunk. I suspected it was the latter when he didn’t move.

He scrunched up his forehead. “A hint?”

I shook my head and pointed away from the table. “Apologize to the lady and scram.” My voice was low and deep.

“Right.” The guy seemed to have a moment of sobriety. “I’m sorry Henri. I’ll see you on set.” He backed up a couple of steps before turning and disappearing into the crowd.

“Scram?” Henri looked up at me. “What are you, your mom?”

I laughed. “I’ve never been in a bar fight before, and that’s the best word I could come up with. What would you have used, Miss Writer?”

Henri and I were facing each other and she took both of my hands in hers. “Scram is the perfect word. Thank you for standing up for my honor.” I knew that she was mocking me or making fun of me, but I didn’t care. And, against my better judgement, I released one of Henri’s hands, slipped my hand behind her back, and in the middle of the bar, in front of all our new friends, I kissed her.

And she kissed me back.

“Jack,” she whispered in my ear. “Would you like to get out of here?”

I rubbed the back of my neck. “I don’t think it’s a good idea.” I took a deep breath. I couldn’t believe that I was shutting it down, especially since I was the one who started it all with that kiss.

Henri grinned. “I mean. I’m exhausted and you’re my ride. I should have phrased that better. Could you drive me home now?”

“Of course.”

Henri’s cheeks were pink and I wondered if she was embarrassed. We both knew what she meant when she asked me if I wanted to get out of there – and I had turned her down. I handed Charlotte two hundred dollars. “This should cover me and Henri. I’m going to drive her home now.”

Charlotte shook her head and pushed the cash away. “Don’t you dare. This was a business dinner, and I’m going to

expense the entire thing.”

“Henri. It was so nice to chat with you. Good luck with your story.” Charlotte hugged Henri and then whispered to me, “She’s all yours.”

The crew from the table had dispersed, and only Charlotte and Logan remained. “Good night, Logan.” I waved.

“Night Jack, nice to meet you Henri.” Logan gave a friendly wave and then draped his arm around Charlotte.

After the steamy temperature inside the bar, the crisp night air felt refreshing. Our boots crunched on the snow as we walked to the Bronco in silence. But, before I could open the door, she turned to me. “I know that we shouldn’t have done that, back there.”

I was ninety percent sure that she was referring to the kiss.

“That was one of the best nights I’ve had in years, and I don’t regret a thing,” her smile had a hint of sadness to it. “I’m glad that I met you Jack Lumber.”

“I don’t regret it either.” I stepped a little closer to her and she leaned against the passenger door. “I only have one regret...”

“What’s that?” she sounded out of breath. The steam from our breath hung in the air between us. I pressed my body against hers and she let out a little moan.

“That I didn’t kiss you again.”

There, in the light of the streetlamp, I gave in and kissed Henri the way I’d wanted to since I’d met her. She pressed her hips into mine, and I thought my cock was going to bust through the zipper on my pants.

“Jack.” She held onto the back of my neck and looked me in the eyes. Shit. She sounded serious, but I didn’t let go of her hips.

“Yes, Henri.”

Then a wry smile spread across her face. “Want to get out of here?”

I wasn’t going to fuck this up again. “Hell yeah.” This time I kissed her hard, and pressed my body against hers, not caring that she would definitely feel my rock-hard cock. “Let’s get out of here.”

ELEVEN

HENRI

JACK DOWNSHIFTED as we reached the stoplight. While we waited at the red light, Jack tuned the radio to a local station and then let his hand rest on my thigh while we waited for the light to change.

His coat had protected me from the weather all day long, and into the evening it had shielded me from unwanted advances from drunken green haired men. I wasn't worried about Harrison, and totally could've told him to fuck off on my own. But, having Jack step in, it didn't feel like he was posturing, it felt right. And, if he was actually my boyfriend, I would've wanted him to do the same thing.

I sighed and rested my hand on his. The radio was as old as the Bronco and Silent Night crackled through its speakers as we idled at the stoplight. "It's the only station in town at night." Jack pointed to the radio without taking his hand from its spot on my leg. It sounded like he was apologizing, but the version of Silent Night was hauntingly beautiful.

"It's alright. It's pretty." What had happened to me? Two days earlier I would've rather sat in dead silence, or listened to anything other than Christmas music.

The light turned green and I suddenly hated the fact that his vehicle was a manual transmission. I shivered when he

removed his hand to shift gears, the warmth of his palm had been keeping my entire body warm. It must have been the adrenaline, or the anticipation of what was going to happen next. Jack was sexy and raw, brawn and brains, and his ruggedness something that seemed so rare, it felt like I was sitting next to an endangered creature.

“How was your conversation with Charlotte? Or was it an interview?” He asked while focusing on the road ahead.

“It was an interview, she agreed to be quoted for the story.” Charlotte had given me exactly the information I needed for my story. The bar fight and the couples drama, along with the drunks, and the drug deal I witnessed in the bathroom were all going to help me spin the story in the direction that it needed to go – dark - to contrast the lightness of the Christmas movie. Mary’s voice echoed in my head, though, and I hoped that Jack wasn’t going to ask me for more details.

Jack inhaled and looked like he wanted to say something, but then stopped.

“What? What is it?” I urged, but with a little trepidation. I was reluctantly ready to answer the question about the nature of the story – if he asked.

He shifted gears and then rubbed his beard. “It’s just that Charlotte, well, she’s not your typical Rapidian. She’s kind of...unique.”

“I know.” I agreed. “She’s got quite the Cinderella story.”

“And, remember in that story, Cinderella didn’t have the best start to her life.”

I wondered where he was going with this. “I remember. But, in the end everything worked out for Cinderella – and Charlotte.”

The lights of the town had disappeared behind us, and the stars shone brightly over the snow-capped peaks. The moon was almost full and lit up the landscape so brightly I doubted that we even needed the headlights. “I just think that you might want to interview a few other people – you know, people that work hard and live ‘normal’ lives.” He took his hands from the steering wheel to make air quotes.

“What is normal, Jack?” I was curious.

“Are you interviewing me?” He raised his right eyebrow, a gesture I noticed that he did when he was entertained.

“Should I?” I tried to raise one eyebrow, but both shot up. “Are you normal? Didn’t you leave and come back too?”

He chuckled. “I guess you got me. You should ask my mom. I’m sure she’d be happy to be in your story.”

Oh God. I couldn’t do that to Muriel. Just like I couldn’t do it to Mary. “Do you know Mary at the Last Chance?” I asked.

“Mary Fisher?”

“Yes! What’s her story?”

Jack rubbed his beard. “I don’t really know. I think that her husband died years ago – he was a bit of a drunk. I think that she’s friends with my mom. I know that I’ve seen her at square dancing.”

Silent Night ended and *Rockin’ Around the Christmas Tree* started playing. “Square dancing?”

Jack’s smile couldn’t be hidden by his beard, the sides of his lips turned up. “It’s...”

I laughed. “I know what it is, I’m trying to figure out why you were there.” I was waiting for him to tell me that he

dropped his mom off and that how he saw Mary.

“When my dad is busy at work, I go with my mom. It’s actually kind of fun.”

“You? You go to...” I couldn’t even finish the sentence, it seemed so preposterous. This gorgeous man with muscles upon muscles, dosey doed with senior citizens? I reached across and took off his hat. He’d worn it all evening, even in the sub-tropical temperatures in the Beardog Brewery.

He gave me the one eyebrow. “What are you doing?”

“How old are you?” I asked. I still hadn’t been able to figure it out and handed him the hat.

“Were you checking to see if I was bald under there?” He ran his hand through his thick mane of brown hair that curled at the nape of his neck.

“Yeah.” I smiled. “I can’t tell if you’re twenty-five, or forty.”

“Forty?” There was the eyebrow again.

“You used the word scam. Do I need to remind you of that?” I laughed, thankful that he wasn’t offended that I’d snatched the hat off his head.

“I think scam would put me in the octogenarian bracket,” he laughed. “I’m thirty.” Jack put the hat back on his head. “How old are you?”

Then his eyes widened. “Oh God. Please tell me you’re not some really old looking teenager.”

I smacked his arm and laughed. “I feel like I should be offended. I’m twenty-seven.”

“Phew.” Jack put his hand on his chest and pretended to be overly relieved. “I mean, you were getting hit on by someone who looks like they play video games in their parent’s basement.”

“He told me he likes cougars.”

This time Jack’s subtle smile turned to a huge grin. “What an idiot.”

I laughed.

Jack continued. “If he likes cougars, he’s in the right place. There’s more than one or two that prowl the Last Chance.”

“Oh, I saw them. That’s what started the brawl.”

“I hope that’s not going to make it into your story.” Jack turned onto the laneway to his parent’s farm.

The cheating, the bar fight, the cougars, it was all going in the story. Instead of confirming or denying this fact, I took the cowardly way out – and changed the subject. “You called this...” I patted the dashboard of his car, “Cindy. Why?”

“Why do you think?” He pulled in the garage and shut off the engine, thankfully cutting *Grandma Got Runover by a Reindeer* off, mid chorus. “I’ll give you a hint. It’s got something to do with the color.”

The Bronco was the color of a pumpkin. “I think I’ve got it.”

Jack raised his eyebrows and shifted in his seat so he was facing me. “Let’s hear it. If you’re right, I’ll start the fire in the cabin for you.”

“And, if I’m wrong?” I had no idea how to start the woodstove.

“I’ll start the fire for you.” His smile was sweet. “Don’t worry. You’re not going to freeze tonight.” Jack was the kind of man I’d been waiting for my whole life. Rugged, handsome, thoughtful – and the way he kissed made me want to give up everything and live in the woods with him.

I rubbed my hands together and hoped that I was right, although it was a win-win scenario for me. “Cindy is short for Cinderella, because it’s the same color as a pumpkin.”

I rubbed my hands together and watched as Jack’s grin spread across his face. “I can’t believe you figured it out so quickly.”

“I can’t believe it took me that long,” I laughed. “Does that make me Cinderella?”

“Only if you lose one of those boots on the way to the cabin.” He joked. Then he held out his watch and tapped its face. “It is almost midnight after all, time to get you home.” He hopped out of the Bronco, and before I could open the door, he had done it, gesturing for me to get out of the truck with a flourish.

“But, if the truck is already a pumpkin, what happens at midnight?”

Jack grabbed my hand and scooped me up in his arms, honeymoon style. With a glint in his eye, he strode out of the garage and carried me into the starlit night. “Your clothes fall off.”



JACK WAS RIGHT. At the stroke of midnight, in the light of the moon and the crackling fire, my clothes were indeed in a pile

on the floor. And, so were his.

My body wanted Jack's. There was no doubt about it. More than that, I wanted all of Jack – and I knew that I didn't just want him for one night. Instead of jumping into bed and immediately getting down to business, we laid on our sides, facing each other. He stared into my eyes and swept my hair behind my ear. "You're a beautiful person Henri. I've only just met you, but I feel like I've known you for years."

The pounding of my heart echoed in my ears and I rested my hand on Jack's chest, feeling the thud of his beneath my fingertips. "I feel the same way too, Jack." I wanted to tell him that the romantic in me wondered if we were destined to meet. It seemed like everything had conspired to put Jack in my path and keep him there.

I knew that would sound crazy, though, so I kept the star-crossed lovers thing to myself. "I want to get to know more about you. All of you." I made the first move. I shimmied closer, so that my breasts were pressed against him and kissed him gently, letting my fingertip travel over his strong shoulder and down his muscular arm. He inhaled sharply as I continued exploring his body, running my hand over his hip and then letting it slip to lightly grip his round ass. His cock twitched against the front of my panties, the only piece of clothing that was left on me.

I knew that he would be big, I had felt it through his pants earlier, but I could barely fit my hand around his manhood. "You're going to have to take your time with me." I whispered in his ear.

"Henri." Jack kissed me and cupped my breast in his rough palm. "This is going to sound crazy."

“What?” My breath was raspy, my desire had my heart racing in anticipation for the moment when Jack would push into me.

He kissed my breast, his beard tickling my chest.

“You’re leaving. And, I know that if we do this, I’m never going to be able to forget you.”

I understood what he was saying and snuggled into his neck, knowing that I was already past that point. Even if we didn’t make love that night, I was never going to be able to forget about Jack Lumber. “Hold me, Jack. Keep me warm like you promised.” Turning so I could nestle into his arms, well aware of his rock-hard erection pressing against my ass, Jack wrapped his arms around me in a protective bear hug, and held me there, all night long.

TWELVE

JACK

DRIFTING in and out of sleep, I finally extricated my arm from underneath Henri when the woodstove needed another log. In my dreams we hadn't stopped. I had pushed into her warmth and her nails had dug into my shoulders when we came at the same time – her lips making the most beautiful o shape as we orgasmed together.

