A woman wearing a red and white Santa Claus suit is sitting on a chair. She is wearing red high-heeled shoes. To her left is a decorated Christmas tree with white and gold ornaments and lights. The background is a light-colored wall with a window.

A BAD BOY
BACHELORS
NOVEL

Bad Boy
BACHELOR
Christmas

WESTON PARKER
USA TODAY BEST SELLING AUTHOR
ALI PARKER

BAD BOY BACHELOR
CHRISTMAS



ALI PARKER
WESTON PARKER

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Ali's About The Author

Weston's About the Author

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DESCRIPTION



The Grinch ain't got nothing on me.

The only good and green thing about Christmas is the money it rakes in.

I'm not interested in carols, candies, or dealing with extra-Christmassy type people.

Until I hire one. A hot college student joins my design team.

She makes up for her annoying jovial spirit with her sexy curves.

And her willingness to give herself to me.

If only that was enough.

When it comes to business, she hasn't got a clue.

Or does she?

Clients love her and the Christmas spirit is practically a pillar of her personality.

Luckily, that spirit doesn't keep her off the naughty list.

She knows how to be bad for me, and it's so good.

What I didn't expect was for her to help heal parts of me that have been broken for a long time.

Maybe Christmas won't be so bad this year.

Maybe profit margins and growth don't matter half as much as getting the girl.

Maybe it's time to give up my bad boy bachelor status?

Or maybe not...

DEDICATION

To our amazing readers. Merry Christmas to you and yours!
From us and ours! May next year be your BEST YEAR
EVER.

Ali & Weston Parker

CHAPTER 1



NORTH

Marge Cuthbert, affectionately called Mrs. Claus by everyone who worked for me, had been a Christmas staple in my life for as long as I could remember. As she stood under the retirement banner at the office, I felt a growing sense of unease expand in my gut. She'd worked for my father before me, was originally hired by my grandfather before him, and rumor had it, she had a whirlwind affair with my grandfather forty years ago when she was a doe-eyed twenty-year-old stepping into the corporate world of Christmas-tree farming.

Yep. Christmas trees. That's my brand. Well, the Waylon family brand, anyway.

It wasn't the most glamorous business. Lots of sap and pine needles and scratched-up hands. And it could be a pain dealing with demanding Christmas Karens who were looking for that perfect tree for their glitz and glamor holiday event. If Walmart is scary during the holidays, try walking a mile in my shoes when every uptight socialite, politician, celebrity, and corporate CEO is looking for the *perfect* tree for their event. You can't custom order a live tree. Can't request bark color, pine needle length, or level of scent strength—some people have tried.

Marge had always been excellent with dealing with that specific breed of clientele. Me? Well, I was a bit rough around the edges, according to those who knew me best. Demanding and bossy didn't go over well with me. Without Marge, I worried I'd lose half of my clientele before the new year. What

would my father and grandfather before him say if I torpedoed all the success they'd built over the last eighty years?

The shame would be unbearable and extremely public.

Cami Rollins appeared at my side and nudged me in the ribs. "Gonna miss her, huh?"

I nearly jumped out of my skin. "Announce yourself before you sneak up on people, Rollins."

Cami, barely five feet herself, craned her head back to peer up at me. I towered over her, measuring at six foot five. "Did I scare you?"

"You're the size of a badger. No, you didn't scare me. Just surprised me, is all." I stared down the length of my nose at her as her lips curled in a devilish little smile. "Go bother someone else."

The waitress rolled her big brown eyes toward her curly hairline. She had a wild head of hair that was usually held back in a hairnet when I saw her at the diner. She didn't work for me, but she was a regular in Marge's life and had been pouring her coffee at the diner for almost five years. On top of that, Marge's best friend was Cami's mother, and they were thick as thieves.

"She's worried about you, you know," Cami said.

"Marge worries about everyone."

"You in particular."

I swirled my glass of red wine and watched Marge receive hugs and farewells from people who had to leave the retirement party early. "She has no reason to worry about me. I'll be fine. It will be a strange season without her, but this was inevitable."

"She thinks you're going to hole yourself up in your big house and get lost staring into a snow globe pining after your past."

I scrutinized the petite young woman. "Don't you have other people you can annoy at this party?"

“Why would I want to do that when bothering *you* is so satisfying?”

Grumbling about her invasive and unwanted opinions, I moved off, shifting through the crowd, easily navigating my way through because I was nearly a whole head taller than everyone there. Waylon men were big. Each and every one of us. Well, everyone except for my Uncle Wallace, who'd barely made it to five foot eight and had been the brunt of many jokes at all family events while I was growing up.

My father's favorite joke had been about picking Wallace up by his collar and hanging him on the door hook in their shared bedroom when they were on the cusp of becoming teens. As a kid I'd believed it was true, but now I saw it was just a ruse to get Wallace's blood boiling.

It worked damn near every time.

Wallace was envious of our heights, broad frames, big hands, and powerful builds. I suspected we'd descended from lumberjacks, perhaps from Alaska or the great plains, somewhere where physical strength and the ability to perform brutal labor meant the difference between life and death. Marge often joked that we were living proof of Darwinism. That, I doubted. We had a few heads in our family full of sawdust and the odd loose screw. All families did.

Right?

We were just freaks, and it was a good thing, too, because Christmas-tree farming was not as glamorous as everything that came after they were uprooted. Ornaments and lights gave the illusion that the work was not brutal, but us Waylon men knew differently.

For example, this year we were having a real problem with coyotes on the farm that had taken to sleeping under the low hanging boughs of some of the trees. I'd surprised a handful before, and having them come out of their sleep snarling and snapping was never a fun way to start a morning.

While my employees gathered around Marge and listened to her tell wistful old stories about Christmases past, I stood

off to the side, not wanting to kill the mood. Having the boss around always made people a little stiff. It changed the atmosphere.

Marge deserved a proper send-off. But over the passing half hour, she caught me hiding, gave me a knowing little smile that promised she would come find me later, and made good on said promise close to nine in the evening when all the employees with children had gone home and those who wanted to take advantage of the open bar were throwing back martinis and vodka sodas.

She sat down across from me at one of the high tables in the restaurant we'd rented out. The place was one of Marge's favorites, and I took her here every year on Christmas Eve to thank her for all her work over the Christmas season. As my Christmas tree designer, she played a major role in keeping me in business. Waylon Tree Farm sold trees to upscale clients, not Joe Blow on the side of the road. We provided the tree for Rockefeller Center every year, along with other special events all over the United States. Every year, we tried to acquire new clients as well as rebook previous ones. Marge's consistent work ensured that happened. Christmas was all about traditions. People liked to know what to expect, and Marge delivered.

She eyed me over the rim of her coffee, dark blue eyes twinkling. "You've been keeping to the shadows tonight, North. How predictably like you."

"I want to let everyone have fun. This is the last company event before the Christmas season kicks off. You know how crazy it can get."

Marge drummed her fingernails on the side of her ceramic mug. They were painted a sparkly light blue. In a week or two, I suspected they'd be replaced with something festive, and she'd bust out her Christmas broaches, earrings, sweater vests, and handbags. Yes, Marge even had Christmas handbags.

"They all like you, you know. You don't have to hide."

"I'm not hiding," I said.

She arched a silver eyebrow. “Cami said you were brooding earlier.”

“Cami says a lot of things. She should learn how to mind her own business. I’m paying for her drinks this evening after all, and she doesn’t even work for me.”

Marge chuckled. Her laugh was nostalgic for me. As a boy, I’d often sought the sound out whenever she came into the big house on the property. Little did I know it had been to spend time with my grandfather. But even after he passed away, she’d popped over frequently, checking in to make sure my father had home-cooked meals at least three nights a week and good reliable company. She was like a mother to him and a grandmother to me.

Irreplaceable at home and at work.

Marge put her hand on mine. Her skin was warm and wrinkled, and a gold ring with a ruby glinted on her middle finger. She’d worn it for as long as I could remember. “Just because I’m retiring doesn’t mean you’re not going to see me anymore.”

“Obviously. You’d miss me too much.”

She patted my hand and leaned back, amusement curling her lips. “Precisely. I’ll still be around, even if you need me for work-related things. I won’t leave you hanging. Speaking of which.” She paused to sip her coffee and set it back down. “What’s the plan for my replacement? The Christmas season is a week away. Have you hired someone and just not found the time to tell me?”

Hiring a replacement for Marge had felt like one task too many on my plate. “I’m going to design the trees myself this year.”

She blinked. “North.”

“What?”

“How in the heavens will you manage that?”

“Have faith, Marge. I’m a Jack of all trades.”

“You’re busy enough as it is. You need help. If you hadn’t procrastinated for the last two months,” she added under her breath, “I could have helped you train the new designer.”

I waved off her concern. “I’ll figure it out. I always do.”

She sighed, clicked her tongue, and shook her head. “No, you won’t. You’ll drown in your work, shut yourself in your house, and let Christmas pass you by without taking a single moment for yourself. Let me help you. I’ll find someone to replace me—as a thank you. And a gift.” She held up a warning finger when I opened my mouth to retort. “I won’t hear it, North. I’ve made up my mind. Let an old woman do you a favor. You’ve done me hundreds since you took over for your father.”

When Marge set her mind to something, there was no arguing with her. We were cut from the same cloth in that regard, and she might have been the only person who could go toe to toe with me and emerge from the debate victorious.

This felt like a fight I would not win, so I conceded with a nod. “Thank you.”

“That’s the spirit,” she gushed before sitting bolt upright in her seat with a gasp and pointing past me.

I looked over my shoulder. “What?”

“It’s snowing!”

With speed that did not match her petite portly frame, Marge burst from her seat and went to the restaurant window, practically pressing her nose to the glass like a starry-eyed child seeing her first snowfall. I moved up beside her, glass of wine in hand, and regarded the flurries as the sky let them loose on the city street outside.

“It’s a blessing,” Marge whispered. “Can you feel it?”

“Feel what?”

“The Christmas spirit.”

No. “Sure, Marge.”

She gave a little shudder of her shoulders, as if she were standing out on the street in the snow and caught a chill. “I think when I go home, I might have to break out my sweater vests. It’s that time.”

Chuckling, I draped an arm over her shoulders. “I’ll drive you and help you pull them out. Are they still in your storage locker?”

She patted my stomach. “You’re a good man, North. That would be wonderful.”

The flurries thickened into earnest snowflakes outside and a young couple burst out of a basement entry apartment across the street. He was in a T-shirt and jeans, and she wore pajamas, but neither of them seemed to care about all the eyes on them as they turned their faces to the sky, laughed like they were children, and enjoyed the first snowfall of the year.

For a moment, I caught myself smiling at their wonder.

CHAPTER 2



WINTER

Dr. Allison Kent sat at her desk in front of me, hands clasped together, regal posture daring me to sit up a bit straighter. Behind her, her office window was trimmed in twinkling Christmas lights, framing an image of the University of Oregon's grounds covered in rain. It always rained here in the fall and winter.

Dr. Kent regarded me with kind eyes. "You've excelled here, Winter. Your work speaks for itself. I think you have a promising career ahead of you in interior design, and if you're interested in the internship program, I'd be happy to discuss it with you."

It was a lot to think about.

I'd spent the last three years fighting for my degree in design. Part of me really wanted to take a semester off before diving back into the extended program in the spring, but another part of me knew how competitive the job market was in my industry. I'd be competing against other green candidates who didn't have a measure of experience on their resumes and were fresh out of school. Somehow, I had to ensure I stood apart.

The internship program might be my best shot at achieving that.

"I was hoping to make a bit of money before the spring semester," I said. "This whole life-of-a-struggling-student shtick is getting a bit old, if you know what I mean."

I looked around Dr. Kent's lavish, nicely appointed office full of collector's edition classic novels and treasures she'd acquired on her worldwide travels.

She probably didn't know what I meant at all.

"I understand," Dr. Kent said, her eyes still warm and kind. "Ramen for lunch and dinner gets a bit old after a while, doesn't it?"

Relaxing a bit, I nodded. "Yes. And I saw Christmas as a chance to—I don't know—step away and take a break. Stay with family. Reset."

My counselor nodded gracefully. "You can absolutely do that. In the end, I don't think it would be the difference between you having a successful career in interior design and not. However, I do think the experience you would get during this internship would be priceless. It's one more season of sacrifice. Then you would wrap things up in the spring and be ready for job applications come summer. Unless you wanted to upgrade further from your degree."

I rubbed the back of my neck.

Truth be told, I was getting a little tired of school. Most of my friends had graduated last semester, and I'd been so swamped that I hadn't had time to connect with other students. My spare time was consumed by nights spent studying or working on design plans in the library. I was sick of the cafeteria food and the ramen in my dorm room. All I wanted was to go home to Ashland, watch Christmas movies, sip hot chocolate by the fire in the house I grew up in, and lounge around in cozy PJs. In short?

I needed to press pause.

But my career was important to me too, and maybe this internship would give me the boost I needed come summertime.

I chewed at the inside of my cheek.

"You don't have to decide anything right this second," Dr. Kent said, "but I do have some connections with a friend in New York who could pass your name along to the right

person. It's a great opportunity—a particularly unique one—where I think you would be able to hone some new skills not taught here at the university.”

“What sort of skills?”

“Adaptability, communication, confronting obstacles when working with clients and a boss who is... particular.”

I sighed. “Where do I apply?”

Dr. Kent grinned. “I'll email you a link. In the meantime, I'll get in touch with my friend in New York so your name doesn't pass them by. I think this is the right decision, Winter. All of your hard work is going to pay off in a big way if you keep your pedal to the metal.”

I stood up, collected my raincoat and scarf from the back of my chair, and managed a smile. “Thank you, Dr. Kent. As always, I appreciate your help. I'll apply tonight. You're right. Now isn't the time to get comfortable and take a break.”

“I'm sure there will be some wiggle room for you to go home to Ashland to see your family during the internship. Reach out to me if you need some assistance making that happen.”

I thanked her once more, stepped out into the hall, and made my way past the other students waiting for their session with the counselor. As I went, I donned my jacket and scarf and pulled my gloves out from my pocket. By the time I made it outside I had my hood up and the zipper drawn all the way to my scarf. The rain seemed tempted to turn to sleet, and I hurried across the grounds to my dorm room, where I immediately turned on my little space heater, shrugged out of all my wet clothes, and changed into comfy leggings and an old sweater.

Sitting cross-legged on my bed, I called my folks.

Dad's voice filled the line first. “I love seeing your name on my screen. How's my favorite daughter? What's it like up there? Been raining buckets all afternoon down here. Damn winter weather.”

I smiled. “Hey, Dad. I’m good. It’s raining here too.” I looked out my small window above my tiny fridge. “It looks like it’s trying to snow, though.”

“You okay? You sound down, honey.”

I heard my mother in the background calling for him to put me on speakerphone so she could hear me. I waited while they fumbled with the phone. Mom and Dad had never really caught up with the times and learned how to operate their iPhone with ease. They still called me to help them get into their accounts all the time, and I had a notebook full of *their* passwords in my nightstand.

The curse of a millennial child, I supposed.

“Your father says you sound down?” My mother’s voice was laced with concern. “Did something happen? Did the meeting with your counselor not go well?”

“No, no, nothing happened,” I said, trying to add some lightness to my voice. Being away from my parents for so long had been hard and was only getting harder the longer I was here on campus. When I first started my program I’d been eager to carve a path for myself. I’d been a bright-eyed, bushy-tailed twenty-one-year-old on the cusp of figuring out who she was and what she wanted. I was tired of living at home and ready for an adventure. Now I found myself aching for all the familiar comforts of my childhood home. “My appointment with Dr. Kent went well. She wants me to do a specialized internship. Apparently, it would look really good on my resume and help me stand apart from other applicants when I’m ready to step into the job market.”

“That’s great news, honey!” Mom cried ecstatically.

“We’re so proud of you,” Dad added. “When is the internship?”

I sighed. “The month of December.”

“Oh,” they said in unison.

My heart fell. “I know. I didn’t want to take it. I said no at first. All I’ve been thinking about for the last two months was coming home and spending the month with you guys. I was

even looking forward to Auntie Lois's Christmas Open House party, and that's saying something."

My parents chuckled softly.

I hated that damn open house party. My aunt insisted on hosting it every year two days before Christmas. She was a terrible cook, so the food was always bad, and the party was dry because she and her husband weren't drinkers. Not that I needed alcohol to have a good time, but the whole affair felt stale within the first hour, and people often clustered in corners, debating when was the polite time to leave.

But this year?

I wanted to go. I wanted to do all the things. Go for a walk to look at the Christmas lights on my block, go ice skating, Christmas shop with my dad like we used to when I was a kid and struggle to find the perfect gift for Mom, see my friends, go dancing...

"I think I have to do the internship," I said resolutely. "Dr. Kent is going to try to put in a good word for me to get some time off so I can be home over the holidays, but it looks like we won't get the extended time we'd hoped for. I'm sorry, guys."

They hesitated for only a beat before chiming in with positive reassurances.

"Don't worry about it, sweetheart," Mom cooed. "This is your dream! Dr. Kent wouldn't lead you astray, and hey, there's always next Christmas."

"Your mother is right. It doesn't make any sense to pass on such a big opportunity. Especially not for my sister's God awful Open House."

I smiled. "You're sure?"

My folks spent the next five minutes convincing me not to feel guilty. It only sort of worked. By the time I got off the phone I was sniffing and missing them even more, but when the email rolled in from Dr. Kent with the referral to apply to the internship, the flutter of excitement in my stomach told me I was making the right decision.

I clicked through the links, attached my resume and portfolio, read it over six times, and hit send.

I'd never been to New York before. All design students dreamed of an internship in the Big Apple. How bad could it be to be away from home when I was going to be in one of the most incredible cities on earth during my favorite time of year?

CHAPTER 3



NORTH

Justin, my best friend and a local realtor, let himself into my house and shook the light dusting of snow from his shoulders onto the polished stone floors. His boots, thick-soled to add an extra couple of inches to his height, squeaked as he heel-toed them off and abandoned them right smack in the middle of my entranceway. He strode under the massive antler chandelier overhead and down the hall toward me, where I waited at the entrance to my kitchen.

“How’re things?” Justin had a low, deep voice, which often surprised people who met him. They expected something else from his five foot eight frame and pinched features.

He and I were opposites in almost every way, and people often joked that I could put him in my pocket and carry him around.

“They’re going.” I poured him a cup of coffee and grabbed creamer out of my fridge. While he fixed it the way he liked it, I leaned up against the kitchen cabinets. “Marge is officially off my payroll. It’s strange as hell.”

“Shit.” Justin sipped his coffee to test it, nodded in satisfaction, and put the creamer back in the fridge. “Were there any tears shed at her retirement party?”

“Not one. Good vibes only. I think she was ready more than she let on.”

“Needed to slow down a bit?”

I nodded.

“Fair enough, the old broad has been working for your family for what, thirty something years?”

“Forty,” I corrected.

“That’s loyalty right there. I hope you still gave her a hefty Christmas bonus.”

“Why is that any of your business?”

Justin rolled his eyes and shrugged one shoulder. “Just sayin’. Staff like that, they don’t come around often. Speaking of which, have you hired someone to replace her?”

I explained how Marge had insisted she help set me up with her replacement. As it turned out, the best she could do on such short notice was a temporary solution at best. “She got in touch with some bigwig at the University of Oregon and asked for the design student at the top of her class. Marge went there before she came to work for my grandfather. I guess she still had some connections.”

“A student, huh?”

“It’s an internship. Low risk. If it doesn’t work out this year I won’t have to fire her at least, and I’ll have all next year to find someone who’s a permanent fit. Someone like Marge.”

“Old, traditional, and predictable?”

“Hey,” I warned.

Justin held up both hands. “What? You know I love Marge as much as the next guy. I’m just putting it out there that her style could use some, well, sprucing up. No pun intended.”

“Marge is a talented designer.”

“Marge has been doing the same thing for four decades and getting away with it because people are fine with the old red, green, and gold because of tradition.”

“What’s wrong with that?”

“It’s the modern world, North. At some point you’re going to have to step into it.”

The modern world. I'd never really felt like I had much of a place in it. I preferred the solitude of the old Waylon tree farm to the hustle and bustle of the city. I liked the small town where I lived well enough, but from within the walls of my sanctuary. I'd felt the sting of stepping out into the unknown. It was a pain I only needed to feel once to learn my lesson from.

My phone buzzed. Justin nodded for me to go ahead and answer it.

Marge's voice filled the other line. "North, are you home?"

"Yes, why?"

"The girl is coming up to the property today to start her internship. Her counselor and I got our wires crossed in communication. I thought she was coming up *next* week. She'll be there shortly. Any minute, really. I hope you're prepared to greet her warmly," she said, stressing the last word. "She's from Ashland, Oregon, so she'll be staying on your property for the duration of her internship."

I frowned. "Wait. What?"

"Don't get your boxers all twisted. It's not the end of the world for you to have some company out there in the middle of nowhere. It might do you some good, in fact. But it's a far cry from what she's used to. So be *nice*."

I grunted.

"And choose your words," Marge added. "She's young. Probably a bit naïve. But my friend said this girl has promise and talent oozing out of her pores. I think she's just what you need this year to replace my dusty old behind."

"How young are we talking?"

"Is that relevant?"

"I'm not a babysitter," I said.

Marge sighed dryly. "Early twenties, I believe. Twenty-four maybe?"

"Good God."

“Give her the benefit of the doubt. Age is no indication of skill or capability. I was twenty when I started working for your grandfather and look how well that turned out.” Her voice took on a cocky note. “I was the best thing that ever happened to him.”

I chuckled despite myself. “Fair enough. I’ll behave.”

“Good. I have to let you go. Cami is giving me the evil eye waiting for me to put in my order.”

I should have known Marge would be at the diner visiting with Cami. She went there basically every Sunday afternoon for coffee and some sort of sweet treat—pecan pie, gingerbread swirl loaf, or bakery-style cookies were her top picks.

We said goodbye and ended the call.

Justin eyed me over the rim of his coffee mug. “So you’ve never even seen this chick before? Marge’s replacement?”

“Nope.”

He grimaced. “And she’s going to live here all of December?”

“Apparently.”

Justin leaned forward and whispered conspiratorially. “What if she’s dumb? Or worse, ugly?”

“I trust Marge’s judgment. I just need someone to help with the designing of the trees who can keep clients happy. I can’t manage the people part of things as well as the work on the farm. The back and forth would kill me.”

“If I had more time on my hands I’d help out.”

“Spare me.” I scoffed. “You’re not interested in physical labor. Stick to selling your houses. I’ll stick to my trees.”

Outside, a car horn honked. Justin scrambled like a dog running to greet his master to go to the front door and peer out the window out to the driveway. “She’s here,” he said.

I followed behind, almost lazily, and stood behind him, looking clear over his head out the same window as a young

woman exited the backseat of a black sedan. She dragged a large leather bag out with her and slung it over her shoulder while the driver popped the trunk and helped her with a larger suitcase.

Justin whistled. “Well, she’s certainly not ugly, that’s for damn sure.”

My friend was right.

The girl was *not* ugly.

She was, however, totally impractically dressed for the shit storm she was about to walk into.

She had on a pair of high heels that had to be five or six inches. She wore black nylons and a black skirt, over which she had on what appeared to be a white cashmere sweater, a red scarf, and an oversized jacket with a furry hood. She was a mishmash of different styles and personalities all poured into one slender body. She struggled with her suitcase up the drive, the wheels getting stuck in the grooves of the paving stones.

“Shouldn’t you go out and help her?” Justin suggested.

“*Should* is subjective. I want to see how she does.”

“You’re a cruel bastard.”

The girl dragged her suitcase about twenty feet from the car before pausing to blow loose strands of long brown hair out of her eyes. The driver of the car had already begun to pull away, and she looked back at him as if wishing he hadn’t left her to this fate. Then she turned back and craned her neck to gaze up at my house.

I wondered what she was thinking.

Did she think I was going to let her stay in the mansion on the property?

In her dreams.

“She’s Marge’s opposite in every way.” Justin looked up at me. “Literally. You owe the old broad a thank you for hooking you up with a designer like this. Look at those *legs*. And that —”

“Why are you still here?”

Justin laughed. “You think I’m going to leave now that something interesting is finally happening on this damn farm? No way, dude. No way.” He turned back, almost pressing his nose to the window. “Merry fucking Christmas to you, North. You lucky son of a bitch.”

CHAPTER 4



WINTER

Holy crap.

House.

Big house.

Like, seriously big, sprawling, massive, timber house.

I couldn't collect my jaw from where it hung. I was too floored by the extravagance of the property and the sheer size of the mansion sitting upon it. Beyond, and up a rise in terrain behind the home, was a massive field of what appeared to be trees that stretched for acres upon acres. The fields eventually gave way to the sheer rock face of a cliff that had to be about a hundred and fifty feet high or so. Atop the cliff was nothing but barren, exposed pieces of jutting rocks. This place felt rustic and remote, and a little intimidating.

A lot intimidating.

It was certainly a far cry from what I was used to in Oregon.

My suitcase dragged and hitched on the driveway paving stones as I struggled to bring it up to the front door, which was approximately three times my height and width. It was set back amongst a stone outcropping boasting fountains and native fauna. I imagined it looked quite beautiful in the spring and summer months. Right now it looked kind of desolate and lonely.

Finally at the front door, I sagged against my suitcase and struggled to catch my breath. My morning had been a journey

already. I'd woken at the crack of dawn to catch an early flight from the west coast to the east, only for my flight to be delayed by two hours. I'd endured the wait and killed time by reading interior design articles on my iPad. Eventually, my flight boarded and took off, and to my dismay my seatmate was the most chatty, opinionated, hard-nosed New Yorker I'd ever met. He told me all about his upcoming holiday stresses, which mostly consisted of him hating that he had to spend the holidays with his own kids—God forbid—and how he wished he could just up and leave to Hawaii until the new year.

After the flight landed I made my escape, only for my luggage to be delayed coming off the plane.

Finally, after a forty-five-minute drive from the airport, I'd made it to my destination. The reward? I had a gorgeous place to stay for the month. Maybe missing a huge chunk of Christmas at home wouldn't be so bad if I got to stay in a place like this. I could only imagine how beautiful it would be once it was all decorated and the lights were hung.

I smiled, squared my shoulders, and knocked on the front door.

Here we go.

Seconds later, the door swung inward, revealing a cavernous foyer with an antler chandelier hanging over the heads of two men. One was short and rather unremarkable looking with a small nose, auburn hair, a short beard, and narrow shoulders, and the other was something else entirely.

I tipped my head back to look at him.

He was six foot-something of muscle and power. His shoulders were broad, probably as broad as a normal-sized doorway, and he had the look of a man who didn't smile often. His hair was black and swept back, and all of him was dark and brooding except for his eyes, which were a bright, golden hazel.

I found myself hoping the big beast was my boss, not the little mouse.

I looked back and forth between them before chiming, “Hi.”

Neither of them moved a muscle for a moment. They just stood there staring at me, looking at my hair, my heels, my nylons, and my skirt.

Suddenly self-conscious, I giggled nervously. “This is the Waylon Farm, isn’t it? Or did my driver drop me off in the wrong place?” Turning, I found the red taillights of my town car disappearing at the end of the long driveway. I swallowed. “There’s cell service out here, right?”

The short one nudged the taller one in the ribs.

The dark-haired lumberjack of a man cleared his throat. “You’re in the right place.”