I woke up with a raging hard on. The pattern on my boxer briefs was warped by how seriously my dick was tenting out the fabric. I think we had done the right thing, though. It had taken every ounce of will power not to slip her panties to the side, or bury my face between her legs. I think that we were both feeling the same thing. I couldn't speak for Henri, but the desire I felt for her after such a short time kind of scared me. I had been hurt before, and if we let this thing go on between us, that hurt would pale in comparison – I could feel it in my bones.

I tucked the blankets around Henri's body and threw on an extra quilt. She murmured and then snuggled under the blankets. I got dressed, kissed her cheek, and then headed out to do the morning chores. The sun hadn't yet peeked over the mountain tops, so I worked in the dull gray pre-dawn light.

The lights were on at the main house and I wondered if mom and dad knew where I'd slept. I felt like an embarrassed teenager and hoped that they'd leave for work before I saw them. After I'd tended to the animals, I headed back to the cabin, hoping to slide back into bed with Henri. But when I got there, she was sitting in bed, tapping away at her laptop.

"Hi." I stomped the snow off my boots before stepping into the cabin.

She looked up at me through thick, black framed glasses. "I thought you'd left."

"I did leave." I gestured to the door with my thumb. "I had to go feed the animals."

She gave me a meek smile and took off her glasses. "That's not what I meant. I thought that you might have regretted...staying here last night."

"Henri." I sat on the edge of the bed and took her hand in mine. "The only thing I regret is not having more time with you."

"Well, it looks like you might." She turned her cell phone to face me. An article about the road closure was on the screen. "I'm here for at least another three days. Unless I can charter a plane."

My mind ran to Corey, the helicopter pilot. "I could probably make that happen, but not a plane, a chopper."

She smiled. "To tell you the truth, Jack, I was hoping it would take them longer to clear the road. I feel like I'm just scratching the surface here. For the story, I mean." She seemed flustered. "I've messaged my boss, and he's okay with me staying and working from here."

“That’s good news.” I let my hand rest on the blanket draped over her shin. “How’s the story going?”

She took a deep breath. “Honestly, Jack. It’s been a bit tougher than I’d anticipated. But I’ll get it done.” She shut the laptop. “Could you drive me into town later? I’d like to conduct some more interviews and maybe sneak onto the movie set one more time.” She flashed a devilish smile.

“Of course. How about you just take Cindy? I’ve got to meet with Freddie at the fire station today. I’m joining the volunteer fire fighters.”

Her eyes softened. “Jack. You square dance, volunteer with the fire department, help your parents. I’ve learned what you do for other people, but I have no idea what you do for yourself.” She leaned against the pillows and patted the space beside her. I crawled over top of her and leaned against the pine headboard. She snuggled into me and I wrapped my arm over her shoulder.

“I could say the same thing about you.” I chuckled. “I know that you like writing, and wearing the color black, and you’ve got a bit of an attitude, and a killer sense of humor, but that’s about it.” I deflected her question with a question of my own, leaving out the sensitive stuff, like her absentee father.

“What do you want to know?” she leaned her head against my shoulder. “I’m an open book.”

I cleared my throat and prepared myself to ask a risky question. “Do you think you could ever live...in a small town? Or, are you a city girl through and through?”

She picked at her fingernail. “I’ve been wondering the same thing.” She dropped her hands in her lap. “Jack, until I came here I would’ve said hell no. I could never leave the city.

But I'm starting to see that I didn't really understand what it meant to live in a small town. I mean, I'm seeing the positive and negative side of Chance Rapids, but being with Charlotte and all of her friends, seeing the way that they know and love your mom, I mean, the good seems to outweigh the bad. But my job is in L.A. I don't think that there are many journalism jobs here, are there?"

I was surprised. I thought for sure she was going to say that she could never become a Rapidian. It sounded like the only thing that was holding her back was her job. "Could you do another kind of writing? Does it have to be hard-hitting journalism?" It was my conversation with my ex, all over again. Her answer had been no. She wanted and needed the excitement of traveling the world.

Henri flipped over so that she was facing me, then threw her leg over both of mine so she was straddling me. I wrapped my arms around her waist, and she draped hers around the back of my neck. "I'm halfway through my first novel. If I could write full-time, I'd give up The Platypus gig in a heartbeat."

"The Platypus?"

She chuckled. "It's the name of the newspaper."

"Why don't you?" I asked.

"It's not that easy," she sighed. "I might not be good enough."

"You will never know unless you try." It was exactly how I felt about buying the lodge. I had no idea what I was doing, only that as soon as I heard that the lodge was for sale, I knew that I had to buy it.

“That’s very optimistic of you, Jack. In the meantime though, the Platypus pays the bills, and I’ve got an assignment to do.”

She rocked her hips lightly, and I took a deep breath, hoping the urge to toss her onto her back and rip off her jeans would pass.

“I could ask you the same thing,” she murmured, rocking her hips again. It wasn’t my imagination; she was interviewing me and ever so slightly grinding against me at the same time. It was one of the sexiest things I’d ever experienced. I was completely clothed and so turned on, my heart had started to thump against my ribcage like a sledgehammer. “Could you ever live in the city?”

“I did.” I rasped. “And no, you couldn’t pay me to go back there.”

“You did? What did you do there...” She stopped her grindy hip teasing, her eyes searching mine. “...and why did you move back?” The questions started coming hard and fast – the new information had definitely brought out the reporter in her.

“I’m a carpenter. I moved back to help my parents. And —”

I was about to tell her about the lodge when two loud barks interrupted me and the clicking of Lucky’s claws on the porch were followed by heavier footsteps and then three hard knocks on the door.

Henri whipped her head around to look at the door while she dismounted from my lap and leapt to take a seat at the small table.

“Jack, are you in there?” It was my mom.

I shifted to the edge of the bed and held a throw pillow on my lap. “Yeah, mom. Come in.”

At thirty years old I felt like a teenager who had just been busted. My mom looked from Henri to me and grinned. “I thought I might find you here. Henri, it looks like the road is going to be closed for a few more days. You can stay here as long as you’d like.”

Mom winked at me. Zeesh, she was the town matchmaker, and she wasn’t even subtle about it. Clearly, she approved of Henri, which was odd, because she hated my last girlfriend.

“Thank you, Mrs. Lumber,” Henri replied. “But, I’m happy to pay your vacation rental rate.”

“I wouldn’t accept it.” She held up her hands in front of her. “You’re doing a story on our little town that is going to be online for the world to see. I should be paying you.”

It was subtle, but Henri’s face shifted. “I can’t—”

“Stop.” My mom held up her hand. “You’re our guest, and you can stay for as long as you’d like. But that’s not the reason I came down here. Jack, there’s a town emergency.”

“Why didn’t you start with that?” I threw the pillow aside and jumped up to grab my coat.

Mom laughed. “Take it easy Jack. You don’t need to rush out of here. The Santa Claus parade is today, and because the roads are closed, they can’t bring in the reindeer from Windswan, and Mr. and Mrs. Claus are trapped on the other side of the slide.”

“Geez mom. Why don’t you start with that, instead of a town emergency.”

“Well, it is an emergency- the parade is tonight!”

I shook my head. “What does this have to do with us?”

“You’re going to think it’s crazy, but I’ve volunteered Dave and Simon.”

Henri tilted her head and was watching the conversation between me and my mom like a tennis match. “Who are Dave and Simon?” she asked.

“The alpacas.” I groaned. “Mom. They don’t look like reindeer at all.”

“I don’t think that the mayor cares at this point. She’s approached a few of the ranchers, but they’ve all said no to using their horses. And, they’ve got cute felt horns we can put on their heads. It’s going to save the day.”

My mom had always been involved with the town, but this was taking it to another level. “Don’t you think that the kids will be confused?”

Henri jumped up and interrupted, her voice brimming with excitement. “I know the perfect person to be Santa.”

“Now we’re talking,” Mom pointed to Henri. “Come on, Jack. You’ve got to get Dave and Simon loaded into the trailer. Henri, come with me.”

I stepped in between Henri and mom, who at this point were just feeding each other with their excited energy. “Henri is here to do work mom. Not run casting for a small-town Santa Claus parade.”

“No, this is perfect, it will help my story.” Henri emphasized the word help and I knew that I’d lost. I was going to be taping antlers to the alpaca’s heads before the day was over.

“Perfect.” Mom clapped her hands together. “When you two are ready, come up to the main house – coffee is on and I’ve just pulled a loaf of banana bread out of the oven.”

Mom and Lucky left to go back to the main house.

“How does your mom do it? She’s got the energy of a twenty-year-old.” Henri pulled aside the curtain and watched as mom disappeared over the hill. “Actually, I don’t even think I had that energy at twenty.”

I put on my coat and hat. “It looks like I’m going to be spending my day turning Dave into Rudolph.”

Henri strode toward me, grabbed my face with both her hands, stood on her toes and kissed me. “I’ve never met anyone like you, Jack. Now, come on. The fate of the parade is in our hands.” I could tell that she was enjoying the ridiculousness of the situation. “I sure as hell could use a coffee.”

“Now, that I can get on board with.” I turned down the damper on the woodstove and the two of us headed to the main house.

If Mom hadn’t interrupted us, I’m not sure that I could’ve resisted Henri for one second longer. Her arrival had also interrupted me before I could tell Henri about the lodge. Would she still be interested in me if she knew the risk I had taken? I realized that it was a stupid concern. Henri was interested in me when she thought I was a farm hand living in my parents’ back yard.

My heart seemed to swell as I realized that Henri liked me for me. Not for what I could give her, or for where I lived, or what I did for a living. She liked me. And, I liked her.

What were we doing? I wasn't an old man, but I wasn't a young one either – and I knew that what was brewing between us was something special – and maybe, just maybe, we needed to see where it could go.

L.A. was a short plane ride away. As I followed Henri to the main house, I imagined picking her up from the airport, us sending flirty text messages back and forth, maybe even some sexy photos. It would be fun, but I knew that long distance didn't work. Or could it?

I wanted Henri. If that meant long distance, maybe we had to try.

THIRTEEN

HENRI

TWANGY COUNTRY MUSIC played on the stereo as Muriel and I drove into town.

“Who is this mystery man that can play Santa?” she asked.

I explained how I’d met Shawn and that he’d be perfect for the job. I didn’t tell Muriel that he was kind of a grouch and despised the fact that he looked like the man in red. That was a small detail I’d worry about when we found him.

“I should find you a coat that fits you a little better,” Muriel turned to look at me while she was driving twenty miles faster than the speed limit.

Smoothing the front of Jack’s coat, I smiled. “It might be big, but it sure is warm.”

A knowing smile crept across Muriel’s face. “You know Henri, Jack hasn’t been this happy in years.”

“What do you mean?” I was learning that Muriel was an open book. You didn’t have to guess what was on her mind, you just had to wait because she was going to tell you.

“Don’t be modest, young lady.” The truck fishtailed as we turned from the sideroad onto the main highway. “I haven’t seen him smile like that in years.”

“I...” I didn’t know what to say. So, I decided to go with the truth. “I don’t think I’ve smiled like this...ever.”

Muriel nodded.

“But.” I continued. “We both know that I’m leaving as soon as the road opens.”

Her laugh was unexpected. “Don’t you two be stupid. I’ve been around long enough to know that everything happens for a reason.”

I was feeling the same way, but never would have said it out loud – especially to the mother of the man who I was... was falling in love with? Was that even possible? “Maybe so, Muriel. But the timing just doesn’t seem right for us. My life is in L.A. and Jack’s is here.”

Muriel turned the country music down until it was barely audible. “His last girlfriend was a writer too. Did he tell you that?”

I stiffened.

“He didn’t tell you.” Muriel didn’t wait for me to respond. “I didn’t think much of the girl, or her writing, to tell you the truth. When Jack had to come back to Chance Rapids, he asked her to come here with him. Truthfully, I think it was the best thing that ever happened to him, but he took it hard. She didn’t want to live in a small town. She wanted to gallivant all over the world, writing stories and rubbing elbows with celebrities. He wasn’t enough for her, but he thought that it was the town that broke them up.” She gestured to the colorful clapboard mining houses as the country roads turned into the quaint side streets of the downtown core. “But nAo town, or location can break up true love.” Muriel drove over the curb

and into the rear parking lot of the diner. “Remember that, Henrietta.”

I was lost for words. No wonder Jack turned cold when he found out I was a writer. It was all starting to make sense.

Muriel was already out of the truck and speed walking towards the main street. I had to jog to catch up to her. “We’ve only just met.” It was the thought that had been running through my mind ever since Jack and I had kissed at the Beardog.

“Time.” Muriel shook her head. “That’s what’s stopping you two?”

It was. And place. Muriel would never understand. I fell into stride next to her and she didn’t flinch when we ducked under the ropes and onto the movie set. The snow machines were running and the same crowd of extras was milling around, waiting for instruction for the next take.

“Where are the stars?” Muriel whispered. I looked around the set, but I didn’t see Bradley and Jennifer anywhere.

“Maybe in their trailer?” I shrugged. “Or maybe in jail? There was a big brawl at the bar last night.”

Muriel shook her head. “Let me guess, someone was sleeping with someone’s wife and the husband came in and busted up some noses.”

“How did you know?” I was beginning to wonder if Muriel was psychic.

“It happens all the time. Too much booze, not enough to do.”

“I don’t think that’s just a small town thing.” I was surprised that I was standing up for Chance Rapids. “It

happens in the city too.”

Muriel stopped and put her hands on her hips. “It’s just a little more obvious in a town where everyone knows everyone.”

While I was contemplating the rather sad state of literal affairs in Chance Rapids, I caught a glimpse of the man with the giant beard. “There he is.” I pointed. This time it was my turn to rush ahead.

“Shawn!” I shouted.

He turned. “Miss Henrietta. Are you looking for a place to make a phone call?” His grin was wide and his laugh, a booming baritone, rang out across the set.

Muriel grabbed my arm. “He’s perfect,” she whispered.

“I know. Now, play it cool.” I hissed out of the corner of my mouth. “And let me do the talking.”

Jack’s mom could be a little too blunt, I’d learned over the past couple of days, and the conversation with Shawn, it was going to take a little finessing. “Hi Shawn. I was hoping to run into you. This is Muriel, she’s a bit of a local celebrity.”

“You’re the lady from the diner.” Shawn grinned. “The best coffee in town.” He winked, and I knew that he’d had some of Muriel’s local’s brew.

“Thank you.” Muriel gave me an elbow. “Tell the man why we are here.”

Shawn raised his eyebrows. “Is there something I can help you with?” he asked.

“Yes. As a matter of fact, there’s a bit of a town emergency.”

“Oh.” Shawn pulled out a radio. “Do we need a medic?”

I put my hand on his arm. “It’s nothing like that.” I took a deep breath. “The Santa Claus Parade is tonight and Santa and Mrs. Claus are stranded on the other side of the avalanche.”

Shawn furrowed his brow. “That’s too bad. But, what does that have to do with...” his eyes lit up as he realized what we were asking. “Wait, you want me to play Santa in the town’s parade.”

“You look just like him.” Muriel offered and I wished that I could slap a piece of tape across her mouth.

Instead of looking offended, Shawn patted his stomach. “I’ve had a few too many of your cinnamon and sugar deep fried pastry things, haven’t I.” Then the same belly shaking full laugh erupted from his mouth again. “Ladies. I’m flattered by the offer, but I don’t think I’m going to be able to do it.”

Muriel crossed her arms. “All you’ve gotta do is stand on the float and throw candy canes.”

“And there’s no one else who can do it?” Shawn looked at his watch. “After a long day of work, the last thing I want to do is put on a costume and freeze my balls off on a flatbed.”

“You could walk with the alpaca.” Muriel offered. That will keep your feet warm.

Shawn adjusted the headset microphone. “Thanks ladies, but unless there’s a sexy Mrs. Claus, I’m going to have to pass.”

“There is.” Muriel said a little too quickly. “And she’s single.”

I hoped that matchmaker Muriel wasn’t planning on dressing me up in a red velvet suit to sit beside cranky Santa.

Shawn seemed to be reconsidering. “Now we’re talking. As long as I’ve got someone cute to sit with, I think I could handle the job.”

I couldn’t believe that he’d agreed to it. “Thank you, Shawn. Let me get your number and we will text you all the details.”

“As long as it’s after six. That’s when we wrap today.” Shawn handed me a business card with his name and number and I tucked it into Jack’s coat pocket.

“It starts at seven. And, you’ve seen the length of the street. You will be home in your hotel room by eight. At the latest. Practice up your Ho-ho-ho’s.” Muriel gave him a light punch to the arm with her hand-knit pastel mitten.

Shawn shook his head. “As soon as I get home, I’m shaving off this damn beard.” He stroked the long white beard and smiled. “Now, get out of here before I put you on the naughty list.” He grinned. “Hey, I could get used to that line.” He put his hand to his ear piece and barked some orders into his microphone. “I’m needed on set.” Shawn ambled into the crowd, pointing and barking orders.

Slipping my arm through Muriel’s, I whispered, “Let’s get out of here before we’re stuck in the movie.”

We slipped off the set unnoticed and shuffled down the street, stopping in front of Emma’s flower shop. “Well, that’s one problem solved, but who is going to play Mrs. Claus?”

Muriel was staring into the window of the flower shop. “That’s a pretty wreath.”

“Muriel.” I growled. “Please tell me you have someone to play Mrs. Claus with Shawn.”

“I wonder how much it is...” her voice trailed off.

“Muriel.” My voice was a little lower.

She turned to me. “I thought that you could do it.”

“Nuh-uh. No way.”

“It’s only for an hour.”

I took a deep breath. “Muriel. I hate Christmas. At home they call me the girl grinch.” I let it all spill out. “I can’t smile and wave and throw candy canes, I’ll scare off the kids.”

“Nobody hates Christmas.”

“I do. I hate it.” The tears were unexpected to both me and Muriel.

Her arms were around me before I knew what was happening. In the middle of the street Jack’s mom held me in a bear hug. At first I was stiff in her arms, wishing I could be anywhere else, but she didn’t let go. Then, I softened into her hug and the tears fell hard and I was soaking the shoulder of her coat.

“Get it out honey. You get all of that out.” Muriel refused to let go until all of the pain had poured out of my eyes and she handed me a cotton handkerchief from her pocket.

“I’m s-s-s-sorry,” I stammered.

“Don’t you be sorry,” Muriel wrapped her arm around my back and led me down the street. “Let’s go get a cup of coffee.”

“Wait.” I stopped. We were in front of the Last Chance. “I have an idea for someone who can play Mrs. Claus. If she agrees, am I off the hook?” My voice was hoarse.

“Henri, you were off the hook the minute you told me you hated Christmas. I was going to step in and do it.”

“No.” I pressed my cold hands to my cheeks, hoping that my chilly fingers would calm down some of the redness and swelling. “I think I have the perfect person. Do you know Mary Fisher?”

“MILFY?” Muriel smiled. “I sure do.” Her eyes widened. “She’s perfect.”

“Come on, Muriel. We’re not getting a coffee, we’re getting a drink.” I pulled open the heavy door and the two of us stepped into the darkness of the Last Chance Tavern.

FOURTEEN

JACK

THE CHANCE RAPIDS Christmas parade wasn't fancy when I was a kid and, twenty years later, it seemed like all of the floats were exactly the same. Flatbed trucks and tractors were decorated with silver tinsel and multicolored Christmas lights, but the energy was upbeat and excitement was in the air. The high school marching band tuned their instruments while the local dance studio kids practiced their routines.

The local hockey team, the Chance Rapids Bobcats, all dressed in their matching warmup suits, were armed with buckets of candy to throw at the kids who weren't in the parade.

I wasn't sure how Dave and Simon would react to the hustle and bustle of the parade, but they were rescued from a petting zoo years ago, and they didn't seem to bat their long eyelashes as I secured the felt antlers to their heads with a shoestring tied under their chins.

Luckily, Dave and Simon wouldn't have to be harnessed to any sleigh. I don't think that they would've been as easy going if I'd tried to do that. Santa's sleigh sat atop the flatbed of Ray's tow truck and plywood reindeer were secured to the sides. The Alpaca were to walk in front of Santa's sleigh, behind the fire truck.

“Jack!” It was Freddie, waving wildly, dressed in his firefighting uniform. “Come on over and meet the guys.”

I pointed to the straw chewing duo next to me. “I can’t leave these two asshats unattended. They like to eat pompom hats.”

Freddie’s laugh was loud and could be heard over all of the commotion. The dance studio kids were all dressed as elves and every single one of them had a fiery red pompom attached to their long hats. “We’ll come to you then.”

Five guys who I recognized from around town, came over with Freddie to meet me. “Glad you’ve decided to join us and not those SAR clowns.” Nick, who I recognized from the lumber yard at the hardware store laughed, and pointed to the Search and Rescue Crew who were all wearing their matching jackets.

I didn’t tell Nick that I would’ve joined SAR if I’d had more time. “They’re missing their red shoes and tiny car.” I smiled. The volunteer fire department members were well respected, but known to be the party crew. Their practices usually ended with a case or two of beer and I think a lot of the guys used it as an excuse to go drink with their buddies on Tuesday night.

Nick guffawed. “They’re jealous of our truck.” He made the universal big rig honking motion by pumping his arm and whoever was sitting in the driver’s seat of the big red truck obliged. The elves jumped in surprise, the bells on the tips of their pointy shoes jingling in unison, and then they all starting pumping their arms.

It was pandemonium, and for the first time, Dave and Simon seemed nervous. They stamped their two-toed feet on

the concrete and Simon started to back away from the loud noises. “Freddie. Can you get him to stop?”

Freddie nodded and ran to the truck. The driver stuck his arm out the window and gave me a wave, flashing the lights for the kids in place of the ground shaking bass of the foghorn.

“Is that better?” Freddie returned. “We don’t need a grandma got runover by a reindeer scenario.” He patted Dave’s neck.

“At least if it was an alpaca, they’d have to update the song,” I chuckled.

Freddie grinned. “Yeah, grandpa got knocked over by a Llama.”

As if Simon understood, he stomped his hoof on the ground. “They’re Alpacas.” I corrected Freddie. “And they are as dumb as they look. They definitely might kick over a grandpa or two.”

Simon and Dave started pulling on their leads and Simon reared up, braying loudly. I shook my head. “This could’ve been a bad idea.” I stroked Simon’s flank. “Easy boy. Easy,” I coaxed, silently cursing my mom for volunteering these old guys for the parade.

“I’ve got an idea.” Freddie disappeared into the crowd and returned with two elf hats. He handed one to me and put the other on in place of his firefighter helmet.

“What’s this for?” I stared at the hat in my hand.

“You said they like the pompoms. We can walk in front of them. Keep them focused on us – and not all of the grandpas.”

I sighed and replaced my wool hat with the red and green striped elf hat. “It’s actually a good idea.” I handed him Dave’s

rein. “Here you go.”

A woman with a loudspeaker yelled. “Places everyone, places.”

The snow had started to fall in big fat flakes, the kind that seemed designed for a snowglobe, or a Santa Claus parade. Through the flakes the most perfect looking Santa was heading my way, with my mom’s friend Mary, dressed as Mrs. Claus on his arm. Santa’s beard was as white as the snow and his cheeks were as rosy as the hat that I was wearing.

“Hi Jack.” Mary waved.

“Hi Mar—” I stopped myself. “Mrs. Claus.” There were children around after all. While Mary waited for the step ladder to be set up so she could mount the float, she introduced me to Santa.

“This is Shawn. He’s here filming the movie,” Mary cast Shawn a glance and looked like she was holding in a smile. “That’s where we got these perfect costumes.” She held out the skirt of her costume and curtsied.

Unlike the rest of the shabby looking costumes that were probably sewn in 1973, Mary and Shawn’s outfits were made from lush looking velvet, and their wigs looked like real hair.

“Are those...Alpaca?” Shawn squished the felt antler on Simon’s head.

“They’re reindeer today.” I shrugged. “You’re looking at Donner and Blitzen.”

“No Rudolph?” Mary asked.

I pulled the nose from my jacket pocket. “I couldn’t get either of them to wear the nose.”

Mary laughed. “Only in Chance Rapids.”

Santa held out his gloved hand. “M’lady, may I help you to our sleigh?”

Mary’s face turned redder than her costume and she coyly held out her hand. The way those two were looking at each other, I hoped that there wouldn’t be a Santa and Mrs. Claus make-out session halfway through the parade.

Cymbals crashed and the band started to play Jingle Bells and we were off. Freddie’s idea with the hats, combined with a pocket full of carrots kept Simon and Dave in line. Freddie waved and pointed at the crowd as we made our way down Main Street, shouting names and tossing candy canes.

“Do you know everyone in town? Like every single person?” I asked.

“Yep.” Freddie smiled and continued waving like a celebrity on the red carpet. Simon looked proud to be walking next to him and the crowd erupted into cheers when they saw Santa’s Reindeer. Dave strolled slightly behind me and nudged me every time he wanted a carrot. I only had one candy cane left in my pocket and I was saving it for one person.