“Wonderful.” I deflated like a balloon. “I’ve had *such* a morning. Let me tell you. My flight got delayed and then I got stuck sitting beside the most obnoxious man of all time. And then my luggage was temporarily lost. I couldn’t find my driver. My phone wasn’t working on the drive over. It’s been a *day* already. Anyway,” I paused, thrust my hand out, and grinned, “I’m Winter Dodson from the University of Oregon.”

My hand hovered between us for a good five seconds before he closed his giant grizzly paw around it.

“North Waylon,” he said, his voice sounding like it was scraping over gravel.

I almost shuddered. “Nice to meet you, Mr. Waylon. I’m so excited to be here. I know I might not be what you were expecting, but I assure you I’m a hard worker and a fast learner. I’m not going to squander an opportunity like this. I’m here to soak up as much knowledge as I can and be an asset to you at the same time. My counselor warned me I had some big shoes to fill.”

The men shared a look.

I gave a gracious little bow and then immediately felt like an idiot. Why was I bowing? When did I think this was, 1840? “Sorry, I talk a lot when I’m nervous. Flustered energy. My dad calls it my tornado tongue. I just talk, and talk, and talk—”

“Let me show you where you’ll be staying,” North Waylon said.

The shorter man beside him cracked an amused grin. “You’re gonna have a December to remember, Miss Dodson.”

I brushed past him as North collected my suitcase and lifted it from the ground with ease. “You can call me Winter,” I said.

“I’m Justin. Nice to meet you, kid. I’m going to get out of your hair. North, I’ll call you later. And Winter?”

I smiled. “Yes?”

He winked. “Good luck.”

With that, he took his leave, making his way to the Jeep parked in the drive. I hurried after North Waylon, having to do a little hop-step every other stride to keep up with his long legs that ate up the distance in record speed even though he looked like he was moving slowly. We passed a gorgeous farmhouse-inspired kitchen that was at least six times bigger than the one in my parents’ house. It gave way to an incredible dining room and lounge, and before I knew it we were pressing back outside into the cold, crossing heated paving stones out to the start of the tree field.

“Christmas trees,” I breathed as we passed through the first line of them. Hundreds of thousands of Christmas trees. I breathed in the cold, pine-scented air. “It smells incredible.”

North hefted my suitcase up a little higher. “Tell me you have more appropriate footwear in here than what you’re wearing?”

I looked down at my heels. “I have sneakers for exercising if that’s what you mean. And some slippers. I’m the sort of girl who *has* to have her creature comforts.”

He grunted. “No snow boots, then?”

“No... I didn’t think I’d need any for this kind of work.”

“I’ll sort that out.”

Puzzled, I wondered why I would need snow boots. I knew it snowed in New York. It actually looked like it was about to start snowing now. But how much time was I going to be spending outdoors versus indoors designing elaborate Christmas scenes and events? The heels seemed like the more appropriate choice.

We walked for a good five minutes before I started to wonder where North Waylon was taking me. He walked with purpose, so I held my tongue, trusting my counselor hadn't sent me out to the middle of nowhere New York, to this tiny town and sprawling farm where I would be murdered by my tall dark and sexy host.

I listened to too much Dateline.

“Does Justin work for you, too?” I asked, trying to make conversation.

“No.”

“Just a friend, then?”

“Yes.”

I licked my lips. Not a chatty one, this guy. “You know, I didn't know farms like this existed in real life. I figured they were a Hallmark movie exclusive.” I pumped my eyebrows, waiting for a reaction to my punchline, but received nothing but silence and the stoic stature of his back as we trudged onward. “I don't know where exactly I thought people got their trees from to sell them at those pop-up tree sale markets, but I guess this makes sense. Have you been doing this a long time?”

“Family business.”

“How many generations?”

“Three.”

“Are you going to pass the legacy down, too?”

He glanced over his shoulder at me, eyes narrowing briefly. “You ask a lot of questions.”

“Silence is meant to be filled.”

North abruptly stopped walking, and I collided with his back—AKA a brick wall. I practically bounced off of him, and he closed a massive hand around my upper arm, encircling it all the way around, and steadied me. I thanked him with a nervous smile and peered past him at the reason why we'd stopped.

A cozy little cabin stood before us, nestled amongst the surrounding Christmas trees. Smoke poured out of a stone chimney jutting out of the roof, and a small porch sat raised above the ground with a couple of chairs and a fire pit. It was quaint and adorable, and again I found myself making Hallmark movie and card references in my head. If this were a greeting card, there would be a little red cardinal perched on the porch railing and everything would be aglow in Christmas lights.

North climbed the two steps onto the porch, his large boots thumping on the wood, and pushed open the front door. “This is your home for the month. Do as you see fit with the space. There is a list of numbers on the fridge. If you need anything, refer to those numbers first. The house is fully staffed with cooks, cleaners, maintenance, and groundskeeping staff. They know you're here and will be happy to accommodate you.”

House staff?

Pinch me.

He invited me inside with a wave of his arm, and I slid past him, stepping into a cozy, warmly lit space. Throw rugs covered the hardwood floors. Plush sofas crowded the fire, and a wall-mounted TV hung in one corner of the room. A coffee table right smack in the middle of the living room boasted a selection of candles as well as a bath caddy full of Christmas-scented goodies—body wash, bath bubbles, bath bombs, shampoo, lotion, you name it.

The kitchen was small but nicely appointed, and North went to the fridge and cabinets to show me that they were fully stocked. He nodded to the three open doorways off the kitchen and living room, a bathroom, laundry room, and bedroom.

“Will this do?” he asked.

I let my bag slide off my shoulder and onto the sofa. “It’s perfect.”

“Good.” He moved back to the front door and stepped out onto the porch. His breath steamed on the air when he spoke. “We’ll go over your duties and my expectations in the morning. After the morning of travel you’ve had, I presume you need some rest. Perhaps it will ease this... hyperness of yours.”

I beamed at him. “Hate to break it to you, but I’m like this all the time.”

“That’s...” He trailed off, made an indecipherable sound in the back of his throat, closed my door, and left, boots thudding across the porch.

I spun and soaked in my cozy little abode. What a glorious place to stay for my favorite month of the year. I lit some candles and plopped down on the sofa to smell all the goodies in my bath caddy. Tucked in amongst the pampering basket were also some other things I’d missed, like chocolates, crackers, and specialty cheeses. A fully stocked wine rack under the TV drew my eye, and I popped back to my feet and began snapping pictures, which I sent in chaotic bursts of messages to the family chat I shared with my parents.

This month was going to be an awfully big adventure. I could feel it in my bones as I checked out the claw-foot tub in the bathroom and the selection of fancy coffees at the coffee bar.

I wondered what kinds of houses I’d be designing. How glamorous was my portfolio going to look after this?

“Look out, world,” I whispered as I braced myself on the kitchen sink and gazed out the frosty window at the Christmas trees beyond. “I’m coming for you.”

CHAPTER 5



NORTH

The house chef, Maurice, had spent the early days of his culinary career in Montreal before coming to work here at the estate for my father. He'd been the dictator of the large kitchen for as long as I could remember, and had slapped my hand away from serving trays when I was a boy many a time at family events. He had a good flourish to said slap. Often, I'd be out nursing my wound when a family member would ask if I'd been trying to help myself to Maurice's dishes. They had no sympathy for me, a young lad too curious for his own good with a greedy belly.

Now, Maurice and I were friends. He didn't dare slap my hand away if I ventured a snack, but that barely happened. I possessed more patience than my eight-year-old self.

He smothered a plate in Hollandaise sauce and clicked his tongue. "It will be cold by the time you get this to her." His French-Canadian accent was not as thick as it once had been, but it wasn't subtle, either. "A shame. The hollandaise will thicken. The egg will not be hot when poached." He clicked his tongue again, this time with more defiance. "You should have invited her up to the house for breakfast."

"And you could have stuck with something simpler."

Maurice laughed like this was the most preposterous thing he'd ever heard. "Do you know who you're talking to? Simple? Me? Blasphemy!"

I folded my arms across my chest. "She has bagels and all kinds of food in her kitchen. This is totally unnecessary."

“A young woman deserves a hot breakfast on her first day in a foreign place. She is our guest, after all, and it is in our hands to treat her as such. Your father knew such etiquette and appreciated it. I suggest you come to grips with having someone residing on your property, North. Hosting requires an elevation in hospitality.”

I groaned inwardly. Everyone had been up my ass lately. Now Maurice too? This girl hadn't even started her first day and she was already more trouble than she was worth.

Maurice covered the plate with a silver lid and placed it in a warming box. “Rumor around the house has it that she's quite pretty.”

“I hadn't noticed.”

“You're not fooling me, Master Waylon. Here.” He thrust the box into my hands. “Bring this to her immediately, before it cools off too much. Perhaps the integrity of the dish can be spared if you put those long legs of yours to good use. Go on.” He shooed me with his hands—like he owned this estate and I did not.

Grumbling, I trekked out of the kitchen and out the back door of the house. I already had my boots and a plaid jacket on. The cold still bit into me, but I was more than used to it, and the fresh pine-scented air rejuvenated me.

Damn Maurice.

What rumors was he talking about? I hadn't heard any stirrings around the house. The girl hadn't even been here for twenty-four hours. The majority of the staff hadn't even laid eyes on her, and he was claiming she was pretty?

What did he know?

The bottom of the box was still warm when I reached the cabin. Smoke curled out of the chimney and the lights were on. I was surprised she was awake. Winter had an air about her that she liked to sleep in. Perhaps it was her youth and my own bias. I stepped onto the porch, knocked, and heard her come to answer the door.

She wrenched it open and grinned up at me wearing red and white snowflake printed pants, fuzzy red socks, white slippers, and a large red sweater. Her long brown hair was a curly mess around her shoulders, and she drew it up in a low messy bun.

“Good morning,” she chimed brightly.

I held out the box. “Morning.”

“What’s this?”

“Take it.”

“Okay, Mr. Seriousness.” She took the box, opened it up, and removed the silver lid, revealing what looked like a more than appetizing eggs benedict—Maurice’s specialty. Her mouth fell open. “This is for me?”

“Yep.” I turned and moved down the steps. “Eat up, then get changed. Did you get the boots that were dropped off last night?”

She nodded.

“Good. Make sure you wear those. I’m going to give you a tour of the property. Wear a jacket, too.”

Winter frowned. “You’re going only to come right back?”

I said nothing. What did she want me to say? Yes?

“Why don’t you come in?” She stepped back, balancing her breakfast on one forearm. “I’m willing to share.”

“No thank you. I’ll be back in an hour.” I remembered Maurice’s reminder to elevate my hosting capabilities. “Enjoy your breakfast.”



Precisely one hour later, I pulled up to the cabin on my four-wheeler. The engine hummed and rumbled and the seat vibrated beneath my ass. As I was about to dismount, Winter emerged from the cabin appropriately bundled up for the cold

morning. She came down the steps, grinning from ear to ear, and said something I couldn't hear over the purring motor.

So she repeated herself once she climbed on the back. "I've never ridden one of these before! What do I hold on to?"

"Me," I called over my shoulder.

Winter shimmied her hips back and forth, trying to get comfortable behind me as the machine continued to grumble like an impatient dog between my thighs. She reached around my sides and tried to fully encircle me, but she couldn't reach, so she plunged her hands into my pockets and balled them into fists, holding on to the interior lining.

That will have to do, I suppose.

"Ready?"

Winter nodded her chin against my back. "Ready!"

Anybody and their mother would have been able to tell that Winter was a novice on the four-wheeler, so I didn't give it a lot of throttle. We started off at an easy pace, and I steered gently around the trees, pointing out different ages as we went and which ones would not be cut down for several years yet. I explained that we grew large trees, which I showed her at the very back of the property, for the superior Christmas events.

"Superior?" she called into the wind. "What defines a 'superior' Christmas event?"

"Rockefeller Center, for example."

"Wow," she gasped, gazing up at the massive trees reaching toward the sky. She leaned in close. "I used to watch the lighting ceremony every year with my parents, and the arrival of the tree. I always wondered where they got them from. I sort of assumed giant lumberjacks trekked into the wilderness and cut them down with axes." She giggled. "I guess I wasn't that far off, huh?"

"I pay people to cut them down."

We wove through many sections of the property, and I showed her all the different crops of trees and explained where all their fates would lead them. We sold mall trees, suburban

trees for people to buy at tree markets and bring home strapped to the roofs of their cars, Santa's village trees. You name it. We sold it.

"I grew up with a fake tree," she said. "But it might as well have been real. It was old, my grandmother's actually, inherited by my mom who never wanted to buy anything new because it wasn't nostalgic. It drove my dad crazy because the stupid thing would lose pine needles every year like it was real." She giggled. "Imagine that, having a fake tree that still shed needles like a real one. What's the point? You don't get the heavenly smell of a real tree, but you still get the mess."

I sped up, letting the hum of the engine drown her out.

Good grief, she talks a lot.

Winter seemed oblivious to my efforts to evade making small talk with her. I liked working with trees. They didn't have opinions or stories they wanted to share. They were consistently silent, and that made for my favorite kind of company.

"We tried a real tree *one* time," Winter said, raising her voice over the engine, "but Dad dragged sap all through the house and ruined one of Mom's favorite rugs, so that was a one-time deal. She was so mad. And it ruined a lot of our ornaments, too. I think Mom called it Christmas Armageddon or something. Looking back though, it makes us laugh, and it's one of our favorite memories. Funny how it goes that way, isn't it? The things that feel the worst in the moment are the things we remember most fondly?"

"Uh huh."

About a mile from her cabin, I brought the four-wheeler to a stop in the middle of a clearing, killed the engine, and got off. I helped her off and her boots crunched on the frozen grass underfoot as I showed her all the chopped trunks. "This section was cut last year and sold. In the spring, when the soil is soft and thawed, we'll pull out all the trunks and fertilize the earth. We won't be able to plant until another year after that, once the soil has been replenished."

She nodded, arms wrapped around herself, hat pulled down over her ears. “You sure like trees, don’t you? When are you going to show me the stuff I get to do? What am I working with? Ballrooms? Guest suites? Dining rooms? Ooh,” she gushed, bouncing up and down on the balls of her feet, “I *love* setting a good holiday table. I’m really good at it, too.”

I eyed her. “Trees.”

“Yeah, I know, you’re a big tree guy. But what about *me*? What am *I* doing?”

“Trees,” I said again simply. What was so hard to understand?

She blinked. I blinked back.

“What do you mean, trees?”

“That’s why you’re here.” I arched an eyebrow and stared down the length of my nose at her. “You’re my tree designer’s replacement. Didn’t they tell you that when you sent in your application for the internship?”

“Tree designer? What exactly does that mean?”

“It means what it says. You’ll design Christmas trees for all our special vendors. In other words, you’ll be in charge of decorating them.”

Her mouth fell open. She looked like she’d just been told that Santa wasn’t real.

“They sent me all the way out here... with my degree... to hang ornaments on trees?” She pressed her hands to her head, and I had the distinct impression that she was talking to herself, not to me. “I gave up the holidays with my family for this?”

“You didn’t know what you were doing?”

“I was under the impression that I’d be using my design degree to bolster my portfolio and work on relevant projects,” she said, her voice hitting a higher pitch. “Nobody worth their salt is going to offer me a job because they appreciated the placement of where I put a ribbon on a *tree*.”

“It’s a little more involved than that.”

“How so?”

I shrugged. “You’re going to be in charge of a lot more than just ribbon.”

She gave me a fake smile for the first time since she’d arrived. “Let me guess, there’ll be tinsel, too?”

CHAPTER 6



WINTER

Trees.

Fucking.

Trees?!

I knew my mouth was still hanging open, and I knew I probably looked like an ungrateful brat standing a good foot and a half shorter than North, but I couldn't wrap my head around the fact that I'd been shipped off to the middle of small-town New York to hang ornaments on tree branches as my internship.

What sort of leverage was that going to give me in my interviews come summertime?

Who was going to take me seriously?

Hi, I'm Winter Dodson, and after all my hard work earning my degree, I decided to spend my precious December playing with Christmas lights and garland. Please hire me.

I cringed at the thought.

"Are you having an aneurism?" North asked, cocking his head to the side.

I scowled. "I'm processing."

He folded his thick arms over his chest. "Take your time."

I stomped around to the other side of the four-wheeler, put my back to him, and hopped up onto the seat. The leather was cold on my ass. I huffed, and my breath steamed in the chilly air.

Christmas trees. What a joke.

I didn't even have any relevant experience to apply to the job!

Okay, that wasn't entirely true. Ever since I was a little girl, my mother and I had a tradition of putting the lights on our family tree after Dad dragged it out of the garage and into the living room. Every year on the first of December he'd bring the tree in the house and start cooking dinner. We *always* ate his famous homemade mac and cheese recipe on tree night. Christmas tunes would play in the background and frost would cling to the windows. Occasionally, we'd had a year where it would snow but not very often. Most of the time it rained. While the cheese sauce simmered on the stove and made our mouths water, Mom and I would wrap the lights around the branches.

She had this technique that she never deviated from that she'd learned from her mother. Every branch was wrapped in lights. It left our hands itchy and covered in tiny pin pricks from the synthetic needles, but it was worth all the effort. Having some of the lights set back in the tree made it even more magical and eye-catching. Once the lights were on, we'd hang the same strand of garland my mother had owned since she moved into her first apartment when she was nineteen. She'd lived alone, and she didn't have all that much money, but she'd splurged when she saw the twinkling silver and gold beads in a shop window. They were well worn now, not nearly as shiny as they were when she was young, but our tree wasn't about looking impressive or having the best decorations.

It was a testament to our family legacy.

Once the garland was on, we'd add some ribbon for depth, and by that point, it would be time to take a break and eat dinner. We'd eat in the living room, something I was hardly allowed to do as a child, and Dad would go on and on about how beautiful the tree was while we ate. Mom would criticize him for putting ketchup on his mac and cheese. They'd bicker and laugh. Dad's favorite song would come on, Song for a Winter's Night by Gordon Lightfoot, and they would abandon

their empty bowls on the coffee table and dance in the middle of the living room in front of the lit but undecorated tree.

They still did that to this day.

I smiled and ran my foot over the frosty grass. Yes, there was something precious about Decembers, especially in the Dodson house. And here I thought I'd be there this year to help with said tree decorating. But no, I'd be decorating trees for a corporate stranger to line his already very deep pockets.

What would my mother tell me if I called her to vent my frustrations?

It's just one year, and your counselor wouldn't have led you astray. If she says this is going to look good in your portfolio, trust her, and do the best job you can do.

I pushed off the four-wheeler and turned to North. He'd been staring calmly at my back the whole time.

“So?”

I chewed the inside of my cheek. “Thank you for giving me a moment. I need the credits, and I know I can do a good job. I just... need to think things over.”

He nodded once. “Very well. I'd hate to have to find a replacement for you on such short notice.” He swung his leg over the seat of the four-wheeler and looked expectantly at me, waiting for me to do the same. “Remember, if you do well, your name will carry weight and be heard by people who have influence in the holiday business. Rockefeller Center is no joke.”

I forced a smile and sat behind him, sliding my hands back into the depths of his warm pockets. “You're right.”

We lurched forward and picked up speed, and I knew we were heading back to the cabin in time. The cliffside loomed before us, dusted with snow on the higher elevations. Soon I spotted the smoke of my little cabin over the tops of the trees, and a few minutes later, we pulled up in front of my porch.

I got off. “Is that it for today?”

He nodded curtly. “Take some time to mull things over. I have client meetings tomorrow, so I’ll need your decision by morning.”

“Okay.”

“Call the house if you need anything or if you need help with your bags. Don’t walk around the fields alone if you can avoid it.”

“Why?”

He looked at me like he wanted to say *because I said so*, but instead said, “Because you’re not in Portland anymore, and wide open spaces like this without a human for miles can be dangerous and easy to get lost in.”

Fair enough.

He pulled away and zoomed off through the trees, pausing to look over his shoulder as I climbed the steps and went inside. I listened to the engine hum until it was too far away and retreated into the warmth of my cozy little cabin. It didn’t feel nearly as welcoming as it had yesterday.

I decided to call my lifeline.

Mom and Dad.

They answered on speakerphone, as always, both enthusiastic.

“How was your first day?” Dad asked.

“Tell us everything!” Mom cried.

I did just that. I told them everything—all about the trees and the real deal as to why I was there. They listened, Dad making the occasional thoughtful sound in the back of his throat that he always did, until I was all the way through my story. Then they met me with nothing but silence.

“So?” I pressed. “What should I do?”

“What do you mean, sweetheart?” my mother asked.

“I’m considering bailing,” I said. “This isn’t what I was led to believe it would be. I thought I was coming out here for

a once in a lifetime internship experience that was going to advance my career. If the conditions had been transparent from the start, I would have turned it down and I'd be home with you guys right now drinking eggnog and getting ready to put up the tree the day after tomorrow."

"Honey," Dad said, "it's not the same without you here, so don't get me wrong when I say this, but you can't throw in the towel yet. You have no idea where this could lead. Sometimes the most unexpected things are what bring us the most blessings. What if this is your moment?"

"Trees, Dad? Decorating trees is my moment?"

He chuckled. "You never know. I met your mother because I took a terrible job selling vacuums door to door. If not for that job, I'd never have knocked on her father's door, and I'd never have seen her inside reading the Great Gatsby and had the chance to plan my happenstance meeting with her the next day."

"It's true," my mother agreed. "Everything happens for a reason. We wish you were here, but we trust that you're where you're supposed to be. Lean into it, Winter. What if you're right where you're supposed to be?"

"And what if I'm thousands of miles away?" I asked.

"Give it two weeks," my dad said. "If you make it halfway through the month and you still hate it, come home. We'll make sure your room is ready. You owe this tree farmer nothing. Give it your best shot for your own sake, see what happens, and get out of there if it's terrible. Deal?"

I sighed and collapsed on the sofa. "I guess so."

Mom's laugh filled the line. "Chin up, honey. How bad can it be?"

"Well, it's not decorating hotel lobbies or ballrooms, so bad."

"Oh the drama." Dad chuckled.

Mom scolded him, and I listened to them giggle like high school kids on the other end. They managed to make me smile,

and I felt a bit better about things when we ended the call. Not great but better.

Maybe I would have clarity with what I wanted to do come sunrise.

CHAPTER 7



NORTH

Nimble and quiet, like an elf, I gripped the porch railing of the cabin and leaned all the way forward, using my height and long arms to reach me all the way to the door mat in front of the door that read “Sleigh Bells Ring” with a little reindeer underneath. Marge’s doing, I assumed. I set the breakfast platter down that Maurice had sent me off with this morning, careful the silver lid didn’t slip and clatter on the porch boards, and pulled myself back up, again careful I didn’t move too quickly to make the old wooden structure creak or groan.

Luckily, it did not. The beams held my weight and let me straighten up. Just as quietly as I’d approached, I backed away from the cabin like I was retreating from the territory of a rabid dog.

What I was really trying to avoid was another chit-chatty morning with Winter. After our ride yesterday, I knew she’d have a lot on her mind this morning. To quit or not to quit? Personally, I couldn’t help but think she’d be a fool to quit.

Okay, fool might have been extreme, but she’d be making a mistake.

Waylon Farms was known across the country and had a spotless reputation. Sure, we were really locked in on our Christmas niche, specifically our trees, but we ran a tight ship, adhered to ridiculous deadlines, and met the needs of some of the most upscale clients in the nation. Not only that, but we worked extremely publicly. Our work was out there for the eyes of the whole country to see. If Winter wanted her name to

be on something she could be proud of that meant something to people, this was it.

Perhaps I should have said that to her yesterday before dropping her off at the cabin.

Whatever.

She could figure it out for herself. I had no interest in pitching my family company to a naïve twenty-four-year-old who thought she was qualified to decorate places like the Four Seasons at Christmas. Give me a break.

A design degree didn't open doors that big for you.

I walked with my chin tucked into the collar of my heavy Carhart jacket and my hands crammed into the sheep-wool-lined pockets. It was a damn cold day today. A sharp breeze blistered between the trees and came up sharply between rows. I'd parked a ways off so Winter didn't hear the four-wheeler's obnoxious approach. Maurice might have called me a coward, but what he didn't know wouldn't hurt him. She had her breakfast, and I had my peace.

Win, win.

When I reached the four-wheeler, I pulled my phone out of my pocket and texted Winter with the number she gave me earlier, letting her know breakfast was on her porch. Then I turned the ignition, gave it the throttle, and sped off through the cold back to the main house. Lights glowed from the inside as I approached, promising warmth and comfort. I saw the fire crackling through the living-room window and smiled despite myself.

Nostalgia was a powerful thing.

As a boy, I'd often run through these trees, pretending to be a prince battling a dragon hiding in their midst, or a soldier caught behind enemy lines. My imagination would lead me every which way, and by the time my afternoon of fun and games expired, I'd be frozen to the bone, teeth clattering, hands frozen damn near solid. My gloves would have gotten lost amongst the countless other pairs from the previous weeks of play minutes into my games. As soon as I walked in the

back door, my mother would sweep out of the living room where she'd often be bundled up reading a book in front of the fire. She'd bring me over to the hearth, set me in front of the crackling flames, and fuss over me while the fire warmed my back and behind.

I remembered how warm her slender hands would feel on my cheeks. She'd press them to my neck and I'd nuzzle into her touch like a Labrador retriever. God, if only I'd known how lucky I had it back then.

But eight-year-olds are not afforded the burden of knowing everything is fleeting.

Maurice would bring me hot chocolate, polished off with a generous dollop of whipped cream and covered in whatever sprinkles he could get his hands on. If there weren't any, he'd shave some of my mother's expensive chocolate onto the top. She never minded. I was the apple of everyone's eye back then.

My hands burned as they warmed up and I shrugged out of my Carhart jacket, leaving it on the dining-room table. I moved into the house, heading for the kitchen to collect my own breakfast. I could hear Maurice's loud, excitable French voice echoing through the house but couldn't determine who he was speaking to. At first I assumed it was someone on the house staff, but when I came around the corner and spotted Justin, I drew up short.

"Don't you have your own house you can, you know, live at?" I asked.

Justin flashed me a devilish little grin. "My house doesn't have a Maurice, and I fancied myself a nice breakfast this morning. I'm cashing in on the perks of having you as a friend wherever I can, North. Don't get it twisted."

Maurice chuckled as he whipped up eggs on the stove. "Don't get it twisted? Is that what the kids are saying these days?"

The expression sounded outlandish in his accent.

Justin snickered. “The kids? Beats the shit out of me, man. The only kids I interact with are my clients’ kid, and they always have their noses glued to their phone screens. That or they’re filming something stupid on their phones like a dance or lip syncing.”

“Your business would benefit from using social media the way youth are using it these days,” I said. “Have you seen the following and influence they can acquire? Hundreds of thousands if not millions, Justin. You could do house tours to promote open houses.”

He rolled his eyes. “Do you ever stop working?”

I’d been accused of this before—seeing everything as an opportunity to expand and grow my business and the businesses of people I cared about and kept in my inner circle. It was a skill—or a habit—I’d honed from my father before I was twenty. He was always innovating, always turning things over and trying to figure out how to make the most of them. His marketing and his people skills had expanded the Waylon business by sixty percent in the four years after he took over from my grandfather, and he’d been the first to break ground with a website for our farm and our services.

I was working to take the next step into social media, but that would have to wait until the new year when I had more time on my hands, and we would build it up for next Christmas.