I saw my mom first. Henri was standing next to her, snapping photos of the parade with her cell phone. She was waving and smiling and I think that she saw Dave’s ridiculous antlers before she saw me, because she clapped her hand over her mouth.

“Freddie, can you hold onto Dave for a second?” I didn’t wait for him to agree and thrust the reins into his glove. I darted across the street and ran up to Henri. “I was saving this for you.” I held out the candy cane, which had snapped and no longer resembled a cane shape, it looked more like a man who couldn’t perform in the bedroom shape.

Henri took the candy cane and smiled. “Thank you.”

I kissed her on the cheek.

“What about mine, Mister?” Mom planted her hands on her hips and put on a fake pout.

“Jack!” Freddie shouted and tossed me an extra candy cane.

“Here you go Mom.” I put it in her hand and laid a kiss on her cheek too. I pointed to the parade with my thumb, “I’ve gotta go before someone’s grandpa gets knocked over.”

“What?” Henri’s brow furrowed.

“It’s...never mind. Henri...” I squeezed her hand. “Meet me at the G-Spot when the parade is over.”

Henri’s brow furrowed even deeper. “Pardon me?” she whispered, her eyes searching mine and that’s when I realized she’d never heard the nickname before.

“Jack!” Freddie yelled. Dave had stopped walking and was holding up Santa and Mrs. Claus’s float.

Mom waved me away and then grabbed Henri’s forearm. “It’s okay Jack. I’ll let her know where the G-Spot is.”

“That’s not what it sounds like,” I shouted, as I ran back to my position with my carrot in hand, wondering how a completely innocent conversation with my mom and the girl of my dreams had turned x-rated.

Freddie handed me the reins. “Sorry I didn’t know what to do.”

“That’s alright.” I lured Dave forward with a carrot. “You’ll never believe the conversation I just had.”

“If your face is any indicator, it was red hot.”

We toddled on, waving and dispensing carrots all the way down Main Street. “My...” I didn’t know what to call Henri. “That girl back there...”

“Henri.” Freddie filled in. “I was there last night. I saw you two on the dance floor and then you were gone.” He gave me a devilish wink. “You work fast my friend.”

“It’s not like that.”

“I know.”

We were at a bottleneck and the parade was at a stand-still. The band had a three-song repertoire and we were on the ninth rendition of Silent Night. “What do you mean, you know?”

Freddie shrugged. “It was obvious that there’s something special between you two. Charlotte thinks so too.”

I didn’t want Freddie, or Charlotte, or any of the Rapidians judging Henri. “There is something special, and just so you know...we didn’t...”

“Whoa, Dude.” Freddie held his hands up in front of him like he was in a stick-up. “That’s none of my business. And, who cares if you did. When you meet the right person, sometimes things happen at a different speed.”

“Is that what happened with you and Serena?”

Freddie had opened a candy cane and while we waited for the parade to resume, it hung jauntily out his mouth. He took it out with his fingers and held it like a cigarette, “Hell no. We hated each other.”

“Really?”

“Yep.” He crunched on the hard candy. “But, that’s just because I didn’t know the real her. It seems like you know that girl.”

I nodded. He was right. I did feel like time had been suspended and I knew Henri better than I'd known any of my past girlfriends. And, we hadn't even slept together. "It doesn't matter." I sighed. "If I want to be with her, we will have to do long distance."

The fire truck in front of us lurched ahead and we were marching again. "What's wrong with that?" Freddie asked. "You get to live your life here and have weekends full of hot sex."

"Easy, there are kids around," I hissed.

He laughed. "They can't hear anything, and they're too obsessed with the fat man behind us. Can you believe how perfect he is?"

"He probably is Santa." I laughed. "In that case, I'd ask him to keep the roads closed until the end of December." The closed roads were what was keeping Henri in Chance Rapids.

We rounded the corner at the end of the street and almost as quickly as it started, the small-town parade was over.

"I'll bet you can't wait to get these things off," I whispered to Dave, as I took off the antlers. Freddie helped me load Simon and Dave into the horse trailer.

"Have you asked her?" Dust puffed into the air as Freddie banged his gloves together.

"Asked her what?"

Freddie cut me a side-eye. "Before you ask her to do long distance, why don't you ask her to stay here."

"She can't stay here." I was quick to reply.

"Why?"

I took a deep breath. “She has a life in L.A. A job. Friends. And, we’ve only just met. That would be insane, Freddie. I can’t ask her to stay.”

“One. She can do that job from anywhere. Two. She just made a whole group of friends here.” Freddie held up his hand and pointed to a finger with each point he made. “And three. She looks like the kind of woman that is crazy enough to move to a small town to be with a mountain man she’s only just met. You’d be crazy not to give that a chance.” He clapped his hands together. “That’s all. If she wants advice on living in this town, tell her to bring a bottle of rose over to our house and Serena can fill her in the good, the bad, and the ugly.”

“Are you the ugly?” I gave him a punch in the arm.

He winced and dramatically rubbed his arm. “Just think about it. Winter is long and cold here.”

“She’s not a heater.” I closed the doors to the horse trailer.

Freddie grinned and the glint in his eye told me he was about to say something lewd or crude.

“Stop.” I held up my hand. “My dad is coming over here.”

Freddie turned and waved to my father. “Hi Bob.” As my dad approached, Freddie’s radio squawked. The dispatcher came through with some codes that I didn’t understand, along with an address on the other side of the railroad tracks. “Copy that.” Freddie barked into the radio. “Jack. There’s a fire. Come on. We’re going to need all the hands we can get on deck.”

Dad held out his hand. “Give me the keys, I’ll take tweedle dee and tweedled dum home. You go with Freddie.”

“Come on.” Freddie gestured for me to follow him. The fire truck with all of the official firefighters roared off, its

sirens blaring. Freddie and I hopped into his pickup truck, he put the green light on the dashboard, and stomped on the gas pedal.

I patted my chest, looking for my phone. I wasn't going to be able to meet Henri at the G-Spot. "Shit," I muttered. "My phone is in my car. I'm supposed to meet Henri."

After the conversation with Freddie, I had planned on having a serious discussion with Henri. I wasn't quite ready to ask her to stay here, but I was ready to ask her to go on a real date.

"She'll understand." Freddie was focused on the road ahead of him.

I nodded and hoped that Freddie was right.

FIFTEEN

HENRI

IT TURNS out that the G-Spot was the nickname for the General Store and Diner. If someone would've told me that when I first arrived in Chance Rapids, it would've saved me a rather uncomfortable conversation with Muriel.

“Oh, Dear.” Muriel had tears in her eyes. “You thought that Jack...” she slapped her knee as she turned on the high beams, illuminating the long laneway. “Was talking about the other G-Spot. In front of his mother.” She swiped at the tears rolling down her weathered cheeks. “Now, that would've been inappropriate.”

And calling your restaurant the G-Spot isn't? I kept that thought to myself. Muriel found the whole situation a lot more entertaining than I did.

Muriel and I waited for Jack at THE DINER, as I called it, but we got a call from Bob, letting us know that Jack had gone off on a fire call with Freddie.

I texted Jack, asking him to meet me at the cabin when he got home.

Re-reading the text, it sounded like I was asking for a booty call. It couldn't have been further from it – I wanted to talk to Jack about...I gulped, my feelings. Because, I think that

he had the same ones – and neither of us knew what to do with them.

Following up the first text, I added a second.

We have to talk.

“Would you like me to walk you to the cabin?” Muriel asked. “I’m going to help Bob with Dave and Simon, but then I will be able to help you start the fire and get settled.”

“It’s okay.” I zipped up Jack’s coat and pulled a little flashlight from my backpack. “I know the way and I can start the fire.” I wasn’t one hundred percent positive on the fire thing, but how hard could it be?

Muriel nodded. “Alright dear. Thank you again for your help today. That Shawn looked more like Santa than the real Santa.”

“Maybe he is the real Santa.” I grinned.

“I don’t think that the real Santa keeps a flask of whiskey in his pocket.”

I clicked on the flashlight and laughed. “Another local’s coffee connoisseur?”

“Touché.” Muriel laughed. “At least I mix mine with coffee.”

The snow squeaked under my feet. The temperature had dropped and every time I inhaled, I felt like my nostrils were freezing shut. Luckily the fire was easy to start and I had it crackling in no time. I checked my phone but there still wasn’t a response from Jack.

Easy Henri. The man is fighting a fire. I reminded myself of this when I felt a pang of rejection stab into my chest.

My cell phone's battery was in the red. I dug out my charger and plugged it in, along with my computer. The deadline for my story was Tuesday. I still wanted to talk to some more Rapidians to fill in the blanks in my story, but I had enough to get started.

I changed into my leggings and sweatshirt and crawled under the thick quilt, propped myself up in the bed and set my computer on my outstretched legs. When I wrote, I liked to listen to music with a similar tone to the story I was writing. For the dark small-town Christmas, I punched up My Chemical Romance, put in my headphones and started writing.

But the story felt wrong. Mary's words ran through my mind and seemed to paralyze my fingers. How could I compare the lives of real people, with real problems, to characters in a film designed to help people feel good?

The lights above me flickered and it took me a minute to realize that the power could go out.

"No. No. No." I hopped out of the bed and opened three drawers before I found some candles. I was able to get them lit before the lights flickered again and then went out completely. The cabin was bathed in the warm orange light from the fire and the candles, and with the sound of the small refrigerator gone, it was the quietest place I'd ever been in my life.

I grabbed my flashlight and stepped onto the porch. In the distance, candlelight flickered in the windows of the main house – the power must have been out everywhere.

"Thank you, fire." I rubbed my hands over the small stove that was now providing me with both heat and light. The bed was still warm and I crawled back into my cocoon, but when I pulled my computer onto my lap, it had ten minutes of battery

life left – long enough for me to save my document and shut it off.

In the silence of the cabin, I couldn't just sit and wait and hope that Jack showed up. I still hadn't figured out what to say to him. I hoped that it would just come to me.

I needed a distraction. I needed to write. The story was going to get done old school. With my notebook and pen, I sat cuddled under the quilt, my hand scrawling across the page. Yes, the assignment felt shitty, but it was my job. And as much as I hated every word I wrote on that page, it was perfect for The Platypus.

I wasn't sure what I was going to tell Jack about us, but as I finished the last sentence on my story, I knew what I was going to tell my boss.

That I was done with this kind of writing.

I had seen so much good in Chance Rapids, a lot more good than bad. I finally understood the appeal of the Christmas movies. I didn't want to write something dark. I wanted to focus on the upbeat, the positive, the light – and write something that would make other people feel it too.

The battery on my phone died before I got a message back from Jack. And, I had no idea what time it was – but my story was finished – and I was exhausted.

I added a few more pieces of wood to the fire, blew out the candles, and fell asleep with butterflies in my stomach. I felt like a kid on Christmas eve, wondering what gifts the next day would bring.



THE REFRIGERATOR WHIRRED and lights flickered and then lit up the cabin. It was still dark outside, but the sun had peeked over the horizon. I plugged in my phone before tiptoeing out of bed to stoke the fire.

While the cabin heated up, I slipped back under the covers. I really believed that I was going to wake up to a lumberjack in the bed, so when I was still alone, I started to worry.

Was Jack okay?

When my phone was charged enough to power up, my fingers trembled as I scrolled through, hoping for a message or to see a missed call from Jack.

My body felt nauseous. There was nothing from Jack. Only a message from my boss asking for an update. Replying to him was going to have to wait – I had more important things to deal with than that stupid assignment.

Jack had rushed off to help the volunteer firefighters. My stomach clenched into a ball as my disappointment at not hearing from him was dwarfed by my new concern about his safety. I threw on my clothes, brushed my teeth, and headed to the main house.

I needed to know that Jack wasn't...I wouldn't let myself go there. "He's fine." I whispered to myself. "He's a tough man." I also knew that he was a brave and caring man, one who would put himself in harm's way to help someone else.

The tips of my fingers brushed against something in the pocket of the coat. It was the candy cane he'd given me, along with a sweet peck on the cheek. It was a familiar gesture, one that came from someone you were comfortable with, someone you'd known forever; and it had warmed my body from my toes right to my fingertips. I swore that I wasn't going to get

rid of that broken piece of candy until I knew that Jack was okay. It could be the last thing he ever gave me.

Light spilled from the farmhouse windows onto the snow. I rapped on the back door lightly, knowing that Bob and Muriel would've been up for hours already.

“Come in,” Muriel shouted.

I stepped into the mudroom and kicked off my practical boots. In the warmth of the kitchen, I was met with the smell of gingerbread and coffee. And smoke.

“Jack.”