Justin went over to the stove and hovered over Maurice’s shoulder. “Smells good, my man.” He closed a hand on Maurice’s shoulder only to have the chef chase him off with a spatula. Justin fled like a scolded child and took cover on the other side of the kitchen island. “Testy.”

“I don’t like people in my space when I cook,” Maurice said.

I nodded matter-of-factly. “Some of us learned that lesson a long time ago. Better shape up, Justin.”

Justin chuckled, pulled his phone out of his pocket, and began showing me some of his new listings in the area while

Maurice put the finishing touches on our breakfast. He'd acquired a beautiful old heritage house about a mile down the street from my farm. It was a three-story, staggering, glamorous property that looked like it had been plucked right out of the nineteen twenties. All that was missing was a husband and wife posed on the front porch, her in a flapper dress, him in a pinstripe suit and fedora.

"I think this one is going to go in the heading image on my website," Justin said. "I'm going to have my assistant update everything. It's eye-catching, unique, and will draw a certain clientele. You know I'm trying to break into the next level of real estate. Do you think this property will do that?"

I took the phone from him and flipped through some pictures. "If you do it wisely."

He arched an eyebrow and stared up at me. "Could you be any more cryptic?"

The house was gorgeous. It had plenty of character with all the original fixtures inside, including original hardwood floors stained in a deep cherry color, matching crown molding and window trims, multiple built-ins in various rooms of the same wood, high ceilings, and a grand feeling of opulence.

"When are you listing it?" I asked.

"Stagers are coming in this week. Then I want it on the market for the first week of December. Why?"

"Put some lights on it."

"Huh?"

"Christmas lights." I handed him back his phone. "You're selling someone their future home. At the end of the day, you're selling a feeling, right?"

He blinked at me.

I chuckled and clamped a large hand on his shoulder. "Listen, as soon as you stop thinking of your listings as items to sell and more as moments and memories for your clients to make, you're going to close more deals. I know it's a weird mental shift, but creating a *feeling* for your buyers is where the

money is at. If you're going to show this property during the Christmas season, deck it out. Literally. Lights. Maybe a tree in the large bay window in the front. A reindeer or two on the lawn. It needs more curb appeal."

He grumbled. "I hate when you say smart things."

Maurice turned from the stove with two plates of steaming omelettes accompanied by perfectly cooked bacon and slices of multigrain toast. My mouth began to water immediately, but I frowned when I saw Justin's generous serving.

"You don't need to give him so much food," I told Maurice before patting the top of Justin's head. "He's just a little guy. Scrape some of his onto my plate."

Justin swatted my hand away. "Fuck off."

Maurice set the plates down on the island. "It's always so nice when you visit, Justin."

"At least someone appreciates my company." Justin tucked in to eat his meal, drawing up a stool and brandishing a fork.

Maurice's gaze, full of humor, flicked to me. "It's like having kids in the house all over again."

I chuckled.

"Hey," Justin said.

My chef eased his way out of the kitchen. "You two eat up. I'll be back at lunch. Oh, and Justin?"

Justin looked up with a mouthful of steaming hot omelette. He fanned his mouth and grimaced in pain. "Yes?"

"North is right. If you want someone to spend millions on a house, show them the home it *could* be."

Justin rolled his eyes. "Neither of you are realtors, you know. I shouldn't come here looking for advice."

"Then why do you?" I asked.

"Because you're a billionaire," Justin admitted. "Obviously, you're doing something right."

“Smartest thing you’ve said all morning. Now eat up.” I clapped him hard on the back, rocking him forward on his stool, and pinched his tricep. “You need to bulk up for the winter season.”

Justin scowled playfully but ate his eggs. When I only had a few mouthfuls left, he coughed and sputtered and nodded to the kitchen doorway. I hadn’t even heard her come in, but Winter stood there, bundled up for the cold, a turquoise knit scarf around her throat that brightened her complexion and showed off her rosy cheeks.

“Morning,” she said somewhat shyly. “I’m sorry to interrupt. North, could I speak to you for a moment?”

Justin cleared his plate and got out of his chair, claiming he had work to do on the heritage house before giving Winter a gracious nod and slipping out.

I invited her to come sit, but she stayed standing on the other side of the island.

“Yes?” I prompted.

She clasped her hands together. “I’ve been doing some thinking, and I think I’d be making a mistake if I quit and went home. I want to see this through, and I apologize for being flaky and letting my doubt get in the way.”

“Doubt and disappointment,” I amended.

“Yes.” She looked down, blushing. “That was rude of me. I’m sorry.”

I waved her off. “It’s fine. You have good timing. We have meetings with clients in the office this morning. I’ll give you a ride back to the cabin to grab some business appropriate clothes.”

“You mean I don’t have to wear snow boots every day?” she dared a joke before going serious again. “Before we go any further, I did want to lay down some rules and expectations.”

I almost snorted. “Rules?”

She nodded. “Yes. Rules.”

“There are no rules other than mine,” I said. “This is my business, and I suggest you lean into that.”

CHAPTER 8



WINTER

T here are no rules other than mine.

His snide comment rang in my ears as I sat in the passenger seat of his all-terrain SUV. It was black, shiny, crazy nice inside, and still smelled like new car. The seat warmer made my rear end nice and cozy, and the view of frosty fields during the drive was gorgeous, but I was still annoyed by how abrasively he'd dismissed my request to lay down some rules.

All I'd wanted was to discuss my creative freedom in the role. How much liberty was I allowed to take? Did I have to follow schematics? How was I going to know how to decorate a tree when the only experience I had was with my parents' tree, which was full of half-broken ornaments I'd made in elementary school?

Whatever, if he wants to be an asshole, so be it.

"You're uncharacteristically quiet." North glanced over at me as we sat at a red light, his hand causally draped over the steering wheel. I dared not to look. I was annoyed with him, and I didn't need to be reminded about how attractive he was.

"Just nervous, that's all."

"To meet the clients?"

I nodded. "Yep."

Lies.

I wasn't nervous to meet them. People were my jam, and I was *their* jam. Strangers loved me. Charming was one of the

biggest pillars of my personality. Well, according to my dad, anyway. Obviously he had a slight bias. Still, I'd always managed to schmooze the pants off anyone I needed—and not in a manipulative way. People just liked working with me. I was accommodating, polite, friendly, and good at cracking jokes.

Maybe these clients would think I was a breath of fresh air compared to North's uptight, *there are no rules other than mine*, personality.

"You'll do fine," he said, surprising me with kind words. "All you have to worry about today is seeing how it's done. I'll take the lead, you sit and listen." He shot me a deadpan look. "In other words, no talking, just take notes."

"Wonderful. I'm great at taking notes."

The light turned green and we pulled away, my snarky sarcasm going either unnoticed or ignored.

Where did this giant oaf get off treating me like I was a ten-year-old tagging along for career day?

A few more minutes of uncomfortable silence passed before I broke. "How much further?"

"Seriously?"

"Yeah, so what? I don't like car rides with undefined lengths."

"Ten more minutes."

Ten more minutes of this torture? I simply could not do it. We had to talk about something. *Anything*.

"If I was back in Portland, I'd be getting ready for the Winter Formal tonight," I said. "Everyone gets really dressed up. Well, as dressed up as college students can afford, I should say, and we eat lots of mediocre cafeteria food on compostable paper plates and drink Sprite and cranberry juice out of Solo cups. It's great fun." I shot him a side-eyed look. "Did you go to college?"

"No."

“Really? You run a huge empire like Waylon Farms, and you didn’t have to get secondary education?”

“Generational businesses usually come with the perk of skipping school and jumping right into the fray.” He put his blinker on and palmed the wheel. We turned right, and the country fields gave way to a small town decked out in twinkling Christmas lights strung throughout trees sprouting from the sidewalk. Their branches were bare, reaching to the sky like skeletal fingers. A Salvation Army Santa stood on a corner outside a grocery store, jingling a set of bells and smiling at pedestrians through a thick, fake, curly white beard.

I’d never heard of the small town in upstate New York before, but Maple Hill had the kind of charm that should have put it on a map. Local boutique windows glimmered with Christmas displays. Peppered between them, coffee shops, restaurants, and beauty businesses invited people inside with winter holiday sale signs.

We pulled off the main road and into the underground parking beneath a four-story brick building that had to be about sixty years old. North parked in a “Reserved for CEO” spot, killed the ignition, and got out of the car all before I had the time to grab my purse from the floor and tighten my scarf around my neck.

He led me across the lot to a stairwell, and we climbed up to the lobby, where I discovered we were in a business building. Above the reception desk was a glimmering sign that read “WAYLON’S” in capital letters. A young woman worked the desk with a Christmas pin in her red turtleneck. Her lipstick matched the sweater, and she looked up and smiled when she saw us coming.

“Good morning, Mr. Waylon,” she said, all business and class. “Your eleven o’clock meeting is prepped in the conference room. Shall I send them in when they arrive, or would you like to come collect them yourself?”

“Feel free to send them in, Tracy. They’ve been here before.”

“Of course.”

I gave her a small wave. “Hi.”

She rose from her seat and leaned over the reception desk to extend her hand. Her nails were red too, and every second one was sparkly. “Hi, you must be Marge’s replacement. Winter, is it?”

“That’s me,” I said.

“I’m Tracy. Nice to meet you. If you need anything at all while you’re here, let me know. I’m the queen of resources and contact numbers.”

North cleared his throat.

I hurried after him, my heels clicking on the polished concrete floors of the office.

The place was large—much bigger than I expected—with an almost industrial feel to it. The ceiling was two stories over our heads, which gave it a grand, cavernous sort of feel. For some reason I instantly pictured it filled with fifteen-foot Christmas trees and pillar candles hanging from the exposed pipes overhead on fishing wire. I could have thrown together a very romantic event in a place like this, I was sure of it.

The floor was a maze of desks and people. Everyone made way for us as we headed to the conference room, a glass enclosure right smack in the middle of the office itself. North got there first, opened the door, and held it open for me. Pitch packages sat on the table, presumably prepared by Tracy, and a fresh pot of coffee sat beside a collection of ceramic mugs and a tiered platter of pastries.

“Pulling out all the stops,” I said.

North sat down at the head of the table and unbuttoned his suit jacket. It had been strange to see him in something other than plaid or his Carhart jacket when we first left the house earlier this morning. I’d found myself wondering where a man of his sheer size could buy such a suit, and concluded it had probably been custom made for him.

He still wore his Blundstone boots even though they sort of ruined the sleek, polished look. Well, they didn’t *ruin* it. They were very him.

He nodded to the empty chair on his left. “Help yourself to coffee or snacks, or sit.”

I poured myself a coffee. It was piping hot. There were fixings like cinnamon, creamer, milk, sugar, and nutmeg. “Would you like one?”

He shook his head.

I sat down and crossed my ankles under the table. “So... who are these clients we’re meeting with today, exactly?”

“Lawyers.”

“Lawyers?” I asked skeptically.

He nodded. “They own a massive firm in Chicago that puts on a Christmas event every year to fundraise for a Christmas Eve Dinner for those who are alone during the holidays, or who don’t have money or a safe place to stay. It’s a haven of sorts. They serve a hot dinner, have a Santa Claus to hand out gifts for the kids, live music and entertainment, treats, hot coffee, that sort of thing. It runs all night long and well into Christmas morning and afternoon.”

“That’s beautiful. It’s all run by volunteers?”

“Yep, the firm does some fundraising but foots the rest of the bill. The bulk of the volunteers are their employees, but they’ve grown over the years and cast a wide net to invite students and others in need of volunteer hours to help out. They serve something like seven thousand people every year.”

I whistled. “Wow. And they come to you to help them with the trees and décor for the fundraiser, which isn’t on Christmas Eve?”

“Precisely. It’s a high-end party for their clients with deep pockets. They donate, and their money goes to good use on Christmas Eve.”

Suddenly I felt very glad that I hadn’t gotten cold feet and bailed. I wanted to be involved in something like this, portfolio aside.

North abruptly got to his feet. “Here they come. The older gentleman is Norman Cuthbert, and the other two are his

children, Michael and Dana. Soak up everything you can. And remember, no talking. Let me handle this. They like knowing what to expect.”

“Uh huh.” I sipped my coffee, rose to stand, and squared my shoulders. I wished I didn’t feel like such a pipsqueak beside him.

Norman and his adult children swept into the room with easy smiles and friendly greetings. It became quickly obvious to me that they had all worked together many times in the past, and this pitch was a shoo-in—more about checking off boxes than worrying about securing their business.

Everyone took their seats. I piped up and offered to pour coffees. North shot me a dark look because apparently even that was considered too much talking for his books, but our three clients thanked me and accepted the offer.

While I poured the coffee and North made small talk with Norman, I gave him an *I told you so* look. He ignored me.

“Where’s Marge?” Norman asked, looking around as he leaned back with his coffee and took a sip. He had an easy way about him, not the sort of demeanor I usually associated with a lawyer. He looked like he was enjoying a friend’s company in their living room rather than a business partner at an office. “Tell me you don’t have her running around like a chicken with her head cut off.”

North chuckled and shook his head. “No, nothing like that. She retired, actually. This is her temporary replacement, an intern from the University of Oregon.” He gestured in my direction. “Winter Dodson.”

Norman gave me a curt, polite nod. “Nice to meet you, Winter. No offense, but we were really banking on Marge’s keen eye and skill this year, North. No detail goes unnoticed under that old bird’s watchful eye, and we have some seriously elite clientele coming to the party this year. You wouldn’t believe the cases we’ve represented and the growth our business has seen. Great for the firm of course, but we want this party to be better than all the ones that came before it.”

I felt a flutter of nerves in my stomach.

How was I supposed to pull that off as a total rookie operating outside my wheelhouse?

North seemed unfazed. “Marge passed down her legacy of talent. Rest assured, you’re in as good of hands as ever, Norman. We won’t let you down. Now,” he clasped his hands together and leaned forward, “tell me what you want, and we’ll zero in on a theme and pin down the scope of the project. Winter?”

I perked up with excitement at the invitation into the conversation. “Yes?”

“Pay attention.”

CHAPTER 9



NORTH

E *ye catching.*

Sparkly.

Refreshing.

Bold.

Those were some of the adjectives Norman used as he went on a tangent about what sort of party he wanted to host for his firm's clients. Beside him, his daughter, Dana, nodded along enthusiastically before putting a hand on her father's wrist and leaning forward to interject.

"Basically what's happening with our business," she began, "is that we're shifting into a totally new landscape of clientele. It was unexpected, but very welcome, and all our partners and employees are reaping the benefits. We want this party to be an expression of gratitude to our clients, and a way to show them where a chunk of their money goes when they work with us. As you know, the haven on Christmas Eve is deeply special to my family and I, and to everyone we work with. We want this party to show that without hitting them over the head with it. Does that make sense?"

Sort of.

Suddenly, Winter piped up beside me. "It makes perfect sense. You want to capture a feeling and invite people into a tradition your firm has established over the last fifteen years." That tidbit of information indicated she'd been reading the package in front of her while Norman and I discussed details. I

could appreciate that. What I did not appreciate was her stepping on my toes and answering for me when I explicitly told her to keep her mouth shut during the meeting.

In nicer terms, of course.

She continued talking, ignoring the prickly stare I shot in her direction. “When I was a kid, my mom used to put a laundry basket under our Christmas tree. It stayed there for the first week of December, and it was my job to go through my things—toys, clothes, you name it—and pick items to donate. There were rules, of course. I couldn’t get rid of things just because I didn’t want them anymore. I had to be thoughtful about it. I had to consider what items might bring joy or comfort to another child who had very different holiday experiences than me. It’s a tradition I want to pass down to my future kids one day because I think it taught me a lot about taking care of my things and knowing the value of a toy doll or race car.”

Dana listened with twinkly eyes. Michael topped off their coffees. Norman nodded along.

She had their attention like she was giving them a sales pitch, but this wasn’t that.

Winter sighed dreamily, as if she’d just transported back to her six-year-old self. “Some of my favorite memories come from that first week of the month. When it was over, my mother and I would pack up the items I’d chosen to donate, and we’d bring them to a local charity in Portland that collected toys for kids in need. We’d clean them all first, of course. I’d brush all the dollies’ hair and put bows in them and try to make them as new and special as possible. Mom would always get me to thank them for the fun we’d had together. Then I’d let them go. I think, and correct me if I’m wrong, but I *think* what you’re asking for is a way to make your clients feel that same feeling. The Christmas spirit,” she surmised simply.

“Yes,” Dana breathed.

“Precisely,” Michael agreed.

Norman slapped his hand on the table, startling us all. Winter yelped beside me and everyone chuckled at her expense. Except for me. My toes still felt trodden upon by her sharp heels.

“That’s exactly what we’re after!” Norman announced enthusiastically. “Do you think you can do it?” His attention was on my intern, not me, the man who’d loyally shown up in every capacity to all their prior Christmas events and delivered top notch products.

Winter turned to me, handing over the reins she’d stolen. “Mr. Waylon?”

“Yes,” I said, resisting the urge to growl out the word. “We can do it. When have we ever let you down, Norman?”

He let out booming laughter before getting to his feet. His children followed suit. They were all smiles and eagerness. Dana went over to Winter and shook her hand, thanking her for the story. Winter blushed and thanked Dana in turn for listening.

“When I have my own kids I want to do that,” Dana said. “Do you mind if I steal a page from your mother’s book?”

“Not at all,” Winter gushed. “It taught me the meaning of Christmas and giving. And, naturally, it took a load off my mother’s shoulders because she didn’t have to stay on top of cleaning up so many toys and having my collection grow too big.”

Dana laughed. “I can imagine. She sounds like a clever woman.”

“The best,” Winter agreed.

We walked the clients out, and as soon as the door closed behind them I turned to Winter and glared down at her.

She smiled up at me, batting her long lashes. “How’d I do?”

“When I tell you not to speak, I mean it. Did you think I was kidding around?”

She shrugged one shoulder. “I knew you meant it.”

“And?”

“And what?”

Grumbling, I pushed out the door into the stairwell, barking at her to follow. We were done in the office today. Her heels clicked on every step of our descent. “Next time, you will *take notes*. Do you understand?”

“I think I did a good job. They liked what I had to say, and I already have a dozen ideas of what I want to do for their trees. Among other things. What sort of budget do I get per tree? Is it based on size? Do I get to do the décor shopping? Is there a company credit card? Or do I get reimbursed? My limit is pretty low on my personal credit card, being a student and all. Do you have a print shop nearby? Do they take online orders? Does Marge have a portfolio of past parties I can compare to for their firm? Have they ever done anything new like this before, or are they more of a traditional Christmas sort of vibe? This is so exciting!”

Holy fucking jingle bells. This woman.



The next day, Winter stayed holed up in her cabin, claiming she was working and didn't want to be disturbed. Worked for me. I needed a break after the shit-show that had been yesterday.

I'd given her what resources I trusted her with and asked her to come up with a pitch for me by end of day today. I wanted to see where that crazy brain of hers was taking things before I let her run full steam ahead. Norman and his firm were big cheese clients for us. Their business was consistent, and for the most part, they were easy to please. Their references had brought us copious amounts of business over the years. I wouldn't jeopardize a future with them because of a starry-eyed intern.

No way.

I was passing through the living room, sipping on a glass of whiskey, when the back door abruptly opened and a cold blast of air nearly knocked me over.

“Son of a bitch,” I hissed.

Winter, who was bundled up fiercely against the cold with a beanie down almost over her eyes and a scarf over her mouth, giggled and pulled the knitted fabric away from her mouth. “Did I scare you?”

I narrowed my eyes at her. “No.”

“Uh huh.”

“You shouldn’t just walk into people’s houses like that.”

“Because I scared you?”

“Because,” I said dryly, “I could have thought you were a robber. What then?”

“You’d only think I was a robber if I scared you,” she said pointedly.

I rolled my eyes to the ceiling.

She laughed. “You’re so easy, North. I just came up to present these.” She held up an iPad she had clutched in a gloved hand that I hadn’t even noticed. “I finished the mock-ups for the trees for the firm and I want to know what you think. I wasn’t sure what scale we were going with—you were kind of vague—so if I have to rein it in, you let me know.”

Without being invited, she pushed into the house, sat down at my dining-room table, and looked expectantly at the empty chair beside her for me to sit down.

Why did this college student make me feel like I was her employee half the time?

Sighing, I fell into the chair beside her.

She clicked a few pages on her iPad before bringing up what looked like a collage of pictures. She turned to me with a grin and hid the screen against her chest. “Okay, remember, they asked for bold. Unique. Sparkly.”

Dread filled the pit of my stomach. I held out a hand for the iPad. “Give it here.”

“I know this is probably *way* different than anything you’ve done before, but hear me out. I think this is the way to get to their clients’ hearts. I reached out to Mr. Cuthbert via email to ask the approximate age of the majority of their clients.”

“You what?”

“He said they were between thirty and forty, give or take, or fifty and upward.”

“Back up.”

She blinked innocently at me. “Yes?”

“You emailed him? Directly? Without my consent?”

“It was *just* an email. And strictly business related and within the scope of my job. What’s the problem?”

I pinched the bridge of my nose. “From now on leave communication with our clients to me, okay?”

She blew past the request as if I hadn’t made it. “I had this idea. My story spoke to all of them because they’re chasing a feeling. The spirit of Christmas. Well, when was the last time you remember feeling that?”

I stared blankly at her.

“Probably when you were a kid,” she supplied. “Same with me. I’ve been chasing that sparkly, twinkly, magical feeling of Christmas morning from my childhood every year, but it eludes me because, well, the veil has been lifted. I know the nibble marks on the carrot in the morning were from my dad. I know the flour on the floor in boot prints were with Dad’s work boots. I know the cards signed ‘From Santa’ were written by Mom. We all have those stories, but before we knew the truth, we knew the *magic*. And this is what Christmas looked like back then.”

Winter finally handed over the tablet, revealing a mishmash of tacky Christmas trees adorned in silver and gold

strands of tinsel, bubble lights, hand-made ornaments, and tacky garland strands.

I couldn't take my eyes off the catastrophe she'd copy pasted. "This is... this is..."

"Christmas circa 1990. I know. Brilliant, right?"

"Hideous."

Winter stammered. "Hideous? What? Why?"

Shaking my head, I gave her the tablet back. "You can't put pictures of a party like this in the newspapers. High-scale clientele donating hundreds or thousands of dollars to their haven event will expect more than a tacky blast from the past. They want high-end backdrops for their social media feeds."

Winter pursed her lips. "I think a lot of people do, but I think that's missing the point of this particular event. Norman said—"

"Mr. Cuthbert," I corrected, "asked for a feeling, which we will deliver in an eye-catching, visually appealing manner. We will not roll over and give him mediocre work because we want him to feel like a kid again. You had your shot. I'm coming to Chicago with you to take the lead and show you how this is done in person. If all goes well and you prove yourself, maybe I'll let you run the show for the next one."

"But—"

"How did you get up to the house, by the way?"

"I walked."

"I told you not to cross the fields alone."

"I wanted to stretch my legs."

I sighed. "Come on. I'll give you a lift back... Circa 1990." I scoffed. "It's in the past for a reason, Winter. Let's leave it there."

CHAPTER 10



WINTER

There were more perks to this gig than fancy homemade breakfasts every morning and a cozy little cabin to call my own.

North Waylon had his own private plane.

And it was *fancy*.

Lavish, white-leather seats with red stitching, red carpet, cream cabin fixtures, and crystal glassware for our champagne poured out of a bottle that probably cost upward of five hundred dollars. Perhaps more.

We flew from New York to Chicago late at night and arrived at two in the morning. By then, I was dead tired, bitter about my ideas being blatantly shot down by North, and still somewhat giddy over the life of luxury I got to live this month. I was excited about seeing the Cuthbert firm's office as well and diving into my first project. It would be a better use of my time than hanging out on the Waylon Farm or listening to North's incessant grumblings over everything I was doing wrong.

Why did he bother to even get an intern when he had such a fixed idea of what he wanted?

Nothing added up to me.

After our flight touched down, we were chauffeured to a swanky hotel close to the Cuthbert office. I got my own room, thank God, and slept like a baby in the California king bed surrounded by plush pillows. In the morning, I woke to room

service, with coffee, orange juice, fresh fruit, bacon, eggs, and toast. I devoured it all, took a hot shower, slapped on some makeup, curled my hair, and studied my reflection in the mirror after getting dressed.

Even if I was to be a fly on the wall today, I wanted to look like a professional fly who knew what she was doing. I hoped the pantsuit I'd picked out conveyed that. Professional, on top of things, creative, but disciplined. What other boxes did a gal need to check?

Silence.

That was North's most important box.

Screw him and his boxes and rules. I wasn't even being paid to be here. Maybe if I was on his payroll, I'd listen to his instructions better, but I had to make the most of this internship for my own benefit, not his. If he'd just loosen up a bit, maybe he'd see that things could be done a little differently and elicit happy customers. If all his clientele were used to the same old shtick from him and Marge, why not see if they were open to taking some risks and throwing some curveballs into the mix?

I thought my nostalgic millennial Christmas was *just* the way to get that job done, and I wasn't going to give up on it just yet. North could get as huffy as he wanted.

An hour later, I strode into the head office of the Cuthbert Firm. It oozed modern minimalism with sleek black furniture, dark gray walls with halo-shaped light sconces, and black and white artwork all over the place. One would never know it was a law firm until they saw their name in gold letters on the wall behind the reception desk.

I slid my hands into the pockets of my blazer as we waited for the Cuthberts to receive us. "This place is a designer's wet dream," I breathed.

North turned to me. "What did you say?"

"It's a blank canvas with so much potential." My eyes darted from corner to corner, blank space to blank space, while my imagination filled in all the things I would love to do if I'd

been given creative freedom over designing the space. “It’s missing warmth. It’s bold and brave and clean, but it needs something to soften it just a little.”

I nodded to an open space right in the middle of the grand office which was currently occupied by low black leather sofas. Nobody was sitting in them. “I’d put a coffee bar there, swap out the small sofas for deep comfortable furniture, jazz it up with some color. Then people might actually congregate there on their lunch breaks. Clients might even be inclined to sit for a while after meetings. This place could be a hub. I imagine some of their clients probably feel pretty safe here if they’re in the middle of legal battles and this is where their representation is. Right?”

North stared at me like I was talking foreign policies.

“What?” I asked.

“Nothing.”

Bullshit. I folded my arms and felt one of my eyebrows take a hike toward my hairline. “Just say it.”

He shrugged one large shoulder. “I guess I didn’t expect design to encapsulate so many bases, like what their clients are feeling and why it might be important to create a space for them to feel safe and relaxed. Not bad, Dodson.”

I had thought I couldn’t care less about his opinion and I found him to be an abrasive, condescending, prickly ass, but I appreciated his praise. “Thank you,” I said curtly.

Maybe, just maybe, I could turn this meeting around in my favor after all. If I could just prove that I wasn’t the desperate college student he seemed to think I was...

My creative juices were still flowing when Norman Cuthbert came to greet us, offering apologies for being late for our meeting. “Clients are unpredictable sometimes. We can’t rush them out when we’re in the middle of pinning down case details.”

“We understand, Norman. It’s not a problem at all. Winter was admiring her canvas.” North gestured at the office.

Norman grinned. “Ah yes, not bad, huh? We renovated two years ago. You should’ve seen the place before this, Winter. It was a nightmare. Outdated ceiling tiles. Gray industrial carpet. Fluorescent lights. There’s only so much that plants and fresh paint could do. We had to step up our game.”

I smiled. “Step it up? It looks to me like you created a new game entirely.”

Norman looked proud. “Only the best for my lawyers and our clients here at Cuthbert Law. Come, let’s get comfortable. I can’t wait to see what ideas you’ve come up with. Dana and Michael are sad to miss our meeting today, they’re both in court, but they’re here in spirit.”

Norman led us to an elegant meeting room with black walls and built-in shelves decorated in legal awards. I sat, crossed one leg over the other, and waited while North got the ball rolling for the meeting. Norman stayed on his feet to pour us each glasses of water from a glass carafe by the window, pausing to offer lemon wedges kept on ice. I accepted, while North shook his head.

While I sipped my lemon water, North made his pitch.

He showed Norman a folder full of his tree designs. Admittedly, it looked a lot more professional than the collage I’d made on my iPad, which currently sat in the side pouch of my purse on the floor between my feet. Frowning, I leaned forward to get a better look, and North tipped the folder down so I could see.

He ran his hand over the page. “I remember that last year we went extremely traditional. Red. Green. Gold. I think it’s best to stay in that same vein if you’re hoping to impress clients, new and old. In my experience, people have a very strict expectation for Christmas, and it’s easy to disappoint when you step too outside the box. Going traditional like this will feel familiar to everyone, and hopefully nostalgic as well. We can hang wreaths on the windows and handle your exterior décor too, if you’d like. I thought red and green lights with white accents would work best.”

Norman scratched his chin as he studied the images.

He doesn't like it, I thought with surprise. More than that. He's disappointed.

North kept talking, explaining his pitch, and while they were distracted, I leaned quietly forward and pulled my iPad out of my purse.

“We'd put the main tree here, in this far corner,” North continued, “so that you could have Santa set up here for the clients' kids. It would make a great photo-op as well.”

Norman made a thoughtful sound. “I see.”

I cleared my throat.

Both men looked over at me.

Smiling, I held up my iPad. “I have a couple of ideas I'd love to show you too, Mr. Cuthbert. If you're open to it, of course.”

If North could have shot lasers out of his eyes, I would have been instantaneously evaporated in my chair.

But Norman seemed intrigued. “Yes, please, let's see what you've got, Winter.”

I got up and walked around the table to sit beside him. In my opinion, sitting and talking like friends was much more comfortable than leaning across a table and pitching. I didn't want to pitch. I just wanted to share my idea, and if it resonated with him, then that was great. If not? I could move on and we could do North's idea.

But something in my gut told me this would work out in my favor.

I showed him the collage on my iPad.

Norman blinked rapidly in surprise. “Good grief.”

“I know it's busy looking,” I said. “That's kind of the point.”

He studied me. “You'll have to explain the method to your madness to me.”

I grinned. “My pleasure.” I launched into the same spiel I’d given North two days ago when I’d shown him my collage.

When I was done, I summarized to bring it all together and tie up loose ends. “Basically, my objective with these tree designs was to evoke a feeling from your clients’ childhood and remind them of the spirit of Christmas.” I zoomed in. “I added this idea sort of last minute, so it’s not polished yet, but what I would love to do is get some pictures from you of last year’s haven on Christmas Eve to make into ornaments to put on the tree so that your clients can see exactly what it is their money goes to. I want it to feel like they’re stepping into a Christmas party at their crazy aunt’s house back in 1990. What do you think?”

North massaged his jaw with a large hand. “She’s learning, Norman. Take it easy on her.”

I sat up straighter. “I can separate myself from my work. If you don’t like it, I’d love to hear why. I won’t take it personally.”

“Don’t like it?” Norman breathed. “I love it!”

North looked like he’d just been kicked in the groin.

“Really?” I asked ecstatically, feeling my chest swell with pride.

Norman nodded eagerly and zoomed in on the iPad, studying the trees more closely and chuckling at the copy-pasted ornaments made out of popsicle sticks I’d found on the internet. “How are we going to find ornaments like this?”

“I was thinking we could ask your employees and some of your clients if their kids would like to decorate ornaments for the trees? I’ll also search thrift stores in the area and see what I can come up with. I’m very confident that I can make this the most nostalgic party you’ve ever had, Mr. Cuthbert.”

He relinquished the iPad, leaned back in his chair with his hands clasped behind his head, and grinned. “Sounds like a hell of a plan to me, Winter. I can’t wait to see how you pull this off. Dana was born in 1990. She’s going to be thrilled.”

North took his portfolio back.

We locked eyes. I could have done the mature thing and told him I could incorporate his ideas into my theme, but instead I rolled my eyes at him.

Norman laughed.

North did not.

CHAPTER 11



NORTH

I dropped the portfolio of my tree designs into the recycling bin in my hotel room, removed my suit jacket, laid it on the bed, and fell into the armchair by the patio doors.

Norman had screwed me.

Not on purpose, of course, but in his own way, his googly-eyed excitement over Winter's hideous pitch had undermined authority I'd been trying to establish with her. I didn't need her getting a fat head right out of the gate, and the way she'd rolled her eyes at me at the end of the meeting suggested just that—her ego was growing to enormous proportions.

Not ideal.

I sighed and rubbed at my temples, head throbbing, stomach growling with hunger. I was considering ordering room service when an urgent knock came at my door.

Winter's voice quickly followed. "North? Are you in there?"

No. "Yes," I called.

"I was going to go for a walk and find a place close by to grab dinner. Would you like to join me? I'm *starving*. All that pitching really made me work up an appetite."

I rolled my eyes, pushed out of the chair, and strode to the door. She stood on the other side grinning up at me when I pulled it open. Cocky little brat.

“The concierge said there’s a great Italian place around the block,” she said.

“Let me grab my coat.”

She waited in the hall for me. Together, we made our way to the elevator, rode it down to the lobby, and pushed out into the cold Chicago evening. She tipped her head back to look at the starless night sky and inhaled deeply.

“It’s going to snow tonight,” she said.

I could feel it too. The sky had that heavy feeling, like the bellies of the clouds were being pulled down to the ground by the weight of gathering snow flurries. The air smelled crisp, and the concrete beneath our feet was cold and salted. Car exhausts puffed like little chimneys going down the street. Blasts of warm air hit us whenever we walked by open shop doors.

Winter tucked her chin into her scarf to ward off the cold, and neither of us spoke again until we were seated at the Italian restaurant by the window. A candle flickered between us, and shortly after being seated we were given water and a basket of bread. Winter went in for the kill, ripping a piece off and smothering it in garlic butter.

Between bites, she offered me an apology. “I didn’t mean to steal the pitch out from under you today. I just... I think I knew in my gut what Norman was asking for when we met with him the other day, and I couldn’t let my idea go unspoken in case he loved it.”

I sipped my water. “I understand. I’m sorry, too.”

“You are?”

“I should have invited you to pitch. It looked unprofessional on my part as the one who didn’t listen to his requests. I pitched based on assumptions and history. It was an error in judgment. And it was lazy,” I added, somewhat dejected. “You made the right call. At the end of the day, I just want him to get what he wants. Now the hard part.”

She cocked her head to the side.

“Following through and bringing your vision to fruition,” I said.

Winter’s bright pink lips stretched in a playful smile. “The hard part? That’s the *fun* part! I love getting into the nitty-gritty part of the work. And I love performing under pressure. There’s something about that anxious-gut, tight-chest feeling when you’re working up against a deadline and everything is up in the air, and then pulling it together right before you cross the finish line. It’s exhilarating. Like a high.”

“You’re definitely in the right line of work if you feel that way.”

Her eyes danced in the candlelight, and for the first time, I noticed how they looked like honey and amber—or liquid gold. *Damn.*

Our server arrived to take our orders, and Winter giggled through her request, choosing something off the menu she’d never tried before and couldn’t pronounce. The server seemed charmed by her, a young man himself probably close to her age, and asked us what our plans were for the rest of the evening.

Winter sighed dreamily. “There’s a gorgeous bathtub and a glass of red wine with my name on it back at our hotel. I’m going to put way too much bubble bath in and soak until I’m a prune. What about you?”

The pair turned to me.

I shrugged.

The server told Winter that if she wanted to see some of the city, he was off at ten, and he knew some local hotspots. “The tub will always be there,” he added with a flash of white teeth.

Winter, sweeter than pie, let him down easy. “We’re on a work trip, so I have a really early morning, and in all honesty, I’m already exhausted. Thank you though. That’s very kind of you.”

The server hung his head in rejection but took it fairly well. He wandered off to help another table.

“He was coming on to you,” I said.

“He was not. He was just being friendly. He heard ‘hotel’ and knew we were from out of town.”

I laughed. “Tell me you’re not that naïve.”

“You know, you’re chattiest when you’re teasing me. What’s with that?”

“I can’t help myself. You exercised incredible self-awareness during your pitch to Norman, and then this? How can both coexist? The guy clearly has the hots for you.”

“People can be nice without having ulterior motives, North.”

“Uh huh. Sure, they can.”

She settled back in her chair, looking petite and cozy like she belonged on the cover of a winter magazine in her thick turquoise scarf and cream-colored jacket. The light of the candle no longer caught her eye, but I still noticed how bright they looked. “What do you do for fun?”

“Fun?”

“Yes, fun,” she mused, letting out a little giggle. “You know, to let go of stress? To unwind, laugh, *play*. What do you do?”

“I’m too busy for fun.”

She burst out laughing.

People at nearby tables looked over at us, but she didn’t seem to notice their curious stares. Either that, or she didn’t care, and the best part was how strangers started smiling because of how contagious her laughter was. It bubbled out and became wild, and soon people were snickering and whispering about the pretty young girl, wondering what she found so funny.

Winter wiped tears from the corners of her eyes with her thumbs. She tracked a bit of smudged makeup toward her hairline. “Oh my goodness, you’re the most serious person I’ve ever met, North. And it just doesn’t make sense to me.

You sell Christmas trees for a living! Isn't that, like, one of the most romantic, glorious, festive jobs of all time? How can you be such a grump?"

"I'm not a grump."

She planted her fists on her hips and sat up straight, pressing her lips into a firm line and scrunching up her forehead in a scowl. "*I'm not a grump. This is my business. I make the rules. Blah, blah, blah.*" She stomped her feet, and I realized she was mocking me. "*I'm too busy for fun.*"

The corner of my mouth twitched, daring a smile. "I don't sound like that."

"You sound *exactly* like that. Nobody is too busy for fun, North. You just don't prioritize it. And maybe you should. It's good for you. And your heart."

"My heart?"

"Stress in men causes early heart failure. Look it up. Fun and... well, other things... are the best way to prevent heart disease."

"Other things?"

Her cheeks turned neon pink. "Mhm."

Oh. Of course. Other things.

"My work is fun," Winter said. "At least, it will be fun when it blossoms into work after I'm done with college. I can't wait to get out in the field and use my talent to bring people joy. I've always thought that homes and spaces, wherever they are, are so important to our wellbeing and the human condition."

"How so?"

"Well, there are all these studies coming out now about our environment and how much it impacts us. For example, that was the theory of minimalism, right? Less clutter in your home, less clutter in your mind. Now, I don't necessarily believe that mentality or way of living brings joy to every individual. It's all very personal. But I want to be the person who helps make people's dreams a reality. I want to elevate

locations so that people feel nothing but contentment and happiness in their own spaces. After a long day of work, you shouldn't come home to a living room that doesn't feel like *yours*."

She began shrugging out of her jacket as the warmth of the restaurant finally got to her bones. She left it and the scarf on the empty seat beside her, and I found my gaze wandering over her in her black turtleneck that hugged all her curves. No skin was showing, but I could imagine what was beneath the fabric.

"I know designers aren't accessible to everyone," she continued. "Budgets and costs are high for renovations, and even if you can afford such a luxury, adding a designer to the bill isn't easy. One day I want to run a non-profit that helps people flip their homes whose space no longer functions for them. Families who've outgrown their house and don't have the ability to move, for example. Like those home renovation shows. I used to be obsessed with them when I was a little girl."

Listening to Winter talk felt easier tonight than all the times that had come before. She lit up when she talked about design, and I let her run with it, sharing all her favorite episodes of said renovation shows and how she always cried during the grand reveal at the end when the families got to see their new home.

"I just want to create that feeling, you know?" she finished shortly after our meals arrived. She twirled pasta around her fork and took a bite. "Then, when I'm good and settled in my career, I can look to the rest of my future. Marriage. House. Kids. All that fun stuff."

"You strike me as the sort of woman who wants a big family."

She covered her mouth with one hand while she chewed. "You guessed it. Three kids, maybe four? So long as I'm in a place financially to pull it off, of course. And my husband wants a big family, too. What about you?"

"Me?"

“Do you want kids?”

I pushed my food around my plate. “I’ve never thought much about it.”

“Really? Never?”

“Maybe when I was a younger man,” I said. “But things change. Your priorities shift. People come and go, and then you’re left to rebuild. After all that, thinking about starting from the beginning is daunting.”

Winter cocked her head to the side. “Do you ever think about marriage? Or getting married?”

“I was married.”

“Oh.” She seemed to register what I’d said before. “That’s what you meant about rebuilding. You and your ex-wife, did you have plans to have children?”

I nodded. “We did. With a house as big as mine, we wanted what you want. A big family. I wanted my children to have siblings, something I grew up without. She wanted big holidays and a house full of messes.” I smiled, remembering how fondly we used to talk about our dreams.

“What happened?” Winter asked softly.

It had been ages since I spoke about Veronica to anyone aside from maybe Justin. The words threatened to get stuck in my throat, but I forced them out without meeting Winter’s eye. “She passed away a few years ago.”

Winter didn’t say anything at first.

So that’s what it takes to shut her up. Dead wives. Noted.

She chewed her bottom lip and watched me before deciding how to proceed. To her credit, she handled the discomfort like a champ because she didn’t offer a plethora of apologies or looks of pity that always made me feel small and weak. “That’s really fucking unfair,” she said. “I’m sorry you had to go through that.”

I nodded solemnly, and I hoped it was enough to express my thanks. Talking about it had always been too hard, and I

wasn't going to start now with my twenty-four-year-old intern.

CHAPTER 12



WINTER

North and I had been back in Maple Hill for two days. I'd been diligently working on acquiring decorations for the trees for the Cuthbert fundraiser, and North and I had already done two walks through the farm to select the perfect trees. And by perfect, I meant imperfect.

He'd resisted at first when I told him I wanted the sorriest looking trees on the property—ones with sagging branches, missing needles, weak spots, and crooked peaks. Charlie Brown trees, in other words. He insisted we could still throw together a millennial Christmas party without resorting to sad-looking trees, but I held fast. All the images in my pitch had included what he called “sad” trees, so we were going to stick to just that.

He still hadn't folded and was still clinging to the idea that the main tree for the event would be a shining testament to his farm.

I hadn't decided if I would bend for that yet. We still had time.

Halfway through the day, I decided I needed to go into town and do some in-person shopping. Online had great options, but I wanted to see what there was in terms of thrift stores downtown, so I called up to the house for a ride from my cabin to the estate. No answer.

North had been pretty insistent on me not walking through the fields, but I didn't have any other options today, so I bundled up for the cold and set off through the trees, keeping

an eye out for any I could mark for the Cuthbert party just in case we'd missed them.

I arrived at the house and discovered that North wasn't home. Some of the staff were, and they arranged a ride into town for me. The driver dropped me off at the curb, and as soon as I got out of the vehicle, the cold bit into my cheeks. The same Salvation Army Santa stood on the curb up ahead shaking jingle bells, and I dropped some cash into his donation pail as I walked past.

"Merry Christmas." I smiled.

"Merry Christmas!" he bellowed in return. "Ho! Ho! Ho!"

Grinning, I slipped down the sidewalk, passing pedestrians sipping hot coffees out of red cups with candy canes on them. It was the third of December, and Christmas spirit was in the air.

I stopped at a small shop with a Christmas tree in the window called Maple Trinkets. It smelled like cinnamon and oranges inside, and I paused to stomp salt from the soles of my boots on the mat at the entrance. A few other patrons wandered around, but it wasn't all that busy, so I took my time moving through the shop admiring all the little odds and ends as I went. At the back of the store I discovered what I was looking for—ornaments.

Unfortunately, there were only a handful I could use. One was a retro plaid bauble. It was sparkly red with a green and gold plaid print on it. I selected a dozen of them as well as some little angels holding choir books, their mouths painted in the shapes of an O to mimic that they were singing. There were hedgehogs made out of corks that felt nostalgic to me, so I picked those too and brought my little treasures to the register. I paid for it all on the company card North had given me, thanked the shop owner, and spent the next hour wandering the streets of town, scouring every shop for nineties-inspired decorations.

When I passed a diner on a corner block, I was hit with a wave of burger-scented goodness. My stomach grumbled, announcing that it was time for lunch, and I sought refuge in

the warmth of the diner. Michael Bublé Christmas songs played in the background and the windows were covered in drawings of a winter scene of kids skating. The ceiling of the diner was draped in multicolored Christmas lights. I smiled up at them as I took a seat at the counter and waited for the waitress with big curly hair to notice me.

She turned around from the peek-a-boo into the kitchen with plates balanced on her forearms and flashed a smile in my direction. “Be right with you.”

“Take your time.” I picked up a menu and scanned the burger options.

By the time she made her way back to me I’d made my decision. I put in my order, and when she brought me my soda, she leaned on the other side of the counter and watched me with big brown eyes. Her eyelashes were crazy long—the sort of lashes women paid for nowadays—and she shook her head every now and then to shake away curly strands of hair that got caught in them.

“Hi,” I said, wondering why she was staring at me so intently.

“You’re North Waylon’s intern, aren’t you?”

“How did you know that?”

She straightened with a disarming laugh. “Don’t worry, I’m not a stalker or anything. I’m good friends with the woman you replaced. Marge. She’s like a second mother to me. And Maple Hill is small. Working in a place like this means I know practically everyone who lives here, and you definitely don’t live here. How’s it all going so far? Has he warmed up to you yet, or is he still being his usual abrasive self?”

I snickered. “So, you know him well?”

“As well as he’ll let anyone know him. Sure.”

That was a unique but apt way of putting it. North definitely gave the impression of intentionally keeping people at arm’s length. Our conversation at the Italian restaurant when we were in Chicago had been the most vulnerable he’d been

with me, and even then, he was still guarded, so I hadn't pushed. Not that I wanted to push anyway. Widower territory was uncomfortable at the best of times, and we didn't know each other well enough to have such conversations. It suited me just fine not to engage in a conversation with my hot lumberjack boss about his dead wife.

"It's going pretty well so far," I said. "I think he misses Marge a lot, and I definitely can't fill her shoes, but I'm making the most of it."

"North is a man of consistency. He misses Marge because she practically raised him, and he knew what to expect from her. Now don't get me wrong, the woman has more talent in her pinky finger than I could ever dream of possessing." She winked. "But in my opinion, he could do with some young, fresh blood around the house. And you're really pretty too, which can't hurt."

I blushed.

She giggled. "I'm Cami, by the way."

"Winter Dodson."

"Nice to meet you, Winter. Unique name. I like it."

My parents had named me Winter because I was born on December twenty-first, the first day of winter. Originally, they were going to name me Sarah Dean, paying tribute to my grandfather on my dad's side with the middle name, but Winter materialized minutes after I was born and it started to snow.

"Thank you," I said.

My burger came up from the kitchen, and Cami made her rounds through the diner topping off coffees and dropping off meals and bills while I ate. The fries were incredible, possibly better than any I'd ever had, and by the time I was done eating, my pants felt a tad too tight and I was already daydreaming about taking my bra off the second I got back to the cabin.

But I had more shopping to do.

“Do you know of any good places in town where I can buy outdated Christmas decorations?” I asked Cami as I paid my bill. “I need things that are kind of 1990.”

She pursed her lips. “There’s a flea market, thrift store type place about a mile outside of town. Maple Hill Flea and Thrift. It’s kind of a mishmash of everything under the sun, so you have to be in the mood to really pick through things, but that’s probably your best bet.”

“Could you give me directions?”

“I’m off in fifteen. Do you want to go together?”

Heck yes I did. North was mediocre company at best, and after being here for a week, I was in desperate need of companionship. I was used to being surrounded by like-minded people back on my campus. There was always something going on or some juicy gossip to share. I felt kind of isolated on the farm and in my little cabin—not ungrateful, just a bit lonely.

“I’ll drive,” Cami said when I took her up on her offer.

She’d been right about the flea market. If you wanted to find something worth buying, you had to be willing to sift through it all like you were looking for a single grain of black sand on a white-sand beach. Lucky for me, I was willing. The hunt was part of the thrill, especially when you found that certain undetermined thing you didn’t know you were looking for until you discovered it.

While we shopped, Cami told me about the first time she met North.

“I was little. Like, really little,” she said, gesturing with one hand on her hip to indicate how short she’d been at the time. I assumed five or six years old. “North was a teenager. We met at a huge Christmas party at his family’s estate. Marge had invited my mother and me, and all the kids were allowed to play in this glamorous room at the house. All I remember was the giant TV on the wall. The biggest one I’d ever seen. North was flirting with a girl his age, much to the great

displeasure of all the other young girls who had their eye on him. He's always been a hot commodity."

I spoke before my brain caught up to my words. "He told me the other night that he was married. And that he lost his wife."

Cami paused in front of an old kid's winter sled with red trim. "He told you that?"

I nodded. "It came up naturally in conversation. Well, as naturally as one can bring up being widowed, I suppose. We were talking about kids."

Cami frowned. "Wow, I'm shocked he'd say anything to you about Veronica at all. He hasn't been the same since she died. None of us saw it coming, least of all North, and as soon as he lost her, he retreated into that big house. The only few people who've really stayed close to him have been Marge and his friend Justin. And maybe a couple of the house staff."

I felt a deep, tugging, pulling need to ask Cami how Veronica had died, but I held my tongue. It really wasn't my business, and it certainly wasn't right for me to go behind his back and find out from someone other than North. If he wanted me to know, he could tell me.

But it sounded like it had come out of nowhere.

I couldn't imagine how hard that would be. He was in his early thirties or so. And he'd lost her a few years ago? They must have been on the cusp of starting their lives together.

So many dreams gone in the blink of an eye.

Suddenly his stoic nature made a lot more sense to me. He wasn't a brooding grump.

He was a grieving man who'd lost it all and was picking his way back to the surface.

Maybe I needed to show him a little more grace.

CHAPTER 13



NORTH

Justin frowned skeptically at the lopsided, less than full Christmas tree in front of us. It had a dramatic lean and was barely as tall as he was.

“So, she wants this runt?” He reached in, grabbed the trunk, and gave it a little wiggle. A hundred pine needles fell to the frozen earth below. “Why?”

“Circa 1990 Christmas,” I said.

“Interesting.”

“That’s one word for it. Every tree she’s picked out is one I’d have chopped down and burned.”

Justin snorted. “Maybe she knows what she’s talking about. If Norman liked the pitch...” He trailed off and shrugged. “He can be a hard guy to please.”

“She’s going to work out,” I admitted. “She impressed him. More than impressed him. He practically leapt out of his chair with enthusiasm. I’m sure she’ll do the same with the next client. She has that sparkle people seem to like.”

“Sparkle?”

“She’s a people person,” I said. “Like Marge.”

“And unlike you.”

“Exactly.”

Justin slid his hands in his pockets and we kept walking through the field. I paused to mark the trees we were going to cut down and use for the Cuthbert party. Winter had given me

her finalized list before she went off into town today. I wasn't sure how long she'd be gone for, but we had a busy week ahead of us, and we needed to start creating movement for the job. Soon bigger events would be on the docket and we couldn't afford to give up any wiggle room.

"What are you going to do when Winter goes back to school?" Justin asked abruptly.

"I have all year to figure that out."

"But you won't."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

My friend stopped walking and turned to face me. His nose was pink from the cold. "You'll dilly-dally all year, and before we know it the Christmas season will be upon us again, and you'll be at square one with no designer."

"Maybe I'll put in for another intern."

He rolled his eyes. "Or you should just make a move on the intern you've got now."

I laughed.

Justin scowled. "It wasn't a joke, man. You've got to start moving forward some day or another. Veronica would want that for you. If she were here, she'd slap you upside the back of the head for spending the last four years moping. You know I'm right," he added with a pointed finger before I had a chance to tell him where to stick his opinions about what my deceased wife would think of my lack of a romantic life. "Winter is a nice girl. Pretty. Sweet. Talented. Hard working. During this crazy season, don't you both deserve to kick your boots off and have a bit of fun?" He waggled his eyebrows.

"It would be unprofessional. She's my intern. The power dynamic is too unbalanced."

"Pfft. Power dynamic. Who cares? She's here for what, three more weeks? Dude. This is the ideal no strings attached situation. There's a deadline and she gets back on a plane and leaves. No harm, no foul. And it's a chance for you to get back

in the saddle.” He knuckled my shoulder with a gloved fist. “Come on, make a move.”

Had I taken notice of how beautiful Winter was?

Yes.

Did I feel ready to, as Justin put it, jump back in the saddle?

I wasn’t so sure.

Time didn’t heal all wounds, as it turned out, and I still felt like a frayed and vulnerable nerve sticking out, just waiting to be scorched again. I wanted to feel a woman again, and I’d be a liar if I said I hadn’t stolen glances at Winter and wondered what her body would feel like against mine, but lying with her might feel like I was replacing Veronica.

What if it set me back? Justin might not have seen much progress from me, but I wasn’t where I used to be. One thing I knew for certain was I couldn’t go back to that dark place. I would never survive it again.

I decided to change the subject.

“How’s your heritage house listing going?”

At first, Justin looked like he wanted to push back and stay on the Winter subject but thought better of it. “Shit.”

“Why?”

We continued walking, heading back to the estate.

He sighed. “Everything that could go wrong has. I hired a staging company I’ve worked with in the past and usually have no issue with, and they botched the whole job, which pushed me back a week. I wanted it to be on the market days ago, but I’m still trying to play catch up. I’ve had three showings, all of which have resulted in bored and unengaged clients who didn’t even bother to view the whole property before they decided the place wasn’t for them. It’s a gorgeous house. It just doesn’t feel like it right now. It feels cold and sterile. All the old charm is missing.” He rubbed his forehead in exasperation. “I doubt I’ll sell it before January now, if I’m lucky.”

“There’s still time.”

“I can’t hire stagers this last minute. Everyone is booked. I think I have to cancel my open house. It’s a bitch, but I’ll come back to it in the new year.”

“Maybe I can help.”

Justin grinned. “North, I appreciate your good intentions, but how could you help? You’re spread thin enough as it is.”

“I have an intern who’s an interior designer. Why not put her skills to the test and see if she can stage the house?”

Justin arched an eyebrow. “You think she could handle it?”

“It’s better than doing nothing at all. Personally, I think she’ll knock it out of the park. Don’t tell her I said that.”

He laughed. “And you can spare her for that long?”

“If I can get her in the house tonight and we can have furniture delivered tomorrow? Yeah, I can spare her.”

“How the hell will you pull that off? Furniture in by tomorrow? There’s no way!”

I closed a hand on his shoulder. “I’m a Waylon. We have connections. Let me see what strings I can pull, and I’ll call you tonight to let you know if we’re on.”