He was leaning against the kitchen counter, his face dirty and his eyes tired. I didn't think. I didn't worry about the text I'd sent the night before, I rushed to him and he wrapped me in his arms.

The tears came before I could control them. “You're o-o-o-okay,” I managed to stammer through my sobs.

Jack squeezed me tightly and I felt him smell the top of my head. “Of course I'm okay.”

He pulled away from me and wiped the tears from my face with his thumb. “You were worried about me?”

“Of course I was worried about you.” I smacked his chest. “You left to go fight a fire and I sent you that message and I didn't hear back and it's the next day...” I was rambling and Jack stopped the ramble with his lips.

I melted into him. He smelled like smoke and body odor, but I didn't care. He was alive, and I was in his arms.

He chuckled and I looked up at him. “What?”

“I think that it’s sweet that you were worried about me, that’s all. I really didn’t do much, the real firefighters had everything under control. He paused, “What was in your text? I think my phone is still in my truck.”

“Never mind. It doesn’t matter.” I rested my head against his chest, noticing that Muriel had disappeared from the kitchen.

I don’t know how long I let Jack hold me. It could’ve been twenty seconds, or two hours, I couldn’t tell – in Chance Rapids, and in Jack’s arms, time seemed to have its own set of rules.

“Henri. I wanted to ask you something.”

My heart felt like it stopped, and when it started beating again, it was pounding against my ribcage like someone had given it a sledgehammer. “What?” I whispered, keeping my ear pressed to his chest.

“I was wondering if you’d go on a date with me. A real, proper date.”

I was about to say yes, but he interrupted. “And, before you give me ten thousand reasons why it’s not a good idea, I want to give you one reason why it is.”

The sledgehammers pounded a little harder. “Why is it a good idea Jack?” My voice was hoarse, and I wondered if he was going to say the same thing that I was feeling.

“Because it doesn’t make sense Henri.”

I looked up at him and scrunched up my forehead.

“I still want to do it. My brain tells me that you’re leaving, but my heart...” He placed my hand on his chest. “My heart

tells me to do it anyway.” He held his hand on top of mine. “So, will you go on a date with me?”

“Yes.” I didn’t even have to think about it.

Jack cupped my face with both of his hands and his beard tickled my chin as he kissed me softly.

“It’s about to turn into grand central station in here. If you want to get some peace and quiet, you might want to head back to the cabin.”

“I actually finished the first draft last night.” *As I was trying to keep my mind off you.* I didn’t add.

Over Jack’s shoulder I saw a line of cars pulling into the driveway.

“What’s going on?” A steady stream of people was making their way to the farmhouse’s front door. Muriel returned to the kitchen and that’s when I noticed she had three coffee carafes set up on the counter – and baskets of muffins and pastries.

Jack poured me a cup of coffee. “Last night a family lost their home in a fire. The community is coming together to organize a fundraiser for them.”

“What?” I took a sip of the very strong coffee and glanced around to see if Muriel could add some whiskey. “Why?”

Jack’s lips formed a narrow line. “They didn’t have insurance. They’ve lost everything, and now the community is coming together to help them out.”

The concept seemed completely foreign to me. I hung in the background as the group of Rapidians planned a fundraiser for the family. I couldn’t believe what I was seeing. Business owners were donating their services, either to the family directly, or planning to auction them off to give the family

money. Bob donated a used car to the family, the owner of the grocery store donated gift certificates, Charlie, the owner of the Beardog, was donating his space for the fundraiser, along with a raffle for free beer for a year. The list went on and on and on.

To say that I was moved was an understatement. This. This was the story that needed to be written.

“Excuse me, Jack,” I whispered, and rushed to the cabin. My phone was charged and I called my editor. “I need to stay here until the end of the weekend – at least. I’ve got a scoop on an amazing story.”

I think he could hear the excitement in my voice. “Alright, Henri. This better be good.”

“Oh, it will be. Trust me.”

When I hung up the phone, I knew that my boss would hate the story. But, for once, I needed to go with my gut. This was the story I wanted to tell. It also didn’t hurt that Jack Lumber had just asked me on a date. Maybe if I stayed in town a little longer, we could go on more than one...

SIXTEEN

JACK

HENRI WAS SPENDING the day working on her story, and I should've been sleeping, but I couldn't. I don't know whether it was the adrenaline from the fire, or the anticipation of our upcoming date, but I was amped.

The smell of smoke lingered in my hair and I took a second shower, thinking about all the things that I wanted to show Henri before she left town.

Freddie's girlfriend Serena had moved from the city to Chance Rapids, and she seemed way more high maintenance than Henri. Henri's café racer might have to be traded in for a dirt bike, or something capable of running on the gravel roads. Henri was tough, though, and if anyone could adapt to mountain living, it was her. When I imagined her dismounting a dirt bike and shaking her hair free from the helmet, my cock twitched.

Instead of continuing with the imagery of Henri dismounting motorcycles, I turned the water to cold and took care of my hard-on in the more painful way - with ice cold water. Shivering, I stepped out of the shower and toweled off my hair. Finally, the smoke smell was gone.

I stopped in at The Sugar Peaks Café and bought some sandwiches and mini eclairs, and then made a quick stop at

Emma's flower shop.

Emma was playing classical music and she was clipping the stems on some roses as I walked into her store. "Hi Jack." She set down the secateurs and crossed her gloved hands on the counter in front of her.

"Hi Emma." My eyes were drawn to the refrigerator full of flowers. "I need a bouquet, but I have no idea what to get."

"Let me guess, these are for Henrietta."

"Yes. I know that my mom likes carnations, but I'm not sure what Henri..."

Emma held up her index finger. "I know exactly what to get for Henri."

"How?" I asked. "How do you know?"

Emma had already turned and was opening and closing the doors of the refrigerators. "It's kind of my thing." She shouted over her shoulder. "When I meet someone, I can picture their favorite flower."

"Are you some kind of floral psychic?" I laughed, but Emma turned and with a completely serious face, replied, "Yes."

"What if they don't have a favorite flower?" I was thinking of myself – I'd never once thought about flowers, or plants.

Emma clipped the stems of some spiky flowers that were so purple they almost looked black. "Black Dahlia." She answered my question before I could answer. "I could give you some red ones, they're a bit more festive, but I think that Henri is going to love these."

"Who am I to question a flower psychic," I chuckled. "Let's go with the dahlias."

Emma wrapped them up and then I made one more stop in town – and picked up the last, and riskiest, item on my list.

Back at the farm, after finishing my chores and helping mom clean up from the fundraising meeting, exhaustion finally hit me. I dropped onto the mattress like a stone, and fell asleep instantly. When I woke up, it was dark.

“Shit.” Through my bleary eyes I could barely make out the time – seven o’clock. I was supposed to pick up Henri at six. I shot out of bed, grabbed everything I needed for the date, and rushed to the cabin, hoping that she wasn’t going to be pissed off at me. When I arrived, she was hunched over her laptop, her fingers flying across the keyboard, a pen between her teeth like a flamenco dancer’s rose.

“Is it six already?” She took the pen from her mouth.

“It’s seven.” I shut the door behind me. “I’m sorry, I fell asleep and rushed here as fast as I could.”

There was a wry smile on her face. “What?” I asked.

“I like you without a hat.” She came over to me and ran her fingers through my hair.

I hadn’t looked in the mirror before leaving. “Is it sticking up all over the place?” I patted it down as Henri laced her fingers behind my neck.

“It is.” She smiled and her eyes held mine. “You manage to make messy hair look good, Jack Lumber.”

She kissed me and then took the pencil that was stuck through her messy bun and shook out her hair – it was sexier than the motorcycle scene that I had imagined. “You’re so hot Henrietta Page.” I pulled her to me with one arm, my other was still behind my back with the flowers.

She giggled and nuzzled into my neck. “What are we doing tonight? I hope we’re not climbing any mountains because I forgot my crampons at home.”

I held up the picnic basket.

“A picnic? Outside?” She was smiling, but her voice sounded a little uncertain and I worried that I’d made a mistake.

Sure, I could’ve taken her to a fancy restaurant in town, or out to the bar again, but neither of those things seemed special enough for her.

I revealed the flowers I’d been holding between my back and her eyes misted over as she took them from my hands and inhaled their scent. “How did you know—”

“That these were your favorite?” I finished her sentence. “I got some advice from a floral psychic.”

Emma smacked my arm lightly and chuckled, she thought that I was joking. “Let me put these in some water.”

As Henrietta arranged the flowers, the light from the woodstove flickered on her face. She was the most beautiful woman I’d ever seen. I rushed to her and wrapped my arms around her waist and kissed her neck while she arranged the flowers. She giggled. “I love your beard, but it tickles.”

I handed her the gift-wrapped box I’d stashed inside the picnic basket. “What’s this?” she stared at the box in her hands.

“I bought you something.”

She pointed to the dahlias. “Jack, this is too much.” She pulled off the bow. “Unless it’s a snowsuit.”

“You’re not going to need a snow suit where we’re going.”

I held my breath as she opened the gift, my heart hammering against my chest.

Her brow knitted as she pulled the top off the box and held up the red bikini. “I don’t know if you’ve noticed, Jack. It’s snowing out there. Unless you’ve got a private jet waiting to take me to the Seychelles.”

I picked up the picnic basket. “The jet is in for servicing, but I’ve got something even better, now go get changed.”



“I CAN’T BELIEVE I doubted you, Jack.” Henri leaned her head back against the cedar wall as I threw some water on the hot stones in the corner of the sauna. “And, I can’t believe you didn’t tell me about this place before now.”

The sauna sat further down the trail from the cabin at the edge of the river. I’d built it when I moved home. “I’ve never brought anyone else here.”

“Can I throw some water on the stones?” she asked.

“Of course.” I handed her the metal ladle and she squealed as she slowly poured the water onto the hot rocks. Plumes of steam surrounded our bodies. My hair was no longer sticking out in all directions, it was plastered to my skull with sweat. Henri had wrapped her hair into a long braid, but the front pieces were loose and dripping with sweat.

Henri set down the ladle and put her hands on my knees. I was on the third level on the bench seating, looking down at her. “Tell me Jack. When you come here alone, do you wear these?” She slipped her fingertips under the hem of my boxer shorts.

Her touch sent goosebumps down my arms and legs, which seemed impossible in the heat of the sauna. “Of course not.” I laughed. “I didn’t think that it would be appropriate to break out my birthday suit on the first date.” I’d be lying if I hadn’t thought about the two of us, naked in the sauna though.

“You bought me a bikini to be a gentleman?” she moved closer. Her body was now between my knees, her eyes at my chest level. She trailed her fingertips across my collarbone and continued down my chest. This time I shivered when the goosebumps prickled across my entire body – including my skull. “When I first saw the bikini, I thought it was a weird gift.”

“I know.” I laughed. “But it felt less weird than proposing a nude sauna session.

She had a glint in her eye. “You should’ve saved your money.” She pulled at the string behind her neck and the triangle top slipped to her waist.

“Henri.” I growled. “You are quite the woman.”

She turned and draped the braid over her shoulder. “I’m going to need help with the rest of it.”

Gulping, I hopped to my feet to pull at the bow in the center of her back. The red bikini top dropped to the floorboards of the sauna with a wet thud. I rested my hands on the sides of her body and kissed her shoulder. I loved the way that she inhaled when I kissed her and the way that she squirmed as my scruffy beard tickled her skin. My hands slid to her lower belly and I squeezed her in to me for a bear hug. We were slippery and sweaty, and literally hot. The sense of ease I felt with Henri was a complete surprise to me.

“I feel like I’ve known you for years, Henri,” I whispered into her shoulder.

Henri turned and wrapped her arms around my waist, pushing her fingertips into the waistband of my boxer shorts. “Jack.” Her voice had a raspy quality to it.

“Yeah,” My cock was rock hard and there was no hiding it – my boxers tented out very obviously, my cock throbbing each time she slipped her hands further down my ass.

She kissed my chest. “I feel like I want to know you for years.”

“Oh my God.” I wrapped my arms around her shoulders and pulled her as tightly to me as I could. “Same.”

She looked up at me, her chin resting on my chest. “What are we going to do about it?”

“We’re going to try.” I rested my chin on the top of her head. “I can come to L.A. and you can come and stay here anytime you want. This feels too good to let time or distance get in the way.”

Henri kissed my chest and then pulled my boxers down to my ankles, my cock slapping my lower belly as it was freed from the fabric. “If this is a birthday suit sauna, we should both be in uniform,” she whispered and wrapped her fingers around my manhood.

“Mmmhmmm.” I closed my eyes. I was in my favorite place, with the most incredible woman who currently had her hand on my package. My brain wasn’t exactly functioning at top speed.