CHAPTER 14



WINTER

“A little to the left. Yes, exactly. Right there.” I nodded in satisfaction after the ragtag group of laborers Justin had recruited finished moving a bench on the front porch. I wanted it right under the bay window in front of a throw rug I’d found at the flea market Cami brought me to.

Beside it, a small side table glowed with faux candles flickering beside staged coffee mugs. Once the laborers went back inside to help finish pulling together the living room, I climbed up the porch steps with a blanket and throw pillows under my arm and haphazardly draped them over the bench.

I stood back to admire my work.

The cozy little “moment” on the porch was exactly what Justin’s heritage house had been missing.

The property was gorgeous, with a rolling front lawn that sloped downward to the street. From the porch, the owners would have a view of their neighborhood unrivaled by the other houses on the block, and I wanted potential buyers to see that as soon as they climbed the porch steps.

This house was about creating moments—tangible spaces that people could see themselves living in. I also wanted to capture a feeling. That was my passion in this job, after all. I hadn’t chosen design just to work with pretty things and maybe get my work featured in a magazine one day, although that would be nice.

I’d chosen this career path because I believed that a space evoked an emotion. Pairing someone with their perfect house

was all about finding the right person for the feeling said house exuded.

This house?

It radiated warmth, history, uniqueness, coziness, and playfulness. It didn't look like any of the others on the street, or town for that matter. Rounded edges with pane glass bubbled windows gave it an almost whimsical look from outside, and when I first arrived this morning to start staging, I'd realized why people weren't interested in making offers.

For such a fun house, it felt cold.

Almost sterile.

In no way was it acceptable for a heritage house to ever feel that way.

Justin had been eager to walk me through the house, and I'd followed along behind him like an eager puppy dog, just waiting for him to throw me the bone and let me run with the project. North had tagged along but had to bow out halfway through the tour to see to business matters.

It meant a lot to me that he'd been willing to sacrifice me for the day and trust me to help his friend. After all, doing business with friends was tricky. Things could get messy quickly. I was not going to let that happen. This was a chance for me to prove myself outside the scope of Christmas trees.

And so help me, I was going to prove myself ten times over.

Once I was happy with how the porch looked, I hurried inside out of the chilly afternoon weather and ducked into the living room, where a handful of people were working on laying out a giant red silk carpet trimmed in gold thread. It looked luxurious amongst all the cherry oak wood and brought in a fresh pop of color—a playful dare to be bold and get away with it. Justin hadn't been too sure about this idea. He'd gone back and forth with me a bit about how he usually liked to stage houses, and I could tell he still wasn't happy that he'd folded his hand so easily as he stood in the hallway of the

butler's pantry, leaning against the doorframe, arms folded over his chest.

I sauntered over to him. "Have faith. Once all the furniture is in and the Christmas tree is up, it will all come together. I promise."

"It's the same color as my grandmother's bath towels."

"Then your grandmother has excellent taste."

He snorted. "She has doilies all over the place and floral wallpaper trim. Her taste is questionable at best."

"As long as she doesn't have plates with flowers or kittens on them hanging on the walls, she gets my stamp of approval."

He gave me a sideways look.

I laughed. "Oh no."

His attention shifted back to the workers as they began dragging the furniture in from the delivery van outside. I stepped in to direct and threw my back into some physical work, helping maneuver heavy, somewhat awkwardly large armchairs toward the fire, angling them toward the mantel for a cozy reading nook. We'd filled the built-ins with all kinds of books, and I took one out to place it on the seat of the chair along with a chunky knitted blanket over the arm.

"What if my potential buyers don't like reading?" Justin asked, his tone teasing.

"Then they will most likely pretend that they do," I said. "If you're buying a house like this, you're content with giving the impression that you read at the very least. And hey, it's one of the classics." I held up the hardcover of *Moby Dick*. "A talking point, if you will."

He clicked his tongue. "If you say so."

More furniture came in—a sofa, coffee table, side tables, and a large antique chest. I directed everything into place, and finally, *finally*, the Christmas tree from North's farm arrived.

Since this house already had so much character, I'd decided to go simple and elegant with the tree. I asked North

to pick one and trusted he'd go for one with full branches, a straight trunk, and even coloring throughout. I'd been right. The twelve-foot tree was stunning.

I had it placed dead center in front of the bay window, and as soon as we had it in a tree stand and positioned properly, I informed some of the workers how I wanted it decorated. Warm white lights. No garland, only silver and gold ribbon curled and poking out. Ornaments in gold, copper, champagne, and silver. Clean. Tidy. Festive but not distracting. That was the goal.

I brought the festive theme to other parts of the house, like bringing in fresh boughs to the fireplace mantel and adding a few ornaments there as well. We put lights here and there, garland up the spiraled staircase railing, and a second smaller tree in the dining room. While we worked, a lighting company arrived and began stringing up lights outside.

Justin was, if anything, overwhelmed.

But he seemed to grow more pleased with the work with every passing hour. Things were coming together quickly—which was what happened when you had twenty-five people working on a house—and we were losing daylight by the time the workers outside finished with the lights. Slowly but surely, the laborers began to leave as finishing touches went onto things.

Justin found me in the kitchen staging the island after everyone else had gone home.

“You outdid yourself, kid,” he said.

I smiled as I placed a Christmas arrangement of flowers near a cinnamon-scented candle that could be lit for walkthroughs. “Thank you for the opportunity. I had a lot of fun. If you don't mind, I'd like to come back when the lighting is better and take some pictures for my portfolio.”

“Knock yourself out.”

I'd already snapped some in the waning evening light for a romantic feeling, but I wanted to come back when the sun was

streaming through the windows so I could show off the colors and textures I'd paired more clearly.

"Grab your coat," Justin said twenty minutes later after we'd done a final walkthrough and confirmed that he only had a few loose ends to tie tomorrow. "I'll drive you back to the farm."

North wasn't home when Justin dropped me off. He offered to wait with me, but I said I'd be fine to go in on my own. The front door was unlocked, and the chef, Maurice, was singing a French ballad at the top of his lungs in the kitchen. I was pretty sure it was a Christmas tune. It had familiar beats, but I couldn't quite place it. I snuck past and made my way out the back as twilight fell and threatened to become full night soon.

I pulled my phone out of my pocket and called my parents on the walk to my little cabin. I gushed about my day, giving them all the dirty details about the staging and how so many people had come together at North's request to help Justin. Dad said that was what small towns were best known for. Mom demanded I send pictures as soon as I was able.

They shared about their day and how they'd gone to the Christmas market in the town square to pick up baked goods to put out at their hosting events for the month. I wished I was going to be there to enjoy the lemon cranberry bars, shortbread cookies, and snowball pastries. My mouth watered just at the thought.

"How are you going to spend the rest of your evening?" Dad asked.

"Well, my first matter of business will be having a nice hot bath to ease all these new aches and pains." Working so diligently had taken its physical toll. I was used to a lot of in-class work. In other words, butt-in-seat work. It felt good to move my body and get down in the dirt for once, but I could definitely feel the aftereffects. "Then I might make myself a quick dinner. There's pasta in the pantry and cream and parmesan in the fridge."

"Sounds lovely," Mom said.

“Anyway, I’d better let you guys go. I’m probably going to lose service up ahead for a minute or two. Have a good rest of your evening and we’ll talk soon, okay?”

They wished me a good night and we exchanged I love you’s before Mom hollered into the phone to remind me to send pictures. I ended the call with a smile, dropped my phone in the pocket of my puffy winter coat, and gazed up at the starry night sky. Everything was blacked out by the cliff, but the stars peeking out above it looked romantic and almost other-worldly. I found myself wondering how beautiful it would be if the cliffside was dusted in snow and the night was clear like this. Would the moonlight make the snow on the ground, trees, and cliff glow? Surely it would.

I hoped I got the chance to see it before I went home.

A sharp wind picked up, and the branches on a tree up ahead shifted. At first, it seemed normal to me, and I assumed the wind had caused the rustling sound, but when I realized the lower branches were still moving and all the other trees were perfectly still, I froze in my tracks.

What is that?

My pulse quickened, and I held my breath, waiting.

The branch rustled again, this time way too mysteriously for me to chalk it up to wind, and as I watched, something low to the ground and slinky crept out from beneath the shadow of the tree. Its eyes were on me. I could feel its stare, curious and unafraid, as it stopped between the rows of trees.

Right in the middle of my path.

I swallowed hard.

So this is why North didn’t want me walking around by myself. Noted.

The creature, a canine with slender legs, haphazard fur, and raised hackles, could only be one thing.

A coyote.

I’d seen my fair share in Portland, but they’d never wandered out in front of me like this. More often than not, if a

coyote was around, you'd never know it because they had no interest in being seen. If you did see one it was by happenstance, and they were keeping their distance.

But this coyote?

He was brave. Too brave. And I felt watched.

Hunted.

Shit.

With shaking hands, I pulled my phone out of my pocket. No service. "Damn it!" A branch cracking up ahead startled me, and I looked up to find the wild dog had taken a few tentative steps toward me.

Not good.

Not good at all.

Desperate, I turned on the flashlight on my phone and cast the glare of light upon the creature. It shrank back a few steps but didn't flee. The flashlight caught its glowing eyes, and I found myself wondering if the padding in my jacket would protect me from the worst of the bites. I'd have to protect my neck, and if I could fight it off, I'd have to get back to the main house quickly so they could get me to the hospital for shots and stitches.

Why hadn't I listened?

"Go away!" I yelled, throwing my arms in the air erratically. "Shoo!"

The coyote backtracked to the tree from which he emerged, then circled back, this time lower to the ground, ears flat against his head, hackles even more raised and bushy.

For a moment, I considered running.

A great blast of sound split the air.

I screamed and covered my ears.

The coyote bolted and vanished into the trees, his paws silent on the frozen ground. My teeth chattered—either from cold or fear, I couldn't be sure—and I straightened up to turn

and find North's large silhouette emerging from around a large pine. He had a shotgun resting against his shoulder, and his features were drawn in their usual scowl.

"I told you not to walk the fields alone," he said.

I smelled gunpowder.

CHAPTER 15



NORTH

Winter stood frozen in place, her knees pinched together in fear, her honey-brown eyes wide with terror. The echo of my gunshot had long since ceased echoing off the cliff, but clearly, it was still ringing in her ears.

I should have known she wouldn't have heeded my warning about walking alone. The girl had a tendency to only hear what she wanted. Maybe the rifle shot would clear her ears out.

"S-sorry," she stammered, finding her voice after what felt like several minutes. "I... erm... shit. I was stupid."

Huh, maybe there was hope for her after all.

I rested the gun on my other shoulder. "Some just have to learn the hard way. You going to be all right?" I nodded down at her pinched knees. She looked like she was about to pee herself.

"Mhm. I'll be fine. Just having minor heart palpitations. I don't know what was scarier, the prospect of being attacked by a rabid coyote or the gunshot." Her gaze fixed on the rifle. "Probably the gun."

"Sorry," I said, deciding that if she had the guts to apologize, so did I.

"Don't be. You saved my hide."

"True."

A smile curled her lips. "Quite humbly too."

Less true.

I tipped my head back in the direction we'd both come, toward my house. "Have you eaten dinner yet?"

She shook her head and straightened up. "No, I was about to warm something up in the cabin. I just got back from Justin's heritage house. Things came together pretty nicely. You should go take a look at it when you get the chance."

"Maurice was just about to put out dinner. Come join me."

Her eyebrows raised. "Really?"

"What? I can't invite my intern to join me for a meal?"

She hurried over like the coyote, eager and low to the ground. "No, no, I'd love to. I'm sure whatever Maurice whipped up is better than what I was going to make. Lead the way."

We walked side by side, Winter occasionally kicking the toe of her boots through frozen blades of grass. She told me all about her day and how Justin's nerves had almost gotten the better of him.

"He wasn't convinced I knew what I was doing," she said, glancing up ahead as my house came into view. She shivered almost excitedly, anticipating the warmth as we both spotted the crackling living-room fire through the window. "But I think by the time I left tonight I had him rightfully convinced. Not a fan of color, that one. Or risk. If he had his way, he'd have made me decorate everything in different shades of gray. Boring."

"Some people like gray."

"Modern homes look great with gray. If people are chasing a minimal aesthetic or a baseline, then that makes perfect sense. But when you have a house like that with so much character?" She shook her head as if repulsed by Justin's preferences. "It's blasphemy. Total blasphemy."

We pushed into the house. Winter let out a happy little sigh and did a shimmy on the mat before slipping out of her boots.

"It's so nice in here," she cooed. "And it smells heavenly."

“Maurice’s schnitzel. Ten out of ten every time.”

“I’m drooling already.”

In my humble opinion, schnitzel paired best with a rich German red, so I poured us each a glass and we made ourselves comfortable in the dining room while Maurice put the finishing touches on dinner. Winter peeled off more layers of clothing until she was down to her white long-sleeve shirt and black leggings. Her socks had snowflakes on them, and she looked quite cute sipping her wine in the massive dining-room chair my father used to occupy at mealtimes when he was still alive.

She crossed one leg over the other and bounced one of said snowflake-socked feet. “I met Cami the other day.”

“Oh God.”

Winter giggled. “She didn’t say anything bad.”

“Now that’s a surprise.”

“She was quite sweet. She took me to the flea market. That place is a total goldmine, by the way. I found so many little treasures for Justin’s house and the Cuthbert party there, and it’s a local family business. I love that.”

“You love a lot of things.”

“True. It’s a Dodson quality. We’re eternal optimists. It drives a lot of people crazy.”

“Can’t imagine why.”

She laughed at me just as Maurice came out of the kitchen with serving trays of food. He laid our plates down in front of us and described the meal, starting with the garlic diced potatoes, pickled cabbage, shredded beets, and last but not least, the schnitzel. Winter hovered over her plate like a woman who hadn’t eaten in weeks, and I wondered if she’d skipped lunch while working feverishly on Justin’s house today. I wouldn’t put it past her. She had workaholic tendencies, that was for sure.

She brandished her cutlery and dug in. We savored the meal together, and she told me all about how her family used

to go to a German schnitzel house in Portland every New Year's Eve when she was growing up.

"We had a standing reservation every year," she explained, "and we never missed it. Sometimes other family or friends would join us. Other years it was just me, Mom, and Dad. I think those were our favorite years. As I got older, the tradition stood. My friends used to make fun of me for never wanting to miss dinner with my folks before going to a party, but I couldn't bring myself to do it. It was too special."

"Will you go this year?" I asked.

She nodded. "Hopefully, yes. If I'm not there, they'll go at least."

"Then we'll make sure you're there."

She beamed. "Do you have any family traditions that make you feel particularly nostalgic?"

I racked my brain, trying to conjure up old memories. "I have fond memories of my mother at Christmastime. She used to have this bright red holiday dress that she'd wear every Christmas Eve for our family house party. At least eighty people would attend. I remember Cami being there some years. Annoying little nuisance, she was. Always sticking her nose where it didn't belong and making trouble for the adults. She got into the vodka one year when she was eleven."

Winter rocked back in her chair with laughter. "Oh no! Did she really?"

I nodded. "A six-hundred-dollar bottle, to be exact."

Her eyes grew big. "Six hundred dollars? Was it filtered through gold and diamonds or something?"

"Who knows? One thing is for certain, she got plastered, threw up in my mother's poinsettias, and was carried home over her father's shoulder like a sack of potatoes. She was never left unattended at another Waylon party, if I recall."

Winter sipped her wine and her eyes danced with mirth. "You said your mother had a holiday dress?"

I nodded, recalling it in my memory like I'd seen it yesterday. "My father bought it for her the first Christmas they were married. It was long, almost to her ankles, with gold buttons from the collar to the hemline. Long sleeves. Sort of puffy before the wrist cuff. Very eighties," I added. "I remember her coming down the stairs in it one year and thinking to myself that I had the most beautiful mother in the world."

Winter rested her chin in her hand. "I bet she was spectacular."

Spectacular was one word for her. She'd been the apple of my father's eye and the light of my world growing up. She worked hard to make things special for me. As a kid, I didn't know all the magic in my childhood had been born from her heart. I supposed all children were naïve to the truth that their mother was the one behind the wonder of Christmas—the food, the lights, the gifts, the tree, the planning, the Christmas cards, the decorations, the events, all of it came from her.

My father had been happy to go along for the ride, but he'd always been so consumed by work that he wasn't as involved as her. She'd bake incredible treats for us, and I remember being eight years old standing beside her in the kitchen watching her knead dough. Her wedding rings had sat off to the side, and I stared at them, wondering if I would ever give a woman such a thing, and if she would love her rings the way my mother did.

Those rings were up in my room in a safe now.

Winter's wine glass had emptied, and mine was close behind, so I topped us off.

She swirled her glass, letting the nectar nearly kiss the rim before lifting it to her lips. I noticed the way her lower lip sealed against the glass and grew fuller as she tipped her head back. When she set the glass down, my eyes lingered on those lips of hers, full on the bottom, thinner on top, and almost heart shaped.

She cocked her head to the side. "What?"

“Nothing.”

Maurice came out of the kitchen and cleared away our dishes. I told him to cut out early this evening and that I would handle the kitchen cleanup. As per usual, he refused, but after a brief and enthusiastically French back and forth from his side of things, he conceded and went down the hall to put on his jacket and shoes. Winter watched the whole thing in amusement but never said a word. When we heard the front door close behind my chef, the rest of the house hummed with pleasant silence, save for the crackling fire in the living room, as if it were calling to us to come near its warmth.

We did.

Winter settled into the deep corner of one of the brown leather sofas and tucked one leg under herself. She held her wine glass close to her body as she gazed into the flames. “My mother has a holiday dress too,” she said rather spontaneously.

“Oh?” I couldn’t think of anything else to say. Speaking about women’s dresses would have bored me any other night, but for some reason, talking about such a mundane thing with Winter felt almost captivating.

She smiled wistfully, those heart-shaped lips of hers daring me to stare at them again. “It’s navy blue velvet. She’s had it for a long time. Decades maybe. I think it was a New Year’s dress originally, but she wears it every Christmas Eve now with a Christmas tree pin right here.” She rested a hand over her heart. “It has a matching pair of earrings.”

I wondered if her mother was as beautiful as Winter herself. Did they share the same upturned nose? Were their complexions equally fair, like fresh snow dusted in freckles across the high points of their cheeks?

Winter sighed and sank deeper into the corner of the sofa. “One day I’ll have a job where I can be home more in December. One day,” she said a little more firmly this time, “I’ll be the master of my own ship.” She nodded resolutely.

“Do you want to start your own design business?”

She lit up brighter than the flames of the fire. “Yes, when the time is right.”

“I have complete faith you’ll succeed.”

She lifted her wine glass in a toast. “Thank you. That might be the nicest thing you’ve said to me since I got here.”

“Don’t get used to it.”

She giggled. “I wouldn’t dare.”

CHAPTER 16



WINTER

North's company this evening felt different somehow, less abrasive. I might have even called it warm, but that could just be the wine talking. How many glasses had I had now? Three? Yikes.

I should slow down.

We lost track of time talking over the following hour. He told me all about the tree farm property when his grandfather had acquired it, and how everyone in town had thought him crazy to turn such a rocky minefield into a farm of any sort. But he had an eye for agriculture and a mind for expansion, and he'd done his due diligence properly fertilizing and turning over the fields before finally starting to grow crops of trees *six whole years* after buying the land.

The house itself had begun as a much smaller structure, just a three-bedroom home with a large main room and functional kitchen, but as the family and their wealth grew, plans were made to build the sprawling home we sat in now. I had to admit, it was the most magnificent house I had ever set foot in. It oozed masculine energy with all the exposed wood beams and deep tones, but it didn't have that coldness I was used to in homes owned by bachelors. This place still felt warm somehow, like the woman's touch hadn't been gone all that long.

My mind inevitably went to his deceased wife. My insides shriveled up, and I set my wine glass down.

North noticed the time. “I should walk you back to the cabin.”

I didn’t want to go. My behind felt glued to the seat and I didn’t want to leave the warmth of the fire—or his company for that matter. But it was midnight, and we had work the next day. We were helping Justin with his open house.

I forced myself out of the corner of the sofa. Once on my feet, my head buzzed from the wine. *Oops.*

North must have noticed how unstable I looked as he stepped *over* the coffee table between us with his freakishly long legs. “Are you all right?”

I nodded and pressed a hand to my forehead. “I think I stood up too fast.”

He made a deep, growling sound in the back of his throat. “You had quite a scare earlier. Maybe the wine after the adrenaline rush wasn’t the best idea.”

“I’m fine,” I assured him. “The walk will clear my head.”

His eyes were on me as we went to the back door where I quickly donned on all the clothes I had taken off before he offered me a steadying hand while I bent over and put on my boots. I accepted. His grip was warm, firm, and callused. *Strong.*

He stepped out into the cold first and I followed. As soon as I was out from behind his massive frame, the cold bit into me. He picked up the shotgun he’d left propped up against the side of the house and braced it on his shoulder. I bundled myself deep in my coat, and we took a few steps out into the night, leaving the halo of light surrounding the house behind.

We were halfway to the cabin when I stopped in my tracks.

He turned with a concerned expression. “What is it? Did you hear something?”

I shook my head, smiled, and tilted my head back. “Look. It’s snowing.”

He looked up at the sky, and we stood amongst the rows of hundreds of trees as the tiny flurries grew into bigger flakes

and dusted our shoulders and the tops of our heads. I breathed in the smell of cold, sharp air, liking the way it made my nostrils burn.

“Christmas is coming,” I whispered.

“Come.” North glanced around, eyes flicking from low tree branch to low tree branch. “Let’s get you back to the cabin.”

He led the way and I followed, sticking close to him for comfort. He didn’t say a word when I accidentally bumped into his elbow over and over. I wondered if he sensed my unease about being out here after seeing the coyote. If he did, he never took the opportunity to make fun of me.

The cabin came into view, and he walked me right up to the front door. The porch creaked under his weight.

I shouldered the door open and stood in the warmth of the doorway. “I’m shocked you’re actually standing on my porch right now,” I teased. “Usually you scurry away before your boots hit the wood.”

He looked away almost bashfully. “I didn’t want to wake you.”

“Uh huh.”

He rubbed the back of his neck. “Will you be okay spending the night out here alone after what happened?”

“Unless coyotes have found out how to pick deadbolts and turn doorhandles, yes, I’ll be okay.”

He gave me a smile that almost knocked me on my ass. Had I not seen him smile in earnest yet? He had dazzling white teeth, and his smile made the corners of his eyes crinkle almost joyfully. I soaked in the sight, trying to commit it to memory before it was gone as quickly as it appeared.

He tipped his head in the direction of the main house. “I’d better head back. I’ll come get you in the morning.”

“Okay.” I felt myself pulled toward him as he descended one of the porch steps, like there was a piece of invisible

thread tying us together. “Or you could stay a bit? I could put on some tea?”

Tea. I cringed. *A man like this doesn't drink tea, you idiot.*

He stopped, turned back, and studied me. For a moment I thought he was going to call me out for trying to buy more time with him. For what purpose, I still wasn't sure. All I knew was that I didn't want him to go, and it wasn't because I was afraid of a skinny coyote getting comfy on my porch.

“Tea?” he grunted.

I fidgeted with my hands and bit my bottom lip. “Yes, you don't have to. I just thought it might warm you up before you had to make the walk back.” I shook my head. “Never mind. Another time, maybe.”

“Tea sounds nice.”

“It does?”

“Doesn't it?” He stepped back up onto the porch. “You're the one who offered.”

We did a little cupid's shuffle on the porch as I tried to make room for him to come inside while holding the door open. It didn't work. He was too broad, and when I got haphazardly stuck between him and the doorframe, he smirked, stepped back, and *picked me up* to set me inside the cabin before coming in after me. He had to duck under the frame before he closed the door behind him and locked it.

I stood there staring like a dazed idiot before snapping to attention and hurrying to put the kettle on and brew us some tea.

Because that was why I'd invited him in.

Right?

For tea?

You're walking on thin ice, Winter. Tread carefully. Tread. Carefully.

North moved around my cabin, his head dangerously close to the ceiling, and began building a fire for me. It wasn't all

that warm inside, and I hadn't quite perfected the art of fire building, so I watched him work. He saw me staring and invited me over to show me some tips and tricks while the tea steeped.

I took a knee beside him and listened as he gave me thorough instructions. Unable to help myself, I watched his hands as he worked to effortlessly build kindling, snap smaller pieces of wood apart, and build a frame. He struck it with a match, and seconds later a small flame went up.

He sat back on his heels with a satisfied nod. "Not too complicated, right?"

I blinked at the flames. "Sure."

There was no way I would be able to replicate what he'd just done. I'd be lucky to get a cough of smoke out of some embers.

He chuckled.

We both pushed to our feet at the same time. He loomed over me, and I gazed up at him. The cabin smelled like wood smoke and the candles from my welcome basket—cinnamon and vanilla—but there was a new scent added to the bouquet now. His scent. Unsurprisingly, he smelled sharply of pine.

I breathed him in as he shrugged out of his jacket and tossed it on the sofa. His flannel shirt was tucked into his black jeans, and I had a sudden primal urge to rip it free and explore what lay beneath. He had the stature and presence of a man who possessed the kind of strength you couldn't earn in a gym. He was a farmer through and through, but his herd was trees, not cattle.

I gulped when he leaned past me to retrieve the fire poker. He jabbed a bit at the burning logs. A couple of sparks went up the chimney, and some passed between us too when his hazel eyes fixed on me.

He's your boss, a little voice whispered in my right ear.

He's sexy as hell, another whispered in my left.

North straightened.

I followed him with my eyes. I couldn't stop staring. In the firelight he looked masterful, like someone had chiseled him out of stone. His jaw was sharp and hard set, his nose straight and narrow, his cheeks high and pink, bitten by the cold. I wondered what he saw when he looked down at me. A naïve college student with a crush on her dark and handsome boss, or a woman he wanted to explore?

After a couple of feathery breaths, I managed to find my voice. "I think the tea is probably ready."

"Tea," he murmured, his gaze raking down the length of my body. "Right."

I felt like an animal trapped in a snare, and I didn't want to escape.

"We don't have to have tea," I breathed.

My words seemed to break him free of his trance, and he reached out, slid an arm around my waist, and pulled me against his body. He was as firm as a tree trunk, and I instinctively went to the tips of my toes to meet his kiss as he bent down toward me. His aftershave flooded my senses and the stubble on his jaw, fresh and short, burned against my skin, but I didn't care. His lips were warm and soft. His hand on my hip slid to my lower back, and before I knew what was happening, he'd turned us around, lifted me up with an arm around my waist, and sat down on the sofa with me in his lap.

Our lips never broke apart.

The kiss deepened as I straddled him. His tongue pressed between my teeth, and I let him explore me as my breathing and heartrate quickened as if in competition with one another. His fingers inched to the hemline of my shirt. Instinctively, I reached my arms over my head and let him pull it off. I wore a thin tank top underneath and an even thinner bra and my nipples were budding against the fabric, pleading for attention. He gave it to them, immediately biting me over the fabric in a firm but playful way that set my nerve endings on fire. His hands roamed all over my body before settling on my ass, and I upped the ante by removing my tank top.

I wanted him to see me.

All of me.

And I wanted to see him, too.

Slowly, I began working open the buttons of his flannel shirt. He watched me with hungry eyes as the fire crackled behind my back, casting dancing shadows across his face. If I hadn't known him, I might have thought he looked frightening.