She laughed and stroked me. “Jack.”

“Yeah.” My eyes were still shut, my hands on her shoulders.

My eyes opened when she let go and stood on her toes to whisper into my ear. “That means you better take off mine, too.”

I was such an idiot. “Of course. Shit. Sorry, I was distracted by your...um...” I pointed to her hand.

“Jack. Take them off right now,” she ordered.

“Are you sure?” In my mind I’d already ripped them off and had pushed into her warmth, but my mind was a couple steps ahead of my body.

She bit her lower lip and nodded. “Jack, I think you just asked me to be your girlfriend, in a very round about way. I don’t want to play games. I want you now, and tomorrow, and...” her voice faded out. “I’ve extended my deadline a week. If we’re going to be long distance, we need to make the most of this week.”

All the tension that had built up since Henri arrived had come to a boiling point. I dropped to my knees and kissed her skin just below her belly button. She arched her head back and let out a moan as I moved lower until I was kissing the slippery fabric of the bikini bottoms. Hooking my fingers in the sides, I pulled the bathing suit to the floor and she stepped out of it.

There wasn’t any romantic music, just the hiss of the steam on the rocks and the crackle of the wood in the stove. I stood and kissed her softly and passionately. “Henri.” I growled. “I’ll make love to you later tonight when we’re under the quilts.”

“Oh.” Her voice was soft. “I thought...” she didn’t finish her sentence.

I held onto her arm and turned her so I could kiss the back of her neck. “Right now, I think we should fuck.”

Henri looked over her shoulder, then her lips widened. “Hell yeah, we should.”

I knew Henri had an edge to her, but I wondered, just how edgy? I was excited to find out. With Henri I could have it all – sweet and slow, or hard and rough -or any combination. I cupped her breasts with both of my hands and she reached her hands behind her to rest on my head. She was writhing in my arms as I kissed her neck. She arched her back, pressing her sweet naked ass against my cock. I groaned with the added pressure.

“Have you got any condoms in that picnic basket?” she continued to press against me.

“Yeah, give me a second.” I had debated on bringing them, having sex in the sauna had always been a fantasy of mine, so I threw them in at the last minute. I sure as hell was grateful I’d let my horny self pack the basket.

Henri tore the foil wrapper open and as she rolled the rubber onto me, my legs trembled like the last of the Aspen leaves in a fall windstorm.

“Fuck me, Jack.” Henri turned and planted her palms on the bench seat of the sauna and looked over her shoulder at me.

“You don’t have to tell me twice. You are so fucking sexy, Henri.”

Dimples dented her cheeks as she smiled. “Well, I am in a sauna.”

I loved her jokes, and how she was both sweet and salty, like a shortbread cookie. My hands gripped her hips. I squeezed her muscular ass and my vision flashed with stars as I pushed into her. Henri gasped and arched her back like a bow. She took my hand from her hip and guided it to her braid. I wound the braid around my fist and Henri let out a sweet moan as I gave it a light tug.

Two simultaneous orgasms later, Henri and I were sweatier than I imagined possible. Having sex in a sauna sounds like a good idea in theory, and I'm sure there are some health benefits, but we collapsed onto the bench panting, likely on the verge of hyperthermia.

"That was incredible Jack Lumber." Henri was lying on her back on the lowest bench. "I'm so hot."

I helped her to her feet. "I know how to fix that."

She kissed me and my cock twitched. She must have felt it because she raised her eyebrows. "Again?"

"I think that we need a reset."

"What kind of reset?" She sounded out of breath.

A blast of arctic air interrupted us as I opened the sauna door. "This kind." I pointed to the river.

"You're a crazy bastard, Jack Lumber." Henri slipped her hand into mine. "Let's go."



THAT NIGHT I learned that the perfect recipe for sleep is sauna, sex, icy plunges in a mountain stream; followed by sweet slow sex and sandwiches in bed.

I woke up feeling more rested and complete than I had in years. Henri was breathing heavily, her hair still damp from the dip in the river.

With the propane stove lit and the percolator filled with coffee grinds, I slipped back into bed. Henri murmured and nuzzled into my chest. “Good morning, Jack.”

“Good morning, Henri.” I kissed her forehead. “How did you sleep?”

She stretched her legs out long and her arms overhead. “Incredible. It’s so quiet out here. And dark. In the city there’s a streetlight outside my window and my neighbor’s car alarm goes off every morning like clockwork,” she sighed. “I don’t even have to set an alarm – that’s a plus, I guess.”

“At the main house the rooster wakes me up. And, sometimes the moon shines right in the window. So, it’s almost the same.”

Henri sighed. “It’s not the same at all. I’m actually getting kind of tired of it. I’ve never really felt quiet and solitude like this, Jack.” She took a sip of water from the glass beside the bed. “Could you picture yourself in L.A.?”

Was this a hypothetical question? It was best to be honest. “No.”

Henri nodded, her lips in a grim line. “I thought so.”

I swept her hair behind her ear. “It’s not what you think Henri. I feel like I could live anywhere, if you’re there.”

“Would you consider it?” Her eyes searched mine. “Just for a little while?”

“I can’t.”

“Why?” her raunchy dirty girl mouth from the night before was gone.

I propped my head on my hand and rested my hand on Henri’s stomach. “I bought a lodge with my brothers. We are fixing it up and I’m going to live there.”

“Why are you just telling me this now?”

I couldn’t tell if she was upset.

“It didn’t come up – and the deal is just getting finalized today. I guess I didn’t want to jinx it. I’m the man on the ground here. I’ll be doing a lot of the construction myself and acting as the general contractor. I’m stuck in Chance Rapids for the next five years – at least.”

“That sounds incredible Jack. Is that a dream you’ve always had?” She had a far off look in her eye.

“It is. In the winter it will be a heli-skiing operation, but in the summer, we are going to do wellness retreats. Sauna, cold therapy, meditation – all that stuff.”

Henri turned onto her side and crooked her arm underneath her pillow. She ran her fingertips up and down my arm, the sensation was so light, but intense at the same time. “You’re incredible Jack.”

No. It was Henri that was incredible. She wanted to be with me when she thought I was a farmhand. “Maybe one day you can quit that job and write your book.”

She kissed me. “One day.”

The coffee started to gurgle as it percolated on the stove, the warm smell of freshly perked coffee filling the cabin. “Speaking of the farm, those goats will destroy the place if they don’t get breakfast on time.” I kissed her cheek and

pulled on my clothes from the night before, minus the boxers. They were still in a pile on the sauna floor. If anyone had been around the night before, they would've seen two bare naked people, streaking through the field, laughing hysterically, wearing only their boots.

Henri strode to the bathroom. "I'm going to have a shower." I loved the fact that she wasn't shy about her body.

"I'll pour you a coffee."

Through the bathroom door she shouted, "Make it a local's coffee."

I chuckled and poured a shot of whiskey into her mug. The shower started to run and the sound of Henri humming in the splashing water made my chest swell. We were going to do it. I had met the perfect woman and we were going to make it work.

The best part, we now had another week together.

As I poured the coffee into our mugs, the handle to the percolator snapped and hot coffee spilled over the countertop, splattering my shirt and burning my bare feet.

"Shit. Ow." I grabbed a tea towel and dabbed at the coffee on my feet. That's when I noticed that Henri's notebook was right in the middle of the coffee spill. What was it with that woman and coffee? I remembered the first awkward moment we'd had together in the coffee shop.

I wiped off the cover of the notebook and held it over the sink, letting the coffee drop from the saturated pages. "Dammit." I shook the notebook, hoping that Henri's work wasn't totally ruined. I gingerly flipped through the notebook and tried to sop up the coffee as best as I could.

It looked okay, and as long as the pages didn't stick together when it was drying, it didn't look like it would be ruined. I fanned the pages, hoping to get them to dry a little bit. That's when I caught my name. I knew that I shouldn't look, but I did.

The article was awful.

I mean, it was well written, but what Henri had to say about Chance Rapids was terrible. It wasn't a story about a Christmas movie being filmed in a small town. No, Henri's story read like a dirty expose about the town. Cheating, alcoholism, missing teeth – it was full of negative stereotypes – there wasn't one positive thing. She didn't name names, but the adult child mooching off his parents, was clearly me. She had notes to insert photos of abandoned trailer park homes, and photos of the Last Chance on a Tuesday, aka stripper, night.

Slamming the notebook on the table, I no longer gave a shit if the pages stuck together. Henri had deceived every single person that I cared about – and she did it with the precision of a professional con artist.

The woman in the shower wasn't who I thought she was. And, I wanted her out of my town.

SEVENTEEN

HENRI

I TOWELED off my hair and wiped the steam from the mirror. The night with Jack had been incredible. I had been in the shower for less than twenty minutes and I already had flutters of excitement to be back in his arms. I wrapped the towel around my body and peeked out the door.

“Jack?”

A mug of coffee sat steaming on the counter, but there was no sign of Jack. I tiptoed to the kitchen to take a sip of my coffee and noticed a coffee-soaked tea towel in the sink. Pulling the curtain back, I looked for any sign of Jack in the field. Figuring he went to feed the animals, I decided to slip back into bed and do some editing on my new story.

That’s when I noticed a piece of paper stuck to the back of the door with a thumbtack. I smiled and pulled the love note from the door.

Luckily I had set down my coffee, because I would have dropped it. The piece of paper wasn’t a love note at all, it was the complete opposite. The number for a local taxi company was scrawled underneath the words: You need to leave.

What the hell had happened? The paper looked like it had been angrily torn from...

My throat constricted. From a notebook. I rushed to the table and picked up my notebook, it was heavy and soggy, the pages warped and sticking together, stained with coffee.

“Oh no.” Jack must have read my story. The story that was never going to get published. “Shit.”

I re-read the story and it was bad – especially now that I had seen the other side of the town. I needed to fix this. I got dressed as quickly as I could and rushed to the main house. There was no sign of Jack, or his parents.

Just in case Jack could never forgive me, I headed to the cabin to pack my bags. I looked around the tiny cabin. So much had changed for me in the time I’d spent between these walls. Next to this river, I’d found myself. I knew that I didn’t want to write for the Platypus anymore. I knew that I wanted a man like Jack. That was a lie – I didn’t want a man like Jack, I wanted Jack.

I tossed the notebook into the trash can, then changed my mind and opened up the woodstove and tossed it in. The damp pages curled and it took some time, but eventually all the cruel things I’d written about Chance Rapids and the Rapidians disappeared.

Even with the notebook destroyed, Jack had still read the things I’d written. I couldn’t take them back. Maybe I could make it right, though. Before I left the cabin, there was something I had to do.

Opening up my laptop, I finished the new story and sent it to my editor. The fire was almost out by the time I pressed send. When the taxi arrived, the fire had been reduced to a few glowing red coals. I took one last look at the cabin, shut the door, and rushed to meet the taxi.

“Where to?” The driver asked.

I didn't know. “Are the roads open?” I asked.

“The road east is open, but they're still clearing the westbound route.” The driver glanced in his mirror. “I don't travel out of town.”

The east route would take me seventeen hours in the wrong direction. “Take me to the G-Spot please.”

The driver gave me a quizzical look; obviously he wasn't in on the colloquial name. “The General Store and Garage.” I clarified.

He nodded and was silent for the rest of the drive into town. I was grateful for the silence. I was doing my best to hold in my tears. The wreaths and red bows hanging on the lamp posts hung heavily with the fresh snowfall. The town looked even more magical than when I'd arrived.

The bell jingled as I rushed into the general store. I wanted to speak to Jack in person, and I hoped that I would find him at his parents' shop. A shaggy haired teenager stood behind the counter. “Can I help you with something?” he asked.

“Is Jack Lumber here?” I asked.

The kid, whose nametag read Taye, shook his head. “Nah. I haven't seen Jack today. Muriel is here though, you can ask her.”

I thanked him, but before I rushed into the diner, I had to talk to Jack. I slipped out the side door and huddled next to a trash can and an ash tray. My hands trembled as I pushed Jack's contact. The phone rang six times, and I was getting ready to leave a message when Jack's voice, gruff and cold, came through.

“What’s up?”

I took a deep breath.

“I can explain.”

There was a long pause.

“I don’t think that you need to explain anything. You used every single person you met here. Good people Henri. You used them for your dirty story.”

“What if I told you that story would never be published? “

His sigh came through loud and clear.

“I’d say that’s great. But it doesn’t change the fact that you wrote it – and you misled everyone. Including my parents, who treated you like family.”

“Jack—”

“Henri. Don’t. Just leave and never come back.”

“Jack!” I shouted into dead air. He had hung up. I dialed his number again, but this time it went directly to voicemail.