Once I got his shirt open, I admired the muscly masterpiece beneath. He was cut like a Greek statue, powerful and shredded with dark hair across his chest and down the middle of his stomach. I followed the line down to his belt, undid it, and pulled his fly down.

North caught my wrist.

I froze. Had I done something wrong?

His lips crashed against mine again. I surrendered, letting him lead. He turned me around and held me with my back flush to his bare chest. He reached across my body, his forearm resting on my chest—making me wonder if he could feel my heart hammering against my ribcage—and flicked my jeans open with a flourish. His hand slid beneath the denim and under my panties. I held my breath but exhaled sharply when he touched me. His fingers grazed my clit, and I instinctively opened my legs further.

He became frustrated with how tight my jeans were, so he lifted me up, yanked them down so the fabric was gathered around my knees, and returned his hand between my thighs to rub me over my panties. Finally, he pulled them aside, and with his lips on my neck and his breath hot against my skin, he pressed a couple of fingers inside me.

I melted against him. His cock grew hard beneath me. I was dripping wet and vulnerable, draped over him like this, and I didn't mind at all. The voice of caution that had existed moments ago was silent. All I wanted was everything he was willing to give me.

Or take from me.

He could have it all.

He cupped my cheek with his free hand and turned my face to him. His kisses were deep and hungry as he fucked me with his fingers, and soon I was a whimpering mess in his arms, grinding my hips against him and holding on to his knees for support. He nipped at my bottom lip and growled when my thighs began to tremble and my body started taking over.

North stretched me, giving me more than I thought I could take, while his tongue plunged into my mouth. I needed him everywhere.

He edged me close to an orgasm before backing off. He did this over and over until I was a pleading, quivering, dripping mess in his lap. Finally, he gave me what I wanted, and I came hard and fast with his kiss silencing my cries.

Dazed and more turned on than I'd been in my life, I slid off his lap, went to my knees on the floor, and turned to face him. Kneeling between his thighs, I began pulling his jeans down with his help before hooking my thumbs in the waistband of his boxers.

I'd only drawn them down a couple of inches when he abruptly pushed my hand away.

"Wait," he said, his voice coarse and gravelly.

I looked up at him, still panting and swollen. He stood. I leaned back and reached for his fly again, assuming he wanted me to take him like this. I would take him however he wanted.

But he stepped away, did up his fly, and wouldn't look at me. "I should go."

I struggled to my feet with my jeans still around my knees, and shimmied them up. My cheeks burned. What had I done wrong? Things were going so well. Why did he want to stop right when they were getting good?

"I don't understand," I said.

"I'm sorry." He moved to the door and threw it open. Cold air blasted inside, making the fire dance. "I can't."

He was gone.

Just like that.

I stared after him into the night before hurrying to close the door and slumping against it. My whole body tingled with desire, but my mind screamed in dismay. Somewhere along the way, I'd done something wrong. I must have. Why else would a man walk away after fucking me in his lap like he wanted to own me? Desperate, I replayed what had just happened over and over, trying to make sense of it, but it only left me feeling more confused.

My body hummed with disappointment.

CHAPTER 17



NORTH

Cami stepped through the front door of the heritage house with her mother on one side and Marge on the other. All three women had snow in their hair and on the shoulders of their coats, and they shuddered in unison before relinquishing their coats to Justin, who'd eagerly hurried down the hall to welcome them to his open house.

Cami shook snow from her curls and looked around in wonder. "Justin, this is incredible!"

He grinned proudly as he hung their long coats on the hook behind the door amongst two dozen others. "Not too shabby, right? If not for Winter, it all would have gone to Hell in a handbasket. Ain't that the truth, North?"

I stood leaning against the banister post at the bottom of the grand staircase to the second level. Local and out of town buyers passed me by, some going up, others going down, and I offered them curt but friendly nods before pushing away from the stairs and joining the others under the giant antler chandelier over their heads. Winter had spruced it up with, pun intended, some spruce and pine boughs as well as dangling crystals that caught the light and sparkled radiantly.

"She did a great job," I said.

Cami peered past me. "Is she here?"

"In the kitchen, I think," I said.

Cami brushed past me, shooting me a little smirk on her way.

I arched an eyebrow. “What?”

“Nothing,” she called over her shoulder as her heeled boots announced her every step down the hall to the kitchen. “You just look less broody this morning than usual, that’s all.”

I felt my forehead wrinkle in disapproval.

Marge laughed and shook her head as she came to give me a warm hug. “Cami is right. You do seem lighter somehow. How are things?” She cupped my cheek the same way my mother used to so she could hold me down at her short five-foot height and look me in the eyes. She stared into my soul. “I hope you’re not working yourself to the bone.”

“The intern you helped set me up with has proven more than useful,” I said.

Marge gave my cheek a firm pat before letting me straighten up. “That’s what I want to hear! I’m going to go find her and pick her brain. Cami? Where on earth did you disappear to, girl? Come along, Leslie. Let’s find that daughter of yours.”

Marge and her closest friend, Cami’s mother, bustled off down the hall, leaving Justin and me to continue welcoming viewers to his open house. The morning had already been a huge success, which, lucky for me, meant I hadn’t spent any one-on-one time with Winter.

After how things ended last night, I wasn’t sure she’d want to see me. It couldn’t have felt good to her ego to have me get up and walk out right before she was about to deck the halls and grab my balls. I’d wanted to go further with her, but things got real too quickly, and I’d been suddenly very aware of the fact that I hadn’t been with a woman since Veronica.

I couldn’t go further with Winter. It felt like I was betraying my beloved wife. Simultaneously, I’d hurt the girl who’d been busting her ass for my company, who I very much wanted to see in compromising positions, last night. Primarily on her back.

“Earth to North?”

I blinked as Justin waved his hand in front of my face. “Sorry. What?”

He chuckled. “Where’d you go, man? You were staring off into space.”

“Got a lot on my mind.”

“Does it happen to have anything to do with your sexy new intern? Because if it doesn’t, I wanted to see how you’d feel about me...” He trailed off and swayed his hips like a salsa dancer before pumping his eyebrows. “You know, taking her out for a night on the town?”

“No.”

“No, as in you weren’t thinking about her and she’s on the table, or no, she’s off limits?”

“Off limits,” I growled.

He held up both hands and backed off. “Okay, okay. Sheesh. I was just asking. Did you see how tight her ass looks this morning in those pants? Shit.” He whistled. “If I had a girl like that staying on my property, I’d—well, I’d do a lot of things to her. And those—”

“Stop, before I make you.”

Justin gave me a shit-eating grin. “I fucking knew it.”

“Knew what? That you’re a slimy little horndog?” I gave him a shove in his chest that sent him back several paces.

He recovered and smoothed out his suit jacket. “No, I knew that you were into her. I’ve seen the way you look at her. It’s exactly like how I look at her. So if I’m a horndog, so are you, champ.”

I rolled my eyes.

“Tell me you haven’t thought about being between those legs of hers and—”

“Justin,” I grated.

“And feeling just how amazingly—”

I closed in on him and backed him right up against the frame of the front door. Shoving a warning finger in his face, I snarled at him. “Do yourself a favor and stop talking before I throttle you with your own tie. Do you understand? She’s my intern and colleague, not a piece of meat to be served up on a platter. Any attraction I may or may not feel toward her is none of your business.”

He tugged at the collar of his shirt, undoubtedly imagining how easy it would be for me to actually strangle him with his own tie. “All right. All right. I fold.”

“Wise.”

I left Justin to continue greeting potential buyers at the door and stepped away to get a breather from him. He was just horsing around, and I knew he wanted me to get back in the saddle after losing Veronica, but I wasn’t ready. I might never be ready. He may not have been able to make peace with that, but I sure could.

After wandering the first floor and admiring all of Winter’s work for the tenth time that morning, I found myself in the kitchen, where she was charming potential buyers and making small talk with Marge and Leslie. Cami leaned on the kitchen island shoveling shortbread cookies into her mouth. She gave me a squirrel-like smile when she caught me lingering in the doorway, watching Winter.

Why was everyone up my ass about my fucking intern?

It was like I had a giant red sticker on my forehead that said, *bailed right before things got good last night*.

Winter spotted me for the first time and abruptly stopped talking. All eyes shifted to me, and she cleared her throat before recovering smoothly, picking up brochures from the island beside the plate of cookies and passing them out to everyone in the kitchen.

“These are Waylon Farm Christmas trees,” she explained, “which are all throughout the house, you might notice. If you are in the market for a live tree this year and you want something that will make your guests gasp when they see it,

call or email us. All our contact info is on the back of the brochure. We do special events as well, not just trees for your living room.”

The girl had tenacity. I had to give her that.

Once everyone had filed out of the kitchen to go about their tours of the house, I moved toward her and stood on the far side of the island.

Winter shifted her weight from one foot to another before settling. “You’ve been avoiding me.”

“Not true.”

“We haven’t spoken all morning.” She looked away, cheeks turning pink. “Did I do something wrong last night? If I said something... did something... I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to.”

“No,” I said, perhaps a little louder than I should have. I dropped my voice and moved around to her side of the island. I wanted to take her hands in mine, but I resisted. There were too many eyes around, too many opportunities for whispers and town gossip. “No, and I’m sorry I made you feel that way. Last night was about me. It had nothing to do with you.”

She looked up at me. I saw all the insecurity in her eyes and wished I could spare her from it. “It doesn’t feel that way.”

I cringed. *Shit.*

How could I explain this to her?

Treading lightly, I tried to find the right words to alleviate her embarrassment. “Last night wasn’t a rejection of you. It was a compilation of shit I haven’t dealt with, and it all came to a head at once. I shouldn’t have put you in that position. You did nothing wrong. And for the record,” I added, “I wanted you. All of you.”

Her cheeks turned an even brighter pink, and I felt the primal urge to drag her in close and kiss her.

Instead, I broke down a barrier and took her hand, guiding her one step closer and checking to make sure nobody was

around. “I have demons, Winter. Places I don’t like to go, no matter how badly I want to.”

She searched my eyes before nodding once. “I understand.”

“You do?”

She nodded again and ran her thumb over my knuckles. “Yes, I think so. And it’s okay. I don’t want to make things weird or ask more of you than you’re ready to give. Although it felt good.” Her cheeks shifted from pink to a magnificent shade of red, but she didn’t falter. “Really good.”

My pants felt suddenly tight and the room was abruptly too hot for comfort.

This girl was going to be the death of me.

CHAPTER 18



WINTER

I'd struggled all morning with how I was going to talk to North when he finally decided to talk to me face to face, and it had gone about as well as I'd hoped. He'd eased my worries that I hadn't done something wrong, although the rejection from last night still stung, and he'd given me room to tell him how I felt. How I'd managed to look him in the eyes and tell him how good it was?

Well, that was beyond me.

But I'd done it, and I'd felt his whole body tighten at my words. At least I had some vindication. He wanted me physically as badly as I wanted him. He just had something standing in his way.

I had a feeling it was the shadow of his dead wife.

There was nothing I could do in the face of those demons—there was nothing I wanted to do, either. If he wasn't ready, it was as simple as that.

North and I abruptly stepped apart when Justin came in the kitchen with Cami under his arm, which was draped lazily across her shoulders. She smirked up at him, her curls now tousled and damp from the melted snow, and rolled her eyes when he muttered something, most likely a come-on, in her ear.

She shoved him away. "Keep your slimy sales tactics for your buyers, Justin."

He rubbed at his chest, feigning hurt feelings. “Sales tactics? I don’t know what you’re talking about. With all of Winter’s hard work, I’m not going to have to lift a finger. This place will sell itself now. I can feel it. Right, North?”

My gaze slid to my boss.

He nodded. “I don’t doubt it. You just need the right people to walk through those doors. Speaking of walking through doors, we should go.” He checked the time on his watch and nodded to me. “We have clients coming into the office from St. Louis today for a pitch. We’ll grab a bite to eat on our way.”

Justin thanked me a dozen more times for my work as he walked us to the door, and Cami trailed along behind us, cutting in when she had a chance and asking if I wanted to go for dinner tonight to catch up. I eagerly agreed. I’d been surrounded by too much testosterone, and I needed female companionship after everything that had happened last night. I didn’t want to air North’s business, but I did want to talk to someone who understood him and could take a load off my shoulders.

Or we could just giggle and talk about other things like Christmas parties and gift shopping. Either sounded great to me.

She said she would pick me up at the office at half past five before North ushered me out the door to his fancy SUV parked in the drive.

Justin hollered after us. “Don’t forget about the Christmas party here tomorrow night! No jeans, North. I mean it. Dress *nice*. And Cami, are you sure you don’t want to be my date?”

Cami brushed past him, hips swaying, eyes rolling. “I’d rather go to every party solo for the rest of my life.”

North and I piled into his SUV, and he cranked the heat. As soon as warm air came out of the vents, I held my hands in front of them to warm up. I hadn’t heard too much about the party tomorrow night, only that it was going to be an elegant affair abounding with high-level clients and some of Justin’s

closest friends to fill out the house and make it feel authentically like a Christmas party. It looked like North and I were among that category.

I'd have to find something to wear.

Snow still stuck to the ground from last night's flurries, but it had melted away from the pavement from all the cars driving over it. I gazed out the window at the passing trees with fluffy white branches and smiled as snow fell away from them when little red cardinals landed upon them.

North parked at the office, and a few short minutes later we found ourselves in his conference room sipping hot coffees we'd picked up at a drive thru on our way. I dug into a toasted cranberry and turkey sandwich while he responded to some emails on his computer.

Even though we'd cleared the air about last night, things still felt a little pulled tight.

Tense.

Like I was crossing a tight rope trying to reach him.

"So, who are these clients?" I asked. Maybe we just needed to talk about something easy and impersonal. "What do I need to know about them?"

His eyes lifted from his laptop screen, and moments later, he closed it and sat back, getting comfortable. "Mr. and Mrs. Velton are long-standing clients of Waylon Farms and have used our Christmas trees for three decades. Basically ever since they began their Christmas Market in 1990."

"Christmas Market?"

"They host vendors, entertainers, and a carnival on their property every December straight through to New Year's Eve, and one of the main attractions is the Christmas tree they bring in to the center of the event. They're a bit delayed this year getting the ball rolling. Mr. Velton had a health scare a month ago and they weren't sure they were going to be able to proceed, but now that he has the all-clear, you and I can consider this a rush order."

I gulped. “How rushed?”

“We need to select their tree, deliver it, and have it erected and decorated within the next four days.”

“Four days?!”

North flashed me a devilish grin. “What? You don’t think we can hack it?”

“I...” I trailed off and shook my head. “Four days isn’t a lot of time.”

“We’ve done it in less.”

Leaning into his confidence, I listened as he told me about the clients and their expectations. They never wanted a tree to look the same. Every year, it *had* to be different. No excuses. And not mildly different, but *wildly* different. He opened his computer back up, clicked to open a few folders, and turned it to me, showing me a file full of previous trees his company had done for them. With a history dating back thirty years, it was going to be hard to come up with something they hadn’t seen before.

I was chewing on that worrying fact when North’s receptionist guided a couple in their mid-sixties into the conference room. North rose to his feet and greeted them warmly before introducing me to them. The Veltons were plain, simple-looking people. The wife wore a ruby-red cardigan with pearls for buttons, and the husband had on a black sweater vest over a long-sleeved shirt. They looked stuffy and outdated, but as soon as they sat down and started talking, I discovered they were actually very amicable and warm.

“We’re so appreciative of you making time to see us, North,” Mrs. Velton said. “As you know we’ve had a stormy couple of months, but now that my darling Walter is out of the woods,” she paused to pat her husband’s hand, “we’re excited to dive into the Christmas spirit and make this the best year yet.”

The best year yet? In four days?

I forced my smile to stay on my lips and hoped it didn't betray my nerves.

Walter Velton leaned forward to rest his forearms on the table. He clasped his hands together to prevent them from shaking. "We'd love to hear what you're thinking for the tree this year, North. What brilliant ideas are swirling in that head of yours?"

North turned, surprisingly, to me. "Actually," he mused, "my new creative partner is the one who's going to handle your design."

I had half a mind to throw up on the spot with the pressure. Instead, I sat up a bit straighter, smiled until my cheeks hurt, and addressed them both. "I'm very excited to work with you both, and I think your event is spectacular. It deserves a tree that doesn't have to compete with everything else you have on site. Carnival rides themselves are bright and loud, so I want to do something that will make the tree stand apart from everything else."

The couple shared a pleased look.

I took that as an indication to continue. "I would like to cut the bottom branches off the tree up to the eight-foot mark."

North rubbed his jaw.

Mrs. Velton blinked. "Sorry?"

Bear with me. "Every year," I said, "your tree has had the same physical shape, which makes sense, because it's a Christmas tree. You've created different schemes using color and lighting, but there's only so much we can do on that front, especially with a tree of this size. So, let's make the tree an experience, just like the carnival rides. We'll cut the bottom branches and hang lights straight down like rain. I've seen this done before, and it makes for beautiful photo-ops. Trust me, if we do this, every family and young couple at your event is going to be under that tree taking pictures, and those pictures are going to flood social media and serve as free marketing for you."

North's hand slid over his mouth, and I had a feeling he was concealing a smile.

I showed them photos of a Christmas market I'd been to two years ago with my parents and younger cousins. The kids loved the dangling lights, and their parents loved snapping pictures with them. Even if you were a God-awful photographer, you were bound to get stunning images.

"We can carry the white lights up to the top of the tree in vertical lines." I spoke animatedly with my hands, trying to help paint a picture for them. "The star of the show can be the star on top, and I'd like to create something a bit more modern. Not a traditional star, but rather a blazing sun of sorts. I can sketch it, if you like."

Walter shook his head. "I trust you."

His wife nodded. "Me too."

Just like that?

North took over the meeting, knowing I was a pitcher not a closer, and went over the details of what they could expect from us in the coming days, including our visit to their property in two day's time to oversee the tree going up and the cutting of the lower branches. From there, we would manage the decorating to their liking.

While he spoke, my brain continued to fire. Snapshots of what the tree could look like flashed in my mind's eye, and when I closed my eyes and painted it in full color against the black of my closed eyelids, I saw more glitz and glamor—I wanted giant ornaments in odd-numbered groupings in whimsical colors. I wanted a Grinch stealing some of said ornaments standing on a lift shouting down at kids passing by. I wanted magic and wonder.

A flutter of excitement rippled through me.

Who knew decorating Christmas trees could be so much fun?

CHAPTER 19



NORTH

Justin did a little shimmy in the snow, leaving a mishmash of boot prints while I crouched down to set a trap. The damn coyotes had been out in more numbers than usual, and with Winter staying on the property, I didn't want to take any risks. She hadn't wandered off on her own since that night I had happened upon her walking alone and had to fire my shotgun to scare off the wayward coyote, but a man could never be too careful.

"It's fucking cold out here," Justin said through chattering teeth.

"You'll be fine, princess."

"How do those things work, anyway?" He nodded at the trap I was setting, a simple catch and release mechanism. "Is it going to hurt them?"

I shook my head and tightened the release. "No. It snares them, and then animal control comes to tranquilize them and relocate them. *If* I even catch one. The farm opens for business in a couple of days for people to come buy their own trees. I can't have wild animals wandering around."

"You already have a giant grumpy one as it is."

I looked up at him from beneath my brows.

"You," he said. "I meant you."

"I knew what you meant."

"I thought it was funny."

“Uh huh.” I rose to my feet and brushed snow off my knees. “How’d the rest of the showing go this morning? Any bites?”

We began walking back toward the house. Winter had been picked up about twenty minutes ago to join Cami for dinner and drinks, and Justin and I were going to drink whiskey and catch up. We’d both had so much on our plates work-wise recently that we hadn’t had much time to hang out. He might have been a tedious pain in my ass, but he was my closest friend, and he’d been the one person to keep me from losing my sanity after Veronica died.

Well, him and Marge.

“I have some interested parties,” Justin said. “There’s an out of town buyer looking at it to turn into a bed and breakfast, which let’s be honest, is a great idea for a property like that. Historic. Simultaneously close but removed from town. Plenty of land to build add-ons if desired. Lots of bedrooms and bathrooms. I have a good feeling about it.”

Sounded like a sweet spot to me, too.

“They’ll be at the Christmas party tomorrow night,” Justin continued. “You and Winter are coming, right?”

“Yes.”

“Are you bringing her as your date?”

“Will you leave that shit alone?”

He gave me a playful shove, but because of our size difference, he was the one who lost his footing and stumbled. He regained his balance with some grumbling. “Dude, just buy her a nice dress and show her a nice time. She’s away from home for the holidays and this party is going to be something else. She’s the one who put in all the work for the décor. Why not make her feel like a *someone* at the party? Introduce her to some of the clients. She might land future gigs from this.”

I hadn’t thought about it that way and felt a tinge of guilt. I’d been too consumed thinking about how dangerous it would be to see her in a gown. Slowly but surely, the girl was becoming my kryptonite. Listening to her pitch to the Veltons

this afternoon had been a huge turn-on. Sure, a Christmas tree decorating pitch wasn't exactly sexy in standard terms, but seeing her step into her role with so much confidence and own the room?

Yeah. That got my blood rushing.

"A dress, huh?" I asked.

"A *nice* dress," Justin pressed. "Something that will set her apart from the other guests. Try that bridal boutique that sells special event dresses. Isn't that where all your staff buys their gowns for your office events? The real bougie ones?"

I shrugged.

We walked in silence for a little while longer, and darkness closed in around us before the house came into view. I smelled Maurice's cooking in the air, rich and fragrant, and Justin let out a low, growling, pathetic sound beside me.

"You can stay," I said.

He rubbed his hands together enthusiastically. "You're a good friend. What's that Frenchman making tonight?"

Chuckling, I let us into the house and poured us each a glass of whiskey. We brought them into the living room, and Justin started talking about the prospective bed and breakfast buyers before his eyes landed on evidence I'd forgotten to tidy up.

Me and Winter's wine glasses from last night.

He picked one up. "What's this?"

"A wine glass."

"No shit. Whose is it?"

I settled into my usual spot across from the fireplace. "Go on. Play detective. I'm sure you'll riddle it out."

"You had Winter up here last night. Drinking wine?" He clicked his tongue and let out a belly laugh. "You naughty dog. What have you been keeping from me? Are you two, you know?" He intertwined his fingers. "Coitus-ing?"

“Dude.”

“Dude!” He fell into the opposite corner of the sofa from me, threw back a mouthful of whiskey, and set his glass down on a coaster. “I need details. You were playing coy before, but I should have known you were keeping secrets. North, ever the gentleman, never one to kiss and tell. How did it happen?”

I rolled my eyes. “We didn’t have sex.”

“Bullshit.”

“We didn’t,” I said simply.

“You want me to believe you had a girl who looks like her in your living room, drinking wine, late at night, and *nothing* happened? Give me a break. I saw you two this morning. There was tension. And don’t even get me started about the passing glances you share or the way you stare at each other when you know the other isn’t looking.”

That was news to me.

Had Winter been staring at me when my back was turned? I’d certainly been staring at her.

I massaged my temple. “If you must know, something did happen, but we didn’t have sex. We fooled around.”

“Good man.”

“I stopped things.”

“Bad man! Why?”

Sighing, I swirled my drink. “Because she’s not Veronica, Justin. Simple as that. And going any further than we did last night felt...” I trailed off and shook my head. I took a greedy sip of whiskey. “Wrong, somehow.”

The smart ass comment I expected never came. Instead, Justin nodded solemnly. “I want to say I understand, but I don’t think I ever can. She’s the first girl who’s turned your head since Veronica died. I can’t imagine what sort of turmoil that stirs up. But for what it’s worth, and coming from someone who knew Veronica just as long as you did, she wouldn’t want you to keep a good woman at arm’s length for

her sake. She'd want you to fall into it. She'd kick your ass if she knew you were using her as an excuse to play it safe."

I knew all these things. Veronica was—had been—the kind of woman to lead with her heart. That strength had inspired me and had been the thing that made me fall in love with her when I was in my early twenties and had a head full of starry dreams. I'd been in the process of being primed to take over the farm, and with her by my side, I'd felt invincible. We had run things together for a brief snapshot of time before fate intervened and turned the tables on us.

Fate. Such a wicked bitch.

"If you want this girl," Justin said softly, "I think it's time you let yourself go after something good. And Winter? She's good to the tips of her toes."

CHAPTER 20



WINTER

S now began falling outside the restaurant window as soon as Cami and I sat down. She'd insisted on taking me to this place, an apparent holy grail in town loved by all the locals. Based on how good it smelled and how busy it was, she'd made the right choice.

The ceiling was full of Christmas lights and glistening ornaments. The sight reminded me of being a kid and lying on my back under the Christmas tree, looking up at the lights and the baubles, feeling that swell of childlike excitement and wonder for the holiday season.

And the anticipation of Santa's visit, of course.

Cami handed me a menu. "Okay. You can't make a bad choice here. Everything is delicious—literally. What I usually like to do is order a bunch of appetizers to share, but we don't have to do that. Look, see what speaks to you, but know it's on the table. No matter what though, I'm getting cheese sticks."

I laughed. "Okay, I won't get between you and your fried cheese."

"You're a quick learner, Winter Dodson."

After a diligent review of the menu, I opted to go Cami's route, and we ordered four appetizers to share, which I suspected would be way too much food. We also ordered red wine, because why the heck not, and sipped on it while we talked about the open house this morning.

"Justin has a thing for you," I said.

Cami gave her head a little shake. The shorter curls that framed her face danced above her eyebrows. “No, not really. He plays like he does, but he and I are more like brother and sister. Maple Hill is a small town. Everyone knows everyone. He used to date my older sister through high school and college, so I always looked up to him as this really cool older boy who would drive me to school sometimes and surprise me with toys and candy every now and then.”

“He and your sister didn’t work out?”

“She went to study in London and things fizzled out. They were kids when they started dating. In the end, they weren’t all that compatible once they got their footing in adulthood. She’s married now with kids of her own and he’s doing just fine, as you can see. You did him a serious favor staging the house, by the way. I can’t believe how good it looked.” She pumped her eyebrows. “I can’t wait for the party tomorrow night.”

“I don’t really know what to expect—or have anything to wear. All my clothes are business casual or loungewear.”

“Don’t worry, I have some connections. You’ll have a dress.”

I wasn’t sure what that meant, or who said connections were, but I wanted to go to the party, and I wanted to show up looking the part. “Thank you.”

“I’ve got you, girl. You’re one of us now. It’s kind of how things work here. Once you’re in, you never get out. And the fact that you’ve defrosted North’s heart a couple of degrees? Well, it’s only a matter of time before everyone notices and starts begging you to stay.”

“Really?”

She gave me a knowing smile.

I fidgeted with my cutlery. “Actually, speaking of North, there was something I wanted to talk to you about. I don’t want to put you in a bad spot, so I totally understand if this is off the table, but... erm... things sort of heated up between us last night.”

Cami's eyes widened. "Heated up? Girl, nothing is off the table except for vagueness. I need to know what 'heated up' means."

I looked around, my cheeks burning, to make sure nobody could hear us. "We *almost* had sex. Like *almost* almost. But right before things went that way, he pumped the brakes and said he couldn't do it. We talked briefly this morning, and I think I know why he backed off, but still, he wants it and so do I, and I don't really know what to do about it. I'm here for only a few more weeks. Do we just pretend there isn't this giant elephant in the room? It's really distracting."

Cami chewed on the inside of her cheek while she thought things over. Finally, she heaved a dramatic sigh. "He's a complicated beast, Winter. I assume you've pieced together his reservations stem from losing his wife?"

I nodded. "He implied as much. I don't want to know what happened or get any details. That's his business to share. I guess I'm just wondering if I should back off completely, or if I should leave myself open to something maybe happening again."

"I think you should do what you want."

"Easier said than done," I murmured.

Our food arrived, and both of us leaned back while the server set out plates of appetizers. Cami went in for a cheese stick right off the jump, scorched her tongue, swore like a sailor, and went back in for another punishing bite.

She licked marinara sauce from her fingers. "Listen, I don't think there's any harm in making yourself available so long as you know what's on the up and up. He might never act on the impulse again. Or," she said somewhat slyly, "a few more days might pass, and things might shift, and he might loosen up to the idea. I don't think he's been with anyone since his wife died. It's a hard pill to swallow and a big step to take. But if I were you, I wouldn't give up hope. 'Tis the Christmas season, after all."

"Am I wrong to want him?"

“What?” Cami blinked and shook her head. “Of course not! Why would it be wrong?”

“He’s my boss... he’s a widower... he’s ten years older than me...”

She waved her hand dismissively. “All minor details. He’s only your boss for a month. Widowers deserve a good lay just as much as the next person. And ten years isn’t that much. Honestly, this is the best case scenario for both of you.”

“How so?” I leaned back and sipped my wine.

“Well, there’s no strings attached. You do your internship and maybe get some great sex. He gets back in the saddle. Then you both go your separate ways when the holidays begin and go back to your normal lives. No harm, no foul.”

“No harm, no foul,” I muttered.

“Unless you see something more with him than just a hookup.”

This conversation was getting a little too real, a little too quickly. “No, not at all. He’s too stoic and moody for me. I like men who are emotionally available.”

“Oh, so like Justin?”

We both burst out laughing. We laughed so hard that a family at the table next to us shot us curious looks and smiles. We apologized through tears and aching ribs, and I had to use the napkin to dab the corners of my eyes.



Cami leaned against me in the backseat of the cab and peered up at North’s front door. “Are you sure you don’t want me to walk you to the door? The driveway might be icy.”

I held up a foot, showing off the winter boots he’d brought me on my first afternoon in town. “I’m covered. Thank you though. I just have to take it slow.”

We'd indulged in perhaps one too many glasses of wine at dinner. After talking about the more serious things, we'd shifted gears and spent the rest of the evening laughing like idiots. We'd spilled out of the restaurant with bellies full of wine and wandered the streets of town, enjoying the Christmas lights and the chill in the air. The alcohol kept us warm, and Cami's bright spirit made me feel like a kid again when she grabbed my hand and led me to a food truck selling all different flavors of hot chocolate.

Now it was almost midnight, and with a big day ahead of us tomorrow, including the party in the evening at Justin's heritage house, I needed to go to bed.

Hopefully North was still up to walk me to my cabin.

I opened the back door of the cab and slid out. Cami called after me that she'd see me tomorrow night, and I made my way up to the front door and knocked. Cami and the cab driver waited until North opened the front door and blinked out at me.

"You're just getting home now?" he asked.

I giggled. "We had fun."

He stepped aside. "Come in. It's cold as hell out."

The warmth of his home swallowed me whole. Shaking off the last of the chill, I breathed in the smell of the place, oaky and savory, like a masculine candle had been burning recently and dinner had been served some hours ago.

He grabbed his coat from the hook beside the door. "I'll walk you back to your cabin."

North led the way out the back of the house, and I followed, having to do a little hop-step every now and then to keep up with his long strides. He slowed down once we were out in the fields, but my pace remained brisk.

My breath fogged on the air as I told him all about my evening. "Cami said Justin used to date her sister. Maple Hill is a smaller town than I realized, isn't it? Everyone seems to know each other or know *of* each other at least."

“Pretty much.” He slid his hands in his pockets and tucked his chin into the collar of his jacket. “Newcomers are rare. You’re the first newbie we’ve had staying for an extended time in a couple of years, probably.”

“Did you ever want to leave for someplace bigger?”

“No, never. Growing up here on the farm was the best childhood I could have asked for. I get to travel enough to be grateful to have a simple place like Maple Hill to come home to.”

My cabin came into view up ahead, and he walked me right up to the front door a short minute later. He stood by while I rummaged for my key in my purse. When I found it and nudged the door open, he fell back a step, giving me space.

From where I was standing it felt like he was implying with his body language that he didn’t want to come inside.

Didn’t want a repeat of last night.

I forced a smile and leaned against the doorway. “Thank you for walking me. I’ll see you sometime in the morning?”

He raked his fingers through his hair. “Yes, I have a delivery coming for you.”

“A delivery?”

“You’ll need something to wear to Justin’s party. Unless,” he added with a smirk, “you’re content to go in your boots and leg warmers.”

“Don’t knock the leg warmers. They’re cozy.”

“Cute, too.”

I hated how much he made me blush.

North stepped off the porch and wished me goodnight. “Sleep well.”

“You too,” I called after him, when all I really wanted to say was *stay*.

CHAPTER 21



NORTH

I drummed my fingers on my knee while I waited for Winter to get ready. I'd wandered down to the cabin about an hour or so ago to walk her back up to the main house, where I had a couple of surprises in store for her. Namely, a dress for tonight's party and a beauty staff on call to do her hair and makeup and all those other woman-type things.

Glancing at my watch, I saw that we were running a few minutes behind.

Justin was going to blow a fuse.

Or with any luck, he might be too busy schmoozing guests at his party to notice we were late.

Getting a dress on time hadn't been as difficult as I anticipated. I called the bridal shop Justin had suggested and was referred to another boutique a couple of towns over, where I ended up doing a video call with one of the consultants, who helped me pick out the winner. She'd packaged the dress up and had it shipped that night, and it had arrived this morning with a note thanking me for my business. I'd been tempted to open the box and take a look but decided to wait.

At half past eight I hollered up the stairs for the team to hurry up. Giggles were the only response I got.

Finally, a good fifteen minutes later, I heard them come out of one of the spare rooms. High heels clicked on the floorboards on the landing, and I turned to find Winter standing at the top of the stairs.

The sight of her hit me like a kick to the gut.

Her long brown hair was curled and drawn over her shoulder. Pearls and tiny glistening jewels filled her locks, and they twinkled under the chandelier as she descended the stairs, revealing glittering shoes under the hemline of her dark green dress. The silky fabric of the gown danced as she walked, and every other step revealed long, lean, gorgeous bare leg through a high slit cut almost all the way to her hip.

I offered her my hand as she reached the bottom steps and guided her the rest of the way.

“Thank you.” Pink lips shimmered with gloss, and her eyelids glistened with powdered silver and gold.

“You’re welcome,” I breathed.

Winter ran her hands over the silky skirt of her dress. “What do you think?”

Say something, man. Anything.

She smiled sweetly and her hand, still placed gently in mine, slid over my wrist and up to my elbow. “You look handsome. This suit is very different from all the plaid and denim.”

I cleared my throat. “Thank you. You look beautiful, Winter.”

“I’ve never worn anything so luxurious before.” She removed her hand from my arm to place her hand over her ribs, where the dress cinched and showed off her shape. “I feel like I’m having my princess moment.”

“Your what?”

“Princess moment.” She giggled. “You know, the moment in the movie when the ordinary girl gets to wear the fancy dress and everyone turns and sees her in a different light?”

Sure.

I offered her my arm. “Shall we?”



The whole driveway of the heritage house was packed to maximum capacity with cars. It seemed as though Justin had invited half the town, and perhaps he had, as well as potential buyers who were staying at some of the hotels. The Christmas lights shone down on us. We made our way from the car we had to leave on the street up to the front door, where we were welcomed inside by a greeter Justin had stationed there. He took our coats, and before we had a chance to get our bearings, another staff member was there offering us sparkly cranberry cocktails garnished with sprigs of thyme and orange slices. Winter took one, pressed her lips to the sugared rim, and sipped as we moved into the house, navigating our way through groupings of people milling around talking and munching on hors d'oeuvres.

Cami stood in front of the crackling fire in the living room and let out an excited squeak when she saw us enter. People made way for her as she charged toward us. Before greeting me, the man she'd known almost her whole life, she threw her arms around Winter's shoulders, gave her a squeeze, stepped back, and gave Winter a little twirl like they were ballroom dance partners.

"Oh. My. *Gosh*." Cami clapped a hand over her mouth. "You look incredible! Where have you been hiding that figure? And those *boobs*," she gushed under her breath. "Wow. Just wow."

Winter blushed and put a hand over her cleavage.

I'd noticed, too. How could I not? The dress was cut low in the front, almost to her ribcage, and showed off a classy amount of milky white cleavage. Her breasts were perky, and I'd had several fantasies already about ripping the straps of the dress down and freeing her.

"Cami," Winter hissed, "you're embarrassing me!"

"Oh please, some good tit décor never hurt anybody. And when you've got a set like that? Flaunt them, baby." Her gaze

wandered to me, and she winked.

Winter fanned her red cheeks and was about to say something when Justin spotted us and came over. He enveloped Winter in a hug, clapped me on the shoulder, and went on an excited tangent about how well the party was going and how many people had already inquired about his designer.

He informed Winter that he'd been passing along her name and talking her up. By the time she graduated, he assured her she'd have plenty of work to choose from just operating out of his client base. This seemed to get her over-the-top excited, leaving Cami and me on the sidelines to sip our drinks and observe.

“Seriously,” Cami said out of the corner of her mouth, “that dress is spectacular. Well done.”

“It’s just a dress. The *girl* is spectacular.”

She nudged my hip with hers, the same way she used to when she was a sprite of a teenager with braces and holes in her jeans. “Yes she is. Rare, too. The sort of girl who only comes around once in a lifetime, maybe. It would be a shame if she came and went, and nothing changed.”

I stared down the length of my nose at her.

“Don’t scowl at me, North Waylon. I’m just saying. Every man in this room wants her out of that dress, but you’re the only one she’d ask to help her with the zipper. Do with that as you will.” Cami gave my hip another bump. “I’m going to go track down my mother and make sure she’s not too deep into the cranberry cocktail. Christmas parties make her saucy.”

“Good luck.”

Winter indulged Justin a little while longer before seeking me out, hooking her arm through mine, and asking me to introduce her to some of the townsfolk. It wasn’t how I usually operated at parties. I preferred to pick a spot and stay there. If people came up to me, so be it, but ideally, I preferred to stand there until an acceptable amount of time had been reached before I could make my exit without being too rude. I had a feeling that would not be an option this evening.

Winter made effortless first impressions on everyone.

Justin's fellow realtors asked her for business cards, which she didn't have, and I told them I'd give them to Justin to pass along once they were done at the print shop. Murmuring to her that little white lies never hurt anyone, we moved along so I could make introductions to some old family friends who had gone to high school with my father.

I hated how they looked at me like I was finally "moving on." Ever since Veronica died, I'd been getting sympathetic smiles everywhere I went from people who thought expressing their sympathy would help me somehow. It didn't. It just constantly reminded me that I'd lost something precious—something I could never get back.

Winter must have sensed it. After making small talk for a while, she led me into the kitchen, where we stood off to the side by the large bay window in the breakfast nook, looking out at the landscaped yard trimmed in Christmas lights.

"Does it get old?" she asked.

"What?"

"The small-town nosiness." She turned her back to the window and crossed her arms. I fought valiantly not to look at the way it pressed her breasts together, like they were kissing. "Everyone knows your business and thinks it's okay to—I don't know..." She trailed off, shaking her head. "Never mind. I suppose I'm being just as bad as them, bringing things up."

"You're not."

The corner of her mouth curled in a half-smile. "Do you ever want to tell them to just fuck off?"

I laughed. "All the time. But it wouldn't get me anywhere. Believe me. I've tried."

"Oh?"

"It's better to be silent and grieving than angry and grieving. The latter makes everyone even more curious. They want to fix things. I learned a long time ago it was more about making themselves comfortable than sparing me."

She sighed, and when I stepped up beside her, she turned back to the window and surprised me by resting her head against my shoulder. Not upon, because she was too short, but against. “Death makes people uncertain. Unsure. They don’t know how to navigate it. I suppose their hearts are in the right place, but it would drive me crazy to be reminded at every turn that I was the widower in town.” She lifted her head from my shoulder and balked at her own comment. “Oh my gosh, I’m sorry, that was rude, I was just—”

“Don’t worry,” I said. “It’s nice to have someone who will speak freely. There is no wrong thing to say. No right thing, either. They’re just words.”

Her head returned to my shoulder. The sounds of the party at our backs filled our ears, and the reflections of guests danced across the window.

“Is Christmas harder than other days?” she asked softly.

“Yes and no. Veronica loved Christmas, so sometimes it makes me feel closer to her. Other times it makes me feel...” I trailed off and shook my head. “It’s been nice having you here, Winter.”

She reached down, and her dainty fingers intertwined with mine. “It’s been nice being here. Minus the coyote standoff.”

I chuckled. “You could’ve taken him.”

With a snicker, she held up her free hand and balled it into the tiniest fist I’d ever seen. “My dad taught me how to throw a mean right hook. That crazy animal was messing with the wrong chick. He’s lucky you showed up and scared him off.”

“I bet you had him shaking in his fur.”

“Like a little bitch.”

Both of us descended into laughter, and I caught our reflection in the window and didn’t recognize myself. It had been a long time since I laughed like this with anyone, let alone a woman and let alone at a party. Veronica had been the one to drag me out of my shell and force me to socialize. After I lost her, I retreated back to my introverted ways—back to where I was most comfortable. But Winter?

She made me feel like that man again.

She gave my hand a little tug. “Come on, let’s grab another one of those cranberry things. Oh, and maybe you could introduce me to the man in the blue suit? Justin said he owned the main hotel in town and that he’s considering a makeover in the next year. Could be a good job to add to my portfolio.”

We made our rounds of the party. Winter shook even more hands and charmed the pants off everyone who was lucky enough to find themselves in her company. I stood by her, watching her work—because that was what this was, a hustle—and admired how she held people captive by her radiance, quick wit, and endearing sense of humor.

Shortly before midnight, I was about to pull her outside and take her home when Justin came hurrying over to where we stood with Cami and announced that he just got an offer on the house.

“That’s fantastic!” Cami popped him in the arm.

He flinched and rubbed at his tricep. “So long as the owners accept it.”

“Call them,” Winter encouraged.

“It’s late,” he said.

“Call them,” Winter said again, this time more forcefully. “They wanted the sale before Christmas, right? Pass along the information as soon as you have it. Let’s make this a night really worth celebrating.”

CHAPTER 22



WINTER

Cami slid a shot glass across the kitchen island to me. Rum, or what I was fairly certain was rum, sloshed over the edge and spilled over the granite, but at this stage of the evening, spilled liquor wasn't a concern.

Justin had just closed on the house, closing the deal with an offer well over asking price. His clients were thrilled, and the buyers were more than eager to get themselves moved in before the holidays really geared up. Justin had already passed along North's name to them and offered to hook them up with a live Christmas tree to be waiting for them, watered and set up, the day they moved in because all the ones Winter had decorated for the open house were being donated. A Merry Christmas and thank you gift. They'd jumped at the offer and requested I decorate it.

My ego didn't need any more stroking, but here I was, basking in the glory of people loving the "magic" I brought to Christmas.

Somehow, with our busy schedule, I'd have to sort out some time to come back to the house and decorate the tree. North had already offered to help me, which was sweet.

What was also sweet was how he'd been by my side all evening.

Even now, as I held my shot glass of rum, he stood close enough that I could smell him—and simultaneously not be able to see past him because of his sheer size. I gave him a little prodding with my elbow and he moved back a step so I

could see the group around the island—Justin, Cami, Marge, Leslie, North, and me. A few stragglers joined us every now and then, but for the most part the party had wound down.

Well, for normal people anyway.

We were still celebrating.

“To Justin!” Cami hollered, lifting her shot glass in the air.

“To Justin!” We all echoed, following suit and throwing back our shots.

North set his down on the counter hard and dragged the back of his hand across his mouth. “Shit.”

I licked my lips, enjoying the spicy, cinnamon-tinged aftertaste. “I love spiced rum. All that’s missing is some eggnog.”

Cami winked. “Next time.”

More shots were poured. The liquor continued to flow, and my head began to buzz pleasantly, but before things went too far I held up a hand and shook my head. “No more for me.”

North put his hand in the small of my back. “Are you ready to go home?”

Home?

The farm wasn’t my home, but I kind of liked that he referred to it as such. Perhaps it was because he wanted me to feel at home during my stay. Either way, I liked how it sounded on his lips, and I nodded. My bed and cozy cabin had been calling my name for the last half hour.

We said our goodbyes. Justin thanked us profusely and promised to get in touch and work out a schedule for delivering and decorating the Christmas tree in a week for the new buyers. North helped me with my coat, opened the door for me, and followed me out onto the porch. The cold air bit into my cheeks as we descended the front steps, so I buried my chin in the collar of my coat and crammed my hands into the fleece-lined pockets.

We had to make the quarter-mile walk down the dark, tree-lined country road from the heritage house to the Waylon Farm. North and I had both indulged a little too much and weren't fit to drive, so we left his car there for him to get later. Instinctively, I stayed close to him, wary of coyotes or other wild animals that might want to test their bravery on two wayward wanderers in the middle of nowhere.

The hemline of my dress began to soak through from the ice and sludge on the street. When my teeth started to chatter, he reached out, wrapped a thick arm around my shoulders, and pulled me into the depths of his open jacket.

My shivering ceased almost immediately as his body heat seeped into my bones. "Thank you."

"I shouldn't have had so many shots," he admitted. "It would have been better to drive."

"The fresh air is good for my head. Besides, Justin is your friend. I'm glad you celebrated with us. I think tonight meant a lot to him."

He admitted that it probably did with a short grunt.

I'm beginning to understand his nonverbal communications, I mused. Is that a good or a bad sign?

Up ahead, the farm came into view, and we followed the glowing lights down the driveway to the front door, wrapped in garland and surrounded by Christmas lights. A decorating team had been hard at work all day while we were busy. Illuminated wreaths hung in front of each window on the second floor, and white lights strung in perfectly straight lines followed every inch of trim on the mansion.

I stopped to admire it all. "It's beautiful."

"It has worthy competition tonight."

Glancing up, I found him staring at me, the reflection of the lights dancing in his eyes.

"Is that the rum talking?" I asked softly.

"Perhaps," he said, taking my hand and pulling me to him. "But I've been staring at you all night. Thinking about your

lips.” His hand came up to graze my lower lip and lingered on my cheek. “And thinking about our night together... how good you felt.”

I shuddered, and this time it wasn't from the cold.

North slid his arm behind my back and held me flush against him. “I want more.”

With my hands pressed to his chest, I stretched to the tips of my toes. He still had to bow his head to meet me. Our lips grazed gently before we kissed in earnest. His kiss was warm, but the tip of his nose was icy cold. He tasted like spiced rum and smelled of pine. My senses piqued to his touch, too—the warmth of his hand on my back, the callused hand against my cheek, the fabric of his suit jacket under my palms, the coarseness of his stubble on my chin.

Without parting, he managed to get his front door unlocked. We backed inside, tripping over each other's feet, and he closed the door with a firm kick, locking it behind him with a flourish of his wrist. His jacket came off, followed by mine, and he picked me up at the bottom of the stairs. I hooked my legs around his waist and he climbed the steps effortlessly, one hand under my ass supporting me, the other still cupping the side of my face and neck.

At the top of the stairs, he turned right. I hadn't paid much attention when I was up here getting ready, and I didn't pay much attention to our surroundings now as we passed a stained-glass window glowing from the outside due to the Christmas lights. He stopped just past the window, pressed me up against the wall, and kissed me deeper. His tongue dipped between my lips. I hooked my arms around his neck and plunged my fingers into his dark, unruly hair.

Somewhere between our kisses my brain started to churn.

What did this mean?

Was he going to pump the brakes and stop right when things got good again?

He held me with confidence and certainty. I sensed no reservation in him this time, and if he did discover that he still

wasn't ready to take this step, I couldn't be angry with him for it. I just had to be willing to set myself up for rejection again.

His kisses burned in the best way, and my nipples budded against my dress in response. The skirt of my dress inched up my legs the longer he held me, and soon his hands were on my bare thighs as he held me to the wall. When he could, he shifted his hands under me to cup my bare ass. A gown like the one I had on was not meant for panties, so I'd forgone them entirely. He squeezed my cheeks and let out a hungry little growl against my lips.

I rocked forward in his hands, using them like a seat, and murmured into our kiss. "Help me out of this dress."

It weighed a ton now that the skirt was wet on the bottom from our walk home.

North carried me down the hall the rest of the way. We ducked into his bedroom, a high-ceilinged, masterful, masculine space in deep shades of navy and camel brown. His four-poster bed didn't so much as creak when he threw me down on it. Scrambling to my knees, I turned my back to him, showing him the zipper, and drew my hair over my shoulder. He worked the zipper all the way down to the base of my spine and I let the straps fall from my shoulders.

I'd opted not to wear a bra, either.

North removed his jacket. I sat with my back to him, curled in the fanned-out skirt of my dress on the bed, and watched him undress over my shoulder. I felt vulnerable and exposed but in a good way. In the back of my mind the fear of him changing his mind still felt real, but I was willing to roll the dice one more time and see what happened.

His belt and shoes came off after his jacket, and he began undoing the buttons of his shirt.

Coyly, I crawled out of my dress. The silky fabric slipped from the end of the bed with a soft whooshing sound. North never took his eyes off me as I sat on my knees, waiting for him, watching him back with equal arousal and intention as he

tore off his pants. In nothing but his boxers now, I admired his body.

Just like last time, I was amazed at the power of his stature. His broad shoulders made his waist look tapered, but in no way was he of narrow build. His thighs were thick and carved with muscle, his stomach cut into squares.

I licked my lips in appreciation before realizing he was soaking in the sight of me with just as much purpose. My milky skin, hard nipples, goose flesh, pale silver stretch marks on my hips, scarred navel from a belly piercing gone wrong when I was a teen, perky but somewhat uneven breasts, the birthmark on the right side of my ribcage that resembled a small peanut.

Normally I felt painfully insecure when I let someone see me like this, but the way North looked at me made me feel *worthy*. Desired.

Beautiful.

The quiet, steady moment broke, and he climbed up onto the bed with me, drew me into his lap, and kissed me like he wanted to consume me. I instinctively reached to his boxers, the only thing standing between us, and trailed my fingers along the waistband. His stomach sucked in sharply as I teased him, and this time he didn't stop me when I slid a hand under the fabric and felt him for the first time.

I shouldn't have been surprised that a man of his size would be well endowed, but I was.

The kiss deepened, and soon he had me down on my back, splayed naked beneath him, his knee wedged between my thighs as I stroked him inside his boxers. My impatience got the better of me and I pulled him free. Before I could wiggle down and invite him to my lips, he rolled me onto my stomach, squeezed my ass, and ran his hand up the back of one of my thighs before slipping it between them and cupping my pussy. I lifted my hips from the mattress and spread my legs a little further—a silent plea for him to fill me.

He did.

He gave me one finger, followed soon after by another, and as he fucked me deep and slow, he leaned over me, cupped my chin with his free hand, and forced my head back so he could kiss me. I could barely breathe, stretched and pulled back like that, but oxygen seemed inconsequential in contrast to how good he was making me feel. I found myself bouncing involuntarily, fucking his fingers, pleading for more, unable to give voice to my desires.

I lost all track of time. Soon, he settled between my legs, face between my thighs, and licked and suckled as he drew me onto my knees. I'd never had a man taste me like that before. His lips sealed over my clit and his fingers pressed inside me. The pressure and the sweet swirl of his tongue pushed me over the edge, and I clawed at the bedding like a feral animal as my orgasm broke over me.

Shuddering and breathless, he let me collapse on the mattress. While I regrouped, he swung off the bed, padded to one of the nightstands, and returned with a condom. He held it in his teeth while he stripped out of his boxers. My gaze fixed on his cock as soon as it sprang free, and I was unable to look anywhere else as he tore the condom open with his teeth and rolled it on.

North pointed to the edge of the bed. "Here."

I shimmied on my knees to the edge of the bed and perched there, hands on the mattress between my legs, tits pressed together to put on a show for him.

He must have liked what he saw because he caught my face in both hands and kissed me ravenously. I moaned against his lips and breathed him in. My whole body hummed with need, and a deep ache settled below my belly.

He broke away. "Turn around."

I turned on all fours. He put a hand in the small of my back and forced me forward. With my ass in the air, I looked back at him just as his cock eased inside me. I was dripping wet, swollen, and ready, but he was still big, and he knew it. North took it easy on me, warming me up with patience and restraint until I pushed back, taking his full length in one stroke.

A groan tore out of him that set my nerves on fire. I felt momentarily drunk with power that I could make a man like him moan like that, and I bounced on his cock, working him over and making myself half delirious with pleasure before he grabbed the back of my neck, forced me back down on the bed, and fucked me like I wanted.

Hard.

Deep.

Almost furiously.

I cried out into the blankets. North held my hips and took more of me. I gave him everything, succumbed to his needs, and went cross-eyed as I came. He pulled me up, held me against his chest, turned my face to the side, and kissed me sweetly as he slowed his rhythm. Panting, I kissed him back, completely senseless.

He smiled against my cheek. “Good girl.”

I hadn’t even noticed, but I was riding him, slowly rocking up and down.

North slapped my ass, reached around my hip, and rubbed my clit as I rode him. My eyes rolled back and I let my head fall against his shoulder. He kissed my neck, nibbled at my ear, and whispered a string of dirty things to me—things he’d been fantasizing about doing since he had me in his lap the other night, his fingers inside me.

“I’m yours,” I whispered. “Use me however you want.”

His fingers curled into a fist in my hair, and I found myself face down in the blankets again while he fucked me wildly until we both came hard and fast. When he let me up for air, I didn’t possess the ability to move, so I lay there, splayed out on his bed, listening to the sound of running water in his bathroom as he cleaned himself up.

Unfortunately, I knew I couldn’t stay.

It was one thing for him to fuck someone for the first time after losing his wife. It was another thing entirely for that someone to stay the night in his bed with him. Somehow, I’d

have to find the will to put that dress back on and walk to the cabin.

I just need a few minutes, I thought, closing my eyes.

CHAPTER 23



NORTH

We'd already been in St. Louis for two days, and when I woke up on the third morning, I went across the hall in the hotel to knock on Winter's door. She didn't answer. I was about to go back into my room when the elevator door opened and she stepped off, chatting on the phone with someone I presumed was her mother or father, phone pinched between her cheek and shoulder, two cups of coffee in her hands and a brown paper bag under her arm.

She grinned when she saw me. "Mom? Sorry, I'll have to call you back. About to start work. Say hi to Dad for me? And tell him to be careful on that ladder without me there to spot him."

She struggled with her hands full, so I took the phone from her shoulder and the bag from under her arm.

"Thanks," she beamed, holding up the coffees. "I brought us breakfast. Figured we needed some fuel before the big day. Is everything going according to plan at the Velton's estate?"

"The tree is up and ready for your keen eye."

Winter pressed one of the coffees into my hand. "Let's eat in your room. You have a better view."