I typed a text. *Let me explain.* My finger hovered above the send button. A text wasn’t going to save this. I took a deep breath and instead of pressing ‘send’, I pressed delete.

Shivering, I headed into the diner. Without Jack’s coat, the air in Chance Rapids cut through to my bones. Muriel was in the kitchen. I slid into one of the booths and tapped my fingers on the table. What had been the perfect night was turning into a nightmare of a day.

Silent Night, the saddest of all the carols played through the diner’s speakers. When Muriel came to my table, she didn’t smile. “Coffee?” she held up the carafe and looked at me like I was a stranger.

I nodded and slid my mug and saucer to the edge of the table. When she didn't offer me the local's coffee, I knew that she knew. "Your car is ready." She took the keys from her apron. "It's out back. The insurance company is going to take care of the bill."

"Muriel." I reached and grabbed her hand. She raised her eyebrows, but didn't jerk away from me. "Can I explain?"

"You hurt my son." Her voice was as cold as Jack's. "I love the people of this town like family and you hurt them too."

"I know." I didn't let go of her hand. Tears welled in my eyes and the orange formica tables blurred. I blinked the tears away. "Muriel. I came here to write that story. It's true."

Muriel looked like she was blinking back tears too. "That's terrible Henrietta. Why would you do that?"

"It was my assignment," I said. My voice was quiet and I knew that it wasn't a good excuse. "I changed my mind though. That story was never going to be published. Muriel, you have to believe me. I was going to write a new one. I came here with an idea about the people who lived in a town like this, but as I got to know everyone, I changed my mind..."

Muriel shook her head. "That's the difference between city and country people. A good person wouldn't have done it in the first place. We're not fancy people, Henri. Sure, we have faults but we care about each other. That's something that's been lost in a lot of places, but not here."

Jack and Muriel were stubborn, and I had hurt them. I didn't blame them for hating me. I reached into my pocket to

find some change to pay for the coffee, but my fingers brushed on something hard and metallic. Jack's weird antique key.

I slid the key across the table with a five-dollar bill. "Muriel. I'm sorry. I care about your son and I've grown to care about a lot of people in this town too. I'm going to make it right. I promise."

Muriel sighed. "Alright dear. You do your best to fix this, but I'm not sure how you're going to do it." She picked up the key. "What's this?"

"It's Jack's. Can you please make sure he gets it."

Muriel tucked the key into her apron and nodded. I handed her my business card. "The story is going to run this afternoon. It's an online newspaper, the website address is on my card. Can you please make sure that Jack gets this card?"

The card went into her apron with the key. "I will." Then Muriel walked away without saying goodbye.

I picked up my bag. "I guess it's time to go." I said to no one.

The rental car was sitting in the back parking lot. I tossed my bag into the back seat and drove down Main Street one last time before heading East.

In the rear view mirror, the colorful mining houses of Chance Rapids were blurry through my tears. I let the tears stream down my face all the way to Windswan. By that time, my feet were overheating and I pulled over in the neighboring town to change into my motorcycle boots. I was going back to the city. I needed to shed the small-town skin I'd tried on. Standing at the back of the car, I balanced on one foot and then the other, putting on my boots.

I knew that the cell service would be spotty for the next sixteen or so hours, so I took the opportunity to call The Platypus office. I confirmed that the article had been received and insisted that it be uploaded as soon as possible.

It was all out of my hands now. I got in the car and didn't look back.

The roads were icy and I held onto the steering wheel with all my might. It felt like the harder I held onto it, the more control I would have over the crappy sedan. The car in front of me fluttered its brakes and started to fishtail.

I didn't understand what I was seeing. I was looking at the headlights of the car in front of me, when I should have been seeing its tail lights. That's when I realized that it was spinning out of control. I jerked the steering wheel to the right, choosing the ditch over a head on collision. The snowbank exploded as I rammed into it, a wave of snow crashing over the entire car. I couldn't see a thing, the car was still moving, and snow was still battering against the car. Then there was a loud crunch, followed by darkness.

EIGHTEEN

JACK

THE MOVIE SET was active and the hustle and bustle was blocking the sidewalk in front of Charlotte's office. I had to wait until the director yelled 'cut', before I could even walk down the street to get in the front door.

Charlotte was sitting in the chair in the front window, watching the action from her front row seat. When I walked in, she stood and came over to shake my hand. "I just heard from the lawyer. Congratulations, Jack."

"Thanks Charlotte." I tried to give her a smile.

"Are you going to keep the name?" she asked. "I kind of like the Snow Ghost Lodge."

"I like it too," I said. "But there are four of us involved in this project."

"Four brothers." Charlotte pressed her lips together. "Who is the oldest?"

"Not me." I laughed. "The name is a tough call, with the tragedy and everything that happened. It might be a good idea to get a fresh start."

"That was years ago." Charlotte shrugged. "I do see your point, though. Where's your sidekick?" she asked. "I've been

looking for her on the movie set, but I haven't seen her yet today."

"She's gone." I kept my voice flat.

"Gone? I thought she was staying another week."

I cleared my throat. "Things have changed."

"Oh. I see." Charlotte's voice was quiet. She was my friend now, but we'd started as business associates, and I could tell that Charlotte was trying to keep a professional demeanor, especially in her office. "I was about to go for lunch. Would you like to talk about it?"

I immediately wanted to say no, but I had to talk to someone about what had happened. "I had planned to get drunk with Freddie and get his advice, but Charlotte had actually spent time with Henri, and she was a woman. I had the feeling that her advice would be a little better than fun time Freddie's. "Sure. It's on me though."

"Deal." Charlotte grabbed her coat from the hook by the door. "Can we go to the G-Spot? I have a craving for a BLT."

"I've heard their service is crap but their sandwiches are delicious." I held the door open for Charlotte, who laughed as she pulled her hair out from the collar of her coat. We wove through the crowded movie set and ducked under the ropes to exit onto the regular portion of Main Street.

Emma was sitting in the diner when we arrived. She waved for us to join her. We didn't really have a choice-all the other tables were full with the lunch hour crowd.

Charlotte sat next to Emma and I slid into the bench seat across from them. During the lunch hour rush, there were three servers, including my mom. One of the young girls, Taye's sister Brooke, took our order and returned with our drinks.

After spilling the coffee this morning, I was going into caffeine withdrawal and my hand shook as I poured the cream into my cup. Charlotte and Emma were drinking sparkling water. Emma stabbed at the ice cubes in her glass with her straw. “How did Henri like the flowers?” There was excitement in her eyes, it was obvious that she loved her job, and took her flower clairvoyance seriously.

Charlotte stared at me while she sipped her water. “You were right. The Black Dahlias are her favorite.”

“I knew it.” Emma shook her shoulders and grinned. “She seems like a cool girl. I’m glad you didn’t show up with a Gerbera daisy girl.”

I didn’t understand Emma’s flower reference, but I assumed that a Gerbera daisy was something a boring, or basic girl, would like. I didn’t say it out loud, but a Gerbera Daisy girl would’ve been a better choice.

It was only a matter of time before Emma dug deeper with her questions, so I decided to cut to the chase. “She wasn’t a cool girl. It turns out that she is a terrible person, but it’s okay, she’s gone.”

“The roads are open?” Emma raised her eyebrows.

“Going East they are.” Charlotte consulted her phone. “The route west is going to be closed for a while still.”

“That surprises me.” Emma sipped her water. “The tulip farm is in Windswan and my friends there say the roads are terrible – black ice in spots.”

“Why is she a terrible person?” Charlotte asked quietly.

Taking a deep breath, I tried to decide how much to tell Charlotte and Emma. “She lied to everyone.”

“Lied?” Charlotte furrowed her brow. “About what?”

Both Charlotte and Emma leaned in closer, their eyes focused on me. I took a sip of coffee and felt my body coming to life. “She wasn’t writing a story on the movie here in town. She was writing a story about how shitty it is to live in a small town.”

“Compared to a Christmas movie, or just in general?” Charlotte asked.

“I’m not sure.” I had read the scribbled article so quickly I could only remember the worst parts.

Charlotte crossed her arms and leaned on the table. “Compared to a Christmas movie, every place is shitty. Could she have just been taking that kind of angle?”

“I don’t think so. It was dark and it was cruel. She wrote about alcoholism, infidelity, wife swapping, gossip, bullying, and drugs.”

Charlotte took a deep breath. “All of those things happen here, Jack.”

“I know. I’m not blind.” I shook my head. “But she could’ve told me, told us, that’s what she was writing about.”

“That’s true,” Emma chimed in. “I sensed that there was a bit of an edge to her...you know the dahlias.”

Charlotte sipped her water. “Would she have gotten the real story if she’d done that? She’s a reporter, she needed to see people in their natural habitat.”

“It almost sounds like you’re standing up for her.”

Before Charlotte could respond, Mom showed up at the table with our lunch. She handed out the round of BLT

sandwiches; mine was the one with the fries. “You’re busy today.” Charlotte seemed thankful for the distraction.

“It’s a regular lunch hour.” My mom smiled. “It’s nice to see you two ladies keeping my Jack company.”

Charlotte grinned and winked at my mom. “He’s buying. We are celebrating the closing of the Snow Ghost Lodge deal.”

She was definitely trying to steer the conversation away from Henri.

“Oh, Speaking of the Snow Ghost Lodge.” She fumbled around in her apron. “You’d better change the name Jack.”

Charlotte smiled. “We were just talking about that.”

Mom handed me the antique key to the lodge. “Where did this come from?” I held the key in my palm and studied it, trying to remember the last place I’d had it.

“That girl dropped it off.” I knew my mom was mad when she didn’t use Henri’s name. “She left this too.” Mom held up a business card. “She said something about an article coming out this afternoon. I can throw it out if you’d like.”

I nodded. “That can go in the trash can.”

Charlotte smiled sweetly at my mom. “I’ll take that card. I’m interested in reading it.”

“Knock yourself out honey. I’ve heard it’s terrible.” Mom slid the card across the table. The cook dinged the bell in the window. “Enjoy your lunch kids. I’ve got to go.”

My stomach growled and I realized that I hadn’t eaten anything since the sandwiches Henri and I had devoured in bed the night before. The bacon was perfectly crunchy and the three of us were silent as we all took huge bites of the sandwiches.

Charlotte dabbed at the corner of her mouth with the paper napkin. “Jack. I think that you might be being a little hard on Henri.”

“How so?”

“She was just doing her job.” Charlotte seemed nervous and she focused on her plate, instead of looking me in the eyes. “I feel like part of this might be my fault.”

“Your fault?” Emma tilted her head.

“Yeah.” Charlotte pressed her lips together. “I told her all sorts of terrible things about this town. I had the feeling she might be angling for a more provocative story, and I didn’t hold back. I’m sorry Jack.”

I shook my head. “This isn’t your fault, Charlotte.”

My mind went back to Freddie’s warning about Charlotte talking to Henri about life in Chance Rapids. He had been right. Charlotte had been the source for a lot of the garbage that was in the story.

Charlotte pulled out her phone. As a realtor, I was used to her constantly being on her phone. Charlotte scrolled while she ate the rest of her sandwich. She brushed the crumbs off her hands and slid her phone across the table. “You need to read this.”

“What is it?” I asked.

Instead of replying, Charlotte nudged the phone closer to me. The website was called The Platypus and it was an article by Henrietta Page. “Hmmm. At least she didn’t lie about her last name.”

“Read it.” Charlotte’s voice was stern.

It wasn’t the article I’d seen in her notebook.

“Holy shit.” I gasped as I scrolled through the well-written article. “This isn’t...”

“A scathing dark article about rednecks.” Charlotte interrupted. “She might have come here to write that article, but it looks like this town got under her skin. Like it does to everyone.”

Henri’s article compared the movie to what she experienced in town. And, in Henri’s opinion, the movie was a feel good and completely unrealistic portrayal of life in Chance Rapids. Real life in the mountain town had more layers, both good and bad. She went on to highlight the people, but the bulk of the article was about community, and how the entire town had come together to help the family whose house burned down after the parade.

The photo that accompanied the article was of Shawn and Mary as Mr. and Mrs. Claus, waving from their plywood sleigh atop the flatbed. Two alpacas sporting fake antlers were in the foreground, their handlers grinning, and one of them, me, was staring at the person taking the photo. I remember that exact moment, our eyes had connected through the crowd and I felt like I’d been hit by a mosquito zapper.

“I don’t know what to say.” My voice cracked.

Charlotte looked at her watch, a vintage Cartier. “You should probably apologize.”

“But she should’ve told us.”

Charlotte shook her head. “Jack. Don’t be a jackass. She clearly came here to do a job, fell in love...with the town, and changed her story.”

Suddenly I wasn’t hungry for the other half of my sandwich. “I have been a jackass.”

“You both have. Now, be a man and go get her and bring her home.” Charlotte made a shooing motion with her hands. “I’ll get the bill. You get out of here.”



WITH THE WESTERN ROUTE CLOSED, there was only one way to get out of town. I wasn’t sure how much of a head start Henri had on me, but I didn’t think it was more than an hour. Emma’s tulip friends were right, the roads were terrible. I put Cindy into four-wheel drive and drove a little faster than I should have for the weather conditions.

As I passed Windswan, the roads deteriorated quickly. Cars were in the ditches all over the place. The road shouldn’t have re-opened. Henri wasn’t used to driving in winter conditions, and I remembered that her shitty rental car didn’t even have winter tires, let alone the chains that going through the mountain pass would require.

My heart pounded against my ribcage as I squinted into the distance, hoping to see the tail lights of the champagne-colored sedan. The pounding in my chest paused as I saw something on the side of the road. From a distance it looked like a small animal, but as I got closer, I think my heart completely stopped. There was no doubt in my mind, Henri’s boots were sitting on the side of the road. I put on my four-way flashers and pulled over to pick them up. What were her boots doing sitting on the side of the road? It didn’t make sense.

Less than a mile down the road, tire tracks swirled in the snow on the surface of the road. A black SUV was in the ditch on the left-hand side, and tracks led off the road to the right. A car had driven down an embankment. It was Henri. I could

feel it. I held my breath as I ran to follow the tire tracks. I didn't have to follow them far, the rental car was covered in snow, the front end crumpled into a tree.

"Henri!" I shouted and ran to the driver's side. It was a struggle as the snow was up to my crotch. I yanked on the door handle, but there was too much snow packed around the car for it to open. I peered in the frosty windows and could see Henri slumped onto the deployed airbags. I banged on the window and shouted.

To my surprise, Henri turned her head to look out the window. Then she unrolled it. "Hi Jack."

"Hi." She was definitely in shock. There was a cut on her forehead that was bleeding.

I held out my hand like a traffic cop. "Stop. I'm going to dig out the door." The wail of the ambulance in the distance was reassuring. By the time I had cleared the door, Josh, from Search and Rescue, had a ski patroller toboggan next to the car.

Henri insisted that she was fine, but Josh insisted harder that she needed to let them put her on the backboard and get her to the hospital.

"Can I come with her?" I asked when we were at the back of the ambulance. I didn't care about Cindy; I just needed to be near Henri and make sure that she was going to be okay.

"Who are you?" The paramedic asked.

Henri was loaded onto the stretcher. I squeezed her hand, "I'm her boyfriend."

Tears spilled from Henri's eyes. "You're going to be okay." The paramedic thought that she was crying because of the accident, but I knew better.

“Everything is going to be okay Henri.” I whispered in her ear.

She croaked, “I’m sorry.”

They loaded her into the back of the ambulance and I hopped in beside her. “They’re going to check you out to make sure you’re okay and then I’m going to take you home.”

“Home?”

“You belong here Henri. Please say you’ll stay.”

The wry smile that I adored spread across her face and I knew that she was going to okay.

“I thought you’d never ask,” she whispered.

That’s when I realized that I’d never asked her to stay. I just assumed that she wouldn’t want to live in my small town.

I bent to kiss her cheek. “I love you Henri.”

“I love you too Jack.”

EPILOGUE

Three months later

The Platypus article was a total flop. The only people who liked it were Rapidians. The rest of the world, my boss included, hated it. There was no intrigue and no drama, it was a feel-good story - and those didn't sell.

I wasn't surprised when I was fired.

"How's it going?" Jack peeked his head into the door of my apartment.

My wrists were sore from so much typing. "I'm on the last chapter." I punched the period button with flourish.

Jack wrapped his arms around my shoulders and kissed my cheek. "I'm so proud of you."

The book I'd started to write years ago had sat dormant on my computer while I wrote satirical pieces for The Platypus. It was a mystery novel about a detective who gets assigned to a case in a mountain town. I'd started the book long before I'd ever heard of a little place called Chance Rapids.

Jack and I were madly in love with each other, but decided that it was too soon to move in together. I rented a little apartment above Emma's flower shop, but spent most of my

night's wrapped up in Jack's arms underneath his plaid quilt, listening to the river, fuelled by the spring melt, rushing past the tiny river cabin.

He was working steadily on the lodge, and for the most part, was getting along with his out-of-town brothers. Muriel hated me for that morning in December, but now treated me like the daughter she'd never had. I'd even let her drag me to square dancing lessons a few times – and she made me my very own square-dancing skirt. It was huge and ridiculous, but super fun to twirl – I secretly loved it.

Life in Chance Rapids was definitely quieter than L.A., and sometimes that quiet was deafening, but overall, packing up and moving to the mountains was one of the best decisions I'd ever made.

I had been so focused on finishing my chapter I hadn't seen Jack walk in. When I stood and saw him wearing a suit, I had to grab the back of my chair to steady myself. He had the shoulders of a Quarterback and the ass of a hockey player, and he wore a suit like a Hugo Boss model.

“Jack. Your beard.” I touched my cheek. He had kissed me like he always did, but it hadn't tickled.

I rushed to him and ran my fingertips over his smooth face.

“Do you still love me?” He grinned, and I saw that he had a dimple in his chin. I rubbed it with my thumb. I was going to make a rude comment about the chafing his beard left on my thighs, but instead, I kissed each of his cheeks and then let my lips linger on his.

“You'd better stop before I rip you out of that dress,” he growled.

I smoothed out the satin fabric. “I don’t think that this dress is designed for sitting.”

“You look beautiful.” He ran his hand over my ass and then gave it a smack. “Now, let’s go before we’re late for this wedding.”

Emma was standing on the steps to city hall, a bouquet in her hand. “Here you go. The bride is waiting inside.”

Jack held my hand and opened the door for me. “I’ll be checking out your ass the whole time,” he whispered. For a city hall wedding, the place was packed. Jack joined his friends in the chairs and I slipped into the office to join the bride.

She had her back to me, but turned as I entered the room.

“You look gorgeous,” I gushed.

Mary was wearing a simple ivory pantsuit, with a high enough neckline to cover her MILF tattoo. “Thank you for being here for me,” there was a tremble to her typically tough voice.

“I wouldn’t miss it for the world.” I smiled, and hugged Mary, one of my closest friends in Chance Rapids.

Mary dabbed at her eyes with a tissue. “This is all because of you.”

“Come on, don’t ruin your makeup. Shawn is waiting.”

Mary hugged me again. “You’re catching the bouquet, Miss Page. I’m making sure of that.”

And, later on that night, at the reception at the BearDog Brewery, Mary kept her promise.

Later that night, curled up next to the man I loved, I dreamt of a different bouquet – one filled with black dahlias.

If you liked All I Want for Christmas, you will love my entire Chance Rapids Series. Book 1, Second Chances is available [here](#).

DEAR READER

Dear Reader,

Thank you for reading All I Want for Christmas! Are you the type of reader who loves bonus scenes, excerpts, and sneak peeks? If yes, click [here](#) to join my newsletter! Warning: these emails might include one or two ridiculous dog pictures, or snippets from the small towns that inspire my books...

If you enjoyed the Chance Rapids scenes in this book and like that small town vibe, you will want to check out my complete Chance Rapids series.

Each book can be read as a standalone, but it's best to start with book 1, [Second Chances](#).

Have the best day ever,

A.J.

SECOND CHANCES - CHANCE
RAPIDS, BOOK 1

SNEAK PEEK

CHAPTER 1

SECOND CHANCES

MEGAN'S DISAPPOINTMENT had grown familiar, the monthly betrayal of her body. She used to get excited when she was a few days late, rushing out to buy a pregnancy test, holding her breath and adding and deleting baby names from the ongoing list in her head, but nothing had prepared her for this kind of betrayal.

She felt that something was off with Alex; she had witnessed the rift between them widen from crack to chasm as the years had gone by. She chalked it up to the stress of daily life and the routine that came with a fifteen-year marriage.

She paced back and forth across the living room, practically wearing a trail in the Berber carpet. 'There has to be a logical explanation,' she thought to herself, the rational side of her brain trying to give Alex some credit, even though in her heart, and her gut, she knew that there was no explaining away the ultrasound baby photo clenched in her hand that she had found tucked away in the pocket of his gym bag.

The problem?

It wasn't hers.

Her thoughts were interrupted by the high-pitched whistle of the tea kettle. She pulled a white tea-stained mug out of the

cupboard, her favorite, and plucked a tea bag out of the canister on the counter, but instead of dropping it into the mug, she gripped the dry bag in her fist as she doubled over on the counter into a heaving sob.

“Pull yourself together,” she whispered and angrily wiped away the errant tear that had managed to fall down her cheek. She dropped the tea bag into the mug, topped it with the steaming water, then went back to pacing. When she opened the fridge to pull out the milk, one of her birthday cards that had been magnetized to the door fell to the floor and landed on her wool sock. Megan picked it up, screamed, and ripped it in half, glitter from the lettering sprinkling onto the white floor tiles. She knew that it was supposed to be funny, that her friend Amy had given it to her to make her laugh, not knowing how cruel the “Here’s another year closer to Velcro shoes” saying was to her. The only Velcro shoes Megan wanted in her life were those belonging to a baby, or a toddler, not her own. She knew that at forty-three, the chances of conceiving were slim to none, but still held out hope that she would be one of the success stories she read about online.

She pulled the milk out of the fridge and shakily poured a touch into her Earl Grey tea.

She wanted to march down to his office, burst in, slam the photo down on his desk, and demand an explanation, but she still hadn’t figured out what she would do when she heard the truth – that is, if he even fessed up to it.

She heard the garage door motor whir and his car pull into the garage. She slipped the photo into the back pocket of her jeans, took a deep breath to steel her nerves, then sat down at the kitchen table.

“Hi, honey.” Alex breezed into the kitchen and pulled open the fridge. “Is it ever getting dark early now,” he mused as he pulled a piece of cut celery out of the crisper.

“Yes. Dark.” Megan took a sip of her tea, recoiling as the hot liquid hit her lips. She hadn’t even noticed the afternoon turn to evening.

Alex strode over to Megan and pecked her on the cheek, “Don’t worry about making me dinner, I’m going to hit the gym and then head out to meet Robbie Mason.

Robbie Mason was one of Alex’s new consulting clients, and she hadn’t met him - which wasn’t out of the ordinary, she rarely saw his clients face to face, they were just names on her bookkeeping spreadsheets. She had noticed that Alex had billed Robbie Mason more than double the number of hours that were typical. It seemed a little strange to her, but like so many other red flags that she saw in retrospect, she had ignored it.

She stared at her slightly balding husband of fifteen years as he lied directly to her face.

“Oh, don’t worry. I didn’t make you anything to eat,” she said and attempted another sip of her tea.

Alex looked past Megan at the cold kitchen. Megan loved getting her crock pot out and usually had something bubbling and steaming on the counter for Alex when he got home from work.

“Everything okay Meg?”

“Why do you have to meet Mr. Mason this late?”

She saw the hesitation in his face, she saw the way his lips contorted right before he spoke, “Oh, you know, the usual contract stuff.”

“You know what Alex? I don’t know. Why don’t you fill me in?”

Alex’s eyes went dark and he slammed the refrigerator door shut. “I don’t have time for this, go check the invoices if you want a play by play of his account.”

Megan had been taking care of the books for Alex’s private consulting company for the past ten years, and while she knew who the clients were, they rarely sat down and discussed the details of each individual account.

Megan grabbed Alex’s wrist and glared into his dark brown eyes, “Make time.”

Alex pulled his wrist from Megan’s grip and stared back, “What’s gotten into you?” He brushed past her into the mudroom and picked up his gym bag. “I’ll see you when I get home,” he said and grabbed a baseball hat from the rack by the back door.

Her rage had been simmering, but when Alex dismissed her, it boiled up and over. She gripped her mug and hurled it at the wall by Alex’s head. He jumped as the pottery pieces clattered to the floor around his feet and the tea streamed down the wall.

“What the hell, Megan?”

“What the hell Megan?” she growled, her voice gravelly and unfamiliar to her own ears. “What the hell Megan?” she repeated and pressed her hands into the table and slid off the chair. “How about what the hell, Alex?” She pulled the photo out of her back pocket and flicked the evidence at him.

She saw his face fall as the photo flitted through the air and came to rest amongst the broken pottery.

“Meg, I—, I—”

“You, what?” Megan interrupted.

“I’m sorry,” he said, unable to meet her gaze, and then he walked out of the house.

End Excerpt.

[‘Second Chances’ by A.J. Wynter](#)

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