Things between us had changed since we had sex, but not immensely so. Winter, with wisdom I hadn't expected from a twenty-four-year old, had asked me to walk her back to the cabin the night we hooked up. She'd acknowledged with a small smile and nod of understanding that she knew spending the night was perhaps one step too many before breaking the

tension with a quick-witted joke about how I might have to carry her there, since her legs were unreliable after our “romp,” as she’d called it.

The walk to her cabin had been crisp and comfortable. The awkwardness I expected to settle between us never came. Instead, we talked about the party, our upcoming St. Louis trip, and a few insignificant things in between that memory couldn’t recall.

I admired her sense of security and willingness to put me first in all this. Did I want her to spend the night? Yes. Had it crossed my mind that I might wake up with her in my bed in the middle of the night and feel like shit, torn up about her being in Veronica’s place?

Also yes.

The fact that Winter had intentionally avoided putting me in that position said a lot to me.

We hadn’t really spoken about that night though. The following morning I’d met her with breakfast at the cabin, and we’d wandered the fields, coffees in hand, until we found a good tree for Justin’s new buyers. I’d marked it to be cut down the day Winter was scheduled to decorate it. We’d joked about our crammed schedule, flirted a bit, and admittedly I fantasized a hell of a lot about all the compromising positions I had put her in the night before.

But that was it.

“I have a couple new ideas of things I want to add to the Velton tree.” Winter stood in front of my hotel room sliding doors, gazing out at a busy city square down below. Christmas decorations hung from lamp posts in the shapes of holly and jingle bells. “Do you think they’ll mind if I throw in some last-minute changes?”

“I trust your judgment. So will they.”

She smiled at me over her shoulder. “That’s the answer I was hoping for.”

Sipping my coffee, I moved to stand beside her. “Have you ever been here before?”

Winter shook her head. “Nope. I haven’t done much traveling, to be honest. After high school I spent a year working to try to figure out what I wanted to do with my life. I poured more coffees than I could count every day, and on my breaks I found myself sitting in the back room sketching out ideas of better floorplans and new ways to decorate the café I worked at. My manager suggested I take a design program online, and that spiraled into me finding the degree program at my university. Since then all I’ve had time to do is study and work part time.” She paused to take a slow sip and licked her lips. “This has been a nice change of pace.”



An hour later, we pulled onto the Velton’s property, an eight-acre plot of land that had been transformed into something akin to Santa’s Village for the holidays. The carnival rides were the first things we saw, with obnoxious flashing lights, ringing bells, and ride operators dressed up like elves in candy-cane-striped leggings and green velvet vests with yellow collars.

Winter sat in the backseat of our town car with her nose practically smooshed against the glass, admiring the sights and seeming to be in awe of it all, even though we’d already been here for two days.

Being with her was like seeing the mundane through new eyes.

We were dropped off as close to the main tree as possible, and Winter shot out of the car, her iPad tucked under one arm. We hurried to the tree, where she immediately engaged in conversation with the general laborers who were hanging the vertical white lights. All the branches had been lopped off on the lower section, as she requested, and when we had gone home at the end of the day yesterday, I’d been scratching my head wondering if this vision of hers was going to come to fruition.

It all looked a bit odd at this stage in the game.

She spoke animatedly with the workers, who all nodded along to what she was saying. I walked a lap around the tree, taking in the sheer size of the beast and the scale of the project I'd put in my intern's hands. For a newbie, she certainly wasn't shy about taking risks. Marge had never once proposed dismembering a tree for a client before. She'd probably have thought the suggestion preposterous. Not Winter though. She saw beauty in risk.

I liked that about her.

She put me to work not long after being on site, which was a different change of pace for me. I was used to labor back on the farm, but out in the field like this I was used to being the businessman—not the physical worker. She had me hanging lights, moving her ladder, and standing back to tell her if things looked balanced as she got on the lift and began hanging tripled baubles within the branches.

At first, the collection of large ornaments about the size of her head looked pitifully small on such a big tree. Then a delivery she'd been waiting for arrived, and she added giant silver and gold holly leaves to the groupings of ornaments, which pulled it all together. More deliveries arrived, and so did several other lifts, and together we hung even larger ornaments, more lights, and massive curls of ribbon.

Winter stood back to admire the work at half past four with pursed lips. The sun had nearly gone down, and we were ready to turn the lights on soon.

“It needs more,” she said.

I looked down at her. “More? We've been at this for hours. How much more could we possibly get on the thing?”

With a finger now pressed to her pursed lips—lips I couldn't help but think about kissing again—she turned in a slow circle, her golden gaze falling on the carnival rides. “It needs to be more cohesive. Whimsical. Childlike.”

“And how are you going to do that?”

She grinned. “Carnival prizes. I want to use carnival prizes as ornaments.”

It sounded crazy and not festive at all, but I'd given her control and she was calling the shots. We hurried from ride to ride, collecting prizes from each vendor, and brought them back to stuff into the lower branches just as actors arrived to play the characters she'd envisioned. The Grinch rose up on his lift and stepped onto the scaffold platform that had been built the day before.

Ten minutes later, the Veltons arrived, hand in hand, bundled up in fur-lined coats. Winter invited them to light the tree as the grounds filled up with guests, almost at maximum capacity. With a grin, Mrs. Velton plugged the lights in.

The tree lit up like a spotlight in the dark. Its lights drowned out the surrounding carnival lights, and the Grinch let out a snarl as he shielded his eyes from the glare. Children were laughing and pointing while their parents snapped pictures. One child shot out of the crowd to rush through the vertical lights hanging from the bottom of the tree, and as soon as he disappeared, more children surged forward, followed by their parents and other family members with their phones in hand, already snapping pictures.

Mrs. Velton let out a dreamy sigh. "It's wonderful."

Winter clasped her hands under her chin. "You think so?"

"It's a dream, truly," Mrs. Velton said. "You captured the heart of our event. North, we want her back next year."

Winter bounced excitedly on the balls of her feet.

I chuckled. "I'll see what I can do."

CHAPTER 24



WINTER

My stomach growled and I clamped my hands over it like I was trying to smother the sound. North, who stood by my side smirking at the Grinch and his enthusiastic display of Christmas loathing, glanced down at me with raised eyebrows.

“Whoa.”

I laughed nervously. “I forgot to eat lunch.”

He tipped his head in the direction of the parking lot where our driver would be waiting for us. “Let’s get out of here and get something to eat. All our work is done.”

I gazed up at the massive tree and smiled. Ever since Mrs. Velton lit it up, I’d been filled with a great sense of satisfaction and accomplishment. I’d been a bit worried about how this one was going to turn out, but I was glad I’d followed my gut.

It was exactly as playful, whimsical, and festive as I’d hoped.

“Food sounds great,” I said.

“I know a place with a great view.”

We said our goodbyes to the Veltons, who were still in awe of their tree even as North and I made our way out through the carnival rides. Kids passed us, crying out excitedly about the big tree, and I grinned over my shoulder as their parents followed them through the curtain of lights hanging from the lowest branches. North reached down and took my hand, stealing my attention back to him.

He never looked down at me as I gazed up at him, but I didn't need him to.

My heart felt lighter than it had in ages. With all my schooling and part-time work back in Portland, I hadn't had much time for romance—or anything remotely close to it, at that. I'd met up with friends for study dates and had dinner with my parents every other Sunday. I'd sat with other design students during lunch and gushed about new trends and fads or lamented about our favorite styles that were already falling out of favor.

But men?

Pfft.

College dudes weren't my cup of tea, but even if they were, they wouldn't have been on my radar.

North was hard to ignore, though. He crept into my thoughts almost every hour, sometimes more, and his masculine energy softened something in me I hadn't realized was sharp-edged and desperate to prove myself. He saw me for my skill and my true self, and the more time we spent together, the more he seemed to appreciate me for all those things.

If someone had told me two weeks ago when I'd first arrived on the farm that my grumpy boss would make me feel like this, I'd have laughed in their face.

We piled into the back of our town car and our driver drove us away from the Velton estate. The carnival lights faded away as we drove through the city, and my stomach continued to growl as we passed dozens of restaurants.

How far was this place?

“Not too much further,” North assured me.

We left the busy streets of the city behind and turned down less busy streets into suburbs that eventually gave way to farm country. Snow covered some of the fields and fence posts but not the roads, which had been recently salted. Finally, we pulled under a ranch gate with words covered in frost and

snow that I couldn't read. We drove down a long, meandering driveway to a large red barn swarming with people.

“What is this place?” I asked.

North grinned, got out of the car, and offered me his hand. “The Clydesdale Farm.”

“Clydesdales?” I gasped excitedly. “Here?”

He nodded. “First thing's first. Let's get some food in you. Then we can see the horses.”

North took my hand once more and led me into the red barn, which sprawled backward and connected to a larger building with an indoor porch boasting a nativity scene of carolers, who sang “O Holy Night” as we climbed the steps. North opened the door and we stepped into a warm, dimly lit, serene restaurant that smelled like frying onions and searing beef. I inhaled deeply and thanked the general noise of the restaurant for disguising yet another belly growl.

A hostess seated us at a table at the back of the restaurant, as per North's request. A chill seeped through the window beside us, and North draped his jacket over my shoulders.

“The view is worth it,” he said.

He wasn't wrong.

Outside our window, about six feet away, a giant white Clydesdale tossed his head and shook snowflakes from his honey-colored mane. A few feet past him, a smaller female whinnied and approached. They bowed their heads in greeting, and even through the window, I heard the jingle of bells braided into their tails with every swish.

Dreamily, I watched them with my chin in my hand as North ordered us wine and bread to the table.

“My dad took me to a horse farm like this when I was little,” I said, recalling that winter when I was eight years old and doe-eyed for ponies. “It was the closest he could get to actually buying me a horse. You know how every little girl goes through a phase of wanting a pony? My phase lasted about eight years.”

North chuckled. “I went through a phase of wanting an elephant, so I hear you.”

“An elephant?” I laughed and tore my eyes from the beautiful horses outside. “What brought that on?”

“Beats me. I guess I just wanted the biggest baddest animal I could think of. I doubled down and started asking for a tiger, after which my mother launched into a speech about ethical animal ownership and why tigers were not and would never be something I could own.”

“Wise woman.”

“Hurt my feelings,” he said.

I snickered. “Poor little North.”

I wondered what he would have been like as a kid. Had he always been outlandishly tall? Had he outgrown his poor mother by the time he was six? Could he roughhouse with his dad when he was fourteen? Perhaps his father was just as large.

“Although,” I added, “I guess you’d look ridiculous on a horse that *wasn’t* a Clydesdale, so maybe the elephant thing makes sense.”

“Big boys need big toys.”

I arched an eyebrow.

He rocked back in his chair and laughed.

Smiling so big it hurt my cheeks, I soaked in the sound of his joyous laughter and the way his surrender to humor pressed dimples into his cheeks. I hadn’t noticed them before.

Our server brought out our meals, and North and I talked about our childhoods and all the ridiculous things we used to have on our Christmas lists. He shared how he’d settled for a ride-on truck instead of an elephant, and I revealed that I got one of those spring-mounted horses to bounce on in the basement of my parents’ house. It used to stay in the living room, but it needed to be oiled with WD40 every other night. The squeaking drove my mother insane, so she banished it downstairs to the playroom, which was also my dad’s man

cave, where he sometimes hosted poker nights with his brother and some of their old friends from college.

“Okay, okay,” North grinned, “best Christmas present you ever got. Go.”

“It’s going to sound silly.”

“Try me.”

Resting my elbows on the table, I leaned forward like I was divulging a secret. “A set of cutting boards.”

North frowned. “Huh. Cutting boards. Really? Do you cook?”

“Not really.”

“Why cutting boards then?”

Good question.

I picked at a loose thread at the wrist of my sweater. “Well, I live in a small dorm room on campus, and I share a kitchenette of sorts with my roommate. Basically, we have a mini fridge, a microwave, and a toaster oven. And about this much counter space.” I showed him a small box shape with my hands, barely a foot wide and a foot deep. “For my first semester I practically only ate ramen because I could just heat it up in the microwave, but my brain power suffered for it, and I needed more nutritious food. But I didn’t have any way to prepare it. I told my dad over the phone one day in November two years ago that I needed to go out and get some kitchen stuff. That year for Christmas, I unwrapped a set of four small cutting boards he’d hand carved and finished with our last name carved in them. They have small handles with a hole in them so I could hang them on the wall, and they wouldn’t eat up precious counter space.”

“Do you use them every day?”

I blushed. “Actually, I only use one of them.”

“What?” He paused to sip his wine with an arched eyebrow before setting it down and leaving his hand on the base, turning it in slow circles. “Why?”

I bit my bottom lip. “I have this thing about holding on to stuff and being hyper aware of losing things. And people.”

He cocked his head to the side. “Losing people? Like your dad?”

I nodded. “My parents had me a bit later in life. My dad is already sixty-four. It’s always been very clear to me that I might not have enough time to get the future all my friends are going to have with their younger dads. Having them walk them down the aisle, become a grandfather... you know, that sort of thing?”

He nodded slowly. “And not using three of the cutting boards is what, a way to save a part of him?”

My eyes burned and I suddenly missed my father very much. “It’s silly.”

“I don’t think so.”

I sniffled and wiped quickly at the corners of my eyes before tears fell free. “My dad means the world to me. I just... I don’t know how many years we have left. I don’t even know if we have ten. He’s healthy and takes care of himself, but there’s heart disease in his family and...” I trailed off and shook my head. “Sorry, I’m not being the best dinner date, crying over something that might not happen.”

North studied me. “He must be an incredible man.”

“The best,” I whispered before clearing my throat and taking a mouthful of wine like it could wash away how much I missed my dad. “Anyway, enough of that. What’s the best gift you’ve ever received?”

North didn’t even hesitate. “The company.”

“Really?”

“I’ve never wanted anything more. It was like a rite of passage when my father told me I was ready to step into it and start learning. I was only a kid, sixteen, but his approval meant the world to me. My mother thought I was too young. She tried to guard what little childhood I had left, but I wanted to be out in the fields cutting down trees and spending evenings

learning the business side of things. Some of my studies might have suffered, but in the grand scheme of things, algebra and physics didn't matter compared to my family's legacy."

"It must have meant a lot to your dad that you wanted it so badly. Not all kids want to fill their parents' shoes."

"I'd dreamed of it since I was a tyke. I used to watch my father cut down trees, and he seemed like a superhero to me. The strength, the determination? I wanted that for myself."

"And the worst gift?"

He snorted, which made me giggle.

"That bad?" I asked.

"Oh, it was bad. When I was twelve, I got a pair of ice skates from my uncle."

"What's wrong with ice skates?"

He lifted his chin and tugged the collar of his shirt down, revealing his swollen chest and dark hair. I tried not to gulp as I got a good look at his muscles in the light. Up until now, I'd only seen his body in bad lighting.

"The first time I took them out for a skate, I took a bad fall and took my uncle's skate right here." He pressed a finger to the skin beneath his collarbone, where I made out a silver, pale scar. "Blood everywhere. Not the kind of red mothers like to see right after Christmas, I'll tell you that much."

"Ouch."

"Twelve stitches and no fun and games for me for two weeks. I had to stare at all my fun new toys and stuff while I was laid up on the couch feeling sorry for myself."

I grimaced. "That sounds terrible. I've never had a stitch in my life. Or a broken bone."

"I knew the scar one."

"How?"

He smirked and his eyes grew hooded as they wandered down to the hemline of my sweater, where just the top of my

cleavage showed. “I looked the other night.”

Blushing, I fanned his attention away with my napkin. “Stop that.”

“Can’t help it. What about you? Worst gift you ever got?”

“Maybe it’s the cutting boards too because they always make me sad.” I laughed.

“Nah, a good gift can make you sad. Go on, what’s the worst one?”

Considering his question, I played back a loop of Christmas gifts I’d received in the past before landing on one that popped up like a red flag just as it had when I opened it on Christmas Eve. “I’ve got it! My last boyfriend from when I was nineteen bought me a razor.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Yep, you heard me right. He bought me a new razor, along with the generous add-on of some razor blades, with a *sweet* little note about how there were no more excuses for furry legs during the winter months.”

North blinked before putting a hand on his chest and laughing uproariously.

“It’s not that funny.” I scowled. “He was an ass. Do you know how much work it is to maintain a fresh shave when it’s the dry season? And how itchy it gets?”

He wiped mirthful tears from the corners of his eyes with his thumbs. “Sounds pretty on brand for a nineteen-year-old.”

“A nineteen-year-old punk maybe,” I grumbled.

“And a brazen punk at that. I can’t imagine giving a woman a razor as a gift. What did you get him?”

I looked out the window at the Clydesdales to hide my smile. “A custom Bluetooth stereo for his stupid car that he liked so much.”

North only laughed harder. “You poor thing. You did such a good job and you got a not so passive aggressive message to shave more often.”

I shot him a dark look but couldn't stop the grin from stretching my cheeks as his eyes danced with mirth. "Laugh it up, North Waylon."

CHAPTER 25



NORTH

Christmas, Four Years Ago

*P*acing my office, I growled into the phone. “You’re not hearing me. That’s unacceptable. These clients have paid top dollar, and the last thing we’re going to do is give them mediocre service. Have you spoken to Marge about this?”

My coordinator, a new hire who’d been scrambling to make ends meet for the past three weeks, squeaked like a mouse cornered by a cat. “No, not yet, Mr. Waylon.”

“Call her. She’ll have a solution. Offering them a refund is not an option on the table right now. Do you understand? That tree goes up and gets decorated. I don’t care if the team is there until the crack of dawn to get the job done. My name will not be on shoddy work.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Keep me updated.”

“Yes, sir.”

I hung up the phone and shook my head before falling into my chair and running my fingers through my hair. Why was good help so damn hard to find these days? If another employee screwed up my carefully managed schedule, I was going to rip my fucking hair out. Some of them may not have understood why a Christmas tree was so important, but I did, and I wasn’t going to let tradition slip through the cracks to cover their sloppy work.

There were layoffs coming at the beginning of January. I'd already started working on a list of names of people who weren't meeting my standards.

A knock came at my home office door.

I looked up.

My wife crossed her arms and leaned on the doorframe, her smile as crooked as her leaning posture. "Is everything all right in here? I heard you pacing. You're going to wear those floorboards out, you know."

"They're testing my patience."

"Isn't that supposed to be my job?" Veronica flashed me her pearly whites before tipping her head down the hall. "Why don't you step away from work for a minute and clear your head? I just took butter tarts out of the oven. Your favorite."

"Maybe later. I have too much on my plate right now."

"It's Christmas Eve, baby. You always have too much on your plate." She pushed off the doorframe and walked languidly into my office, pausing to run her fingertips over a smiling photograph of us from our engagement several years ago that sat on my desk. "A break would do you some good. And I miss my husband. I've been alone all day cooking for the party."

"We should have canceled."

She frowned. "That's not the Christmas spirit."

"Veronica," I said, "I'm sorry, I am, but this requires all of my attention right now. Can't you give me an hour or two?"

"An hour or two always turns into six or seven with you, North. I know how you Waylon men are. If you're not dragged away from the office, you'll never leave."

She didn't understand—not tonight, anyway. More often than not she accepted my demanding work schedule from November through December, but tonight she seemed impatient. She knew I had big-ticket clients who'd been let down by my coordinator. Why was she picking right now to be fussy and needy?

“Tell you what,” I said, “let’s take a rain check on tonight. And tomorrow? Once all this is sorted. I’m all yours.”

She pouted. “I’ve heard that before.”

I reached out and guided her into my lap. She smelled like caramel and cinnamon from all the baking she’d done, and her black hair was a tousled mess pulled back in a low bun at the nape of her neck.

I gave her nose a brush with mine. “Bear with me. I know I’m a tedious man to be married to.”

She sighed, but a small smile graced her lips. “Fine.” She pushed out of my lap with her hands on my chest. My chair squeaked as if asking her to stay, but she moved to the door, the brief smile already gone. “I have some errands to run. We need eggnog and flour. Do you need anything while I’m out?”

I shook my head.

Veronica drummed her fingers on the doorframe three times—something she did whenever she didn’t quite want to leave.

“Drive safe,” I told her. “The roads are probably icy. Take the Land Rover.”

“Love you, baby.”

My eyes were already back on my computer screen. “Love you too.”

I woke with a gasp and a sharp pain in my chest. Sitting bolt upright, I clutched at my heart as it threatened to pound right out of my body. The hotel sheets were soaked through with my sweat and my jaw ached from clenching my teeth in my sleep.

I hadn’t dreamt of my wife in some time. Six months or so probably.

What did it mean that she was visiting me in my slumbering hours now?

Grimacing, I ran my hands up and down my face, rubbing away sweat as my stubble scratched at my palms. Veronica

would have told me to shave.

I threw off the covers and went to the bathroom, where I stood under a stream of hot water in the shower, letting it chase away the lingering tightness in my chest and the hollow feeling in my gut.

If I could go back in time and change anything in my life, it would have been letting her leave the house that night. Eggnog and flour weren't worth her life, but that's exactly what that errand run had cost her. And me.

Everything.

Gone.

Just like that.

After turning off the water I stood in the shower stall for several minutes, letting the air dry the droplets of water on my body until I was chilled to the bone. I got out, threw on a hotel robe, and padded to the window, where I threw open the drapes and stared out at a snowy landscape. A crescent moon hung in the sky, shedding little light on the hotel grounds down below. Solar lights illuminated landscaped gardens, and twinkling Christmas displays of presents and reindeer winked up at me.

Nothing stirred down there. It was three thirty in the morning. I might very well have been the only person awake, minus hotel staff.

Veronica's voice rang in my ears, and I shook my head to clear it. I missed her—God did I ever miss her—but I didn't want to hear her. I thought I had put those nightmares to bed. Years of therapy had helped me work through the thickest parts of my grief. Had I screwed up by stopping my sessions? I'd been warned that there would be triggers that would bring memories surging back, but I couldn't put my finger on what might have triggered this dream.

Winter.

Rolling my shoulders, I dispelled the thought.

How could the one person who had made me happy since Veronica's death simultaneously be the reason I felt like such shit right now?

Winter.

She would make me feel better. She would chase this sickening feeling out of my stomach and replace it with lightness and warmth.

Without hesitating, I left my room with the essentials, crossed the hall, and knocked on her door.

Hard.

CHAPTER 26



WINTER

“**W**hat the...” I sat up, rubbed at my eyes with the heels of my hands, and looked blurrily around my hotel room. The lights were all off, but a bit of moonlight poured through a crack in the curtains—just enough to see the outline of furniture in the room.

The knock came at the door again. Aggressive. Determined. Loud.

“Hang on,” I called, throwing off the blankets and swinging my legs over the edge of the bed. The tile floors were cold on my bare feet as I scrambled to find my hotel robe. No way was I going to open the door in the thin little silk nightgown I had on. I found it hanging on the bathroom door, the collar still damp from the late bath I’d taken to warm up after our chilly day at the Veltons’ and the Clydesdale farm. My hair had soaked through the thermal material. I shivered, bundled myself up, and hurried to the door as yet another knock came.

I yanked it open. “*What?* It’s the middle of the morning, what could be so important that—” I broke off and tipped my head back to look up at North. Just like me, he wore his hotel robe and was barefoot in the hallway. I poked my head out, looked back and forth, and frowned up at him. “What are you —”

He didn’t give me time to get the word out.

Before I knew what was happening, he stepped forward, gathered me in his arms, and kissed me.

Hard.

I inhaled sharply out of surprise more than anything before melting in his arms and letting him push me into my room. He closed the door behind us so hard the picture frames on the walls rattled. I murmured against his lips, wondering what this was all about, but instead of answering me he tore open my robe. It fell from my shoulders and got caught up around my feet as he backed me to the armchair near the window. Stumbling, I pitched backward and landed on my ass on the chair cushion.

North loomed over me, his features lost in shadow, his silhouette outlined by the pale silver light of the moon shining through the window.

A tremor of lust rippled through my body. I was going to have sex dreams about this very moment for the rest of my life. I'd gone to bed hours ago aching for him to join me, but I was scared to make the first move. He had so much more on his plate than I did, and the last thing I wanted to do was make his suffering worse. Grief was a winding, complicated road, and healing wasn't linear. For all I knew, his time with me the other night had set him back.

Now, looking up at him as he dropped his robe, I decided that was not the case.

He wore nothing underneath and, in the dim light, appeared to be a hand-poured sculpture of silver and onyx. He went to his knees in front of me.

"North," I breathed.

He responded by running his hands from my ankles all the way up my bare legs, over my knees, up my thighs, under my nightgown, and between my legs. He pushed them gently apart and I subconsciously settled deeper into the chair, leaning back, watching as he dipped his head to taste me.

His tongue flicked over my clit.

I flinched and gasped.

He paused, sparing a glance up at me as if to ask permission to continue.

“Don’t stop,” I whispered.

His lips sealed over my flesh, and he gently began to suckle. My pulse rushed in my ears, and I instinctively gripped the armrests of the chair, my nails biting into the fabric as my spine arched. North put his hands to the cut of my hips and held me in place as his tongue dipped inside me. My breath shuddered in my chest, and my lower stomach fluttered with every lick, taste, and suckle, until I was a panting, dripping mess in his hands.

More.

With hardly any control left, I rolled my hips in silent invitation for him to give me more, and he responded like a mind reader, slipping a finger inside me. He pressed up against my G-spot and I gasped.

“Not yet,” he murmured through glistening lips. “Hold it.”

“I—I can’t.”

He smiled before swirling his tongue over me and thrusting his finger. “Yes you can.”

Easy for someone without a vagina to say, I thought hopelessly, straining against the urge to give in and let the release break over me. But I wanted to obey. I wanted him to say those two little words that had set me on fire last time.

Good girl.

Who knew it would be such a turn-on?

Not me.

Not until a man like North Waylon whispered it to me in the heat of the moment.

So I obeyed, biting down on my own tongue to stop myself from falling to pieces as he upped the ante and slid another finger inside me. I whimpered and oozed desperation. He chuckled deeply, knowing full well the power he held over me in the moment, and when my toes began to curl and my thighs started to quiver, he finally lifted the restraints.

“Okay, baby,” he purred. “Come for me.”

I let go.

My climax ripped a cry of pleasure from my throat. North pressed his fingers in deep and suckled at my clit as I thrashed beneath him, and once I was spent, he worshiped me with wet, sloppy kisses all the way up my stomach, pushing my silk nightgown up as he went until he was able to pull it over my head.

He sat back and gave my thighs an affectionate squeeze. “Good girl.”

I reveled in his words.

North grabbed something from the pocket of his robe on the floor—a condom I soon realized. Then he scooped me up and carried me to the bed. He kissed me as he laid me down on my back, and something about the moment felt more intimate than the other passionate nights we’d shared thus far. His hands never stopped roaming over my body, and as we kissed, his touch wandered back between my thighs. I explored his body with my hands, tracing muscle, bone, cartilage, and scars—pausing to feel the one he’d shown me at dinner earlier. I wanted to know every swell and valley of his body.

I wanted to know every crevice of him, both his physical self and his soul. His spirit.

Our kiss deepened, and I pulled him down to me, holding his stubbled face in my hands as he braced himself above me on one elbow. He struggled with one hand to open the condom, so I plucked it from his fingers, tore it open, reached down, and rolled it on myself, pausing to grip him and tease him as I did. I wanted to give him more, but the last time I tried to offer him oral he’d gotten cold feet. Maybe that was one step too far for now and I had to bide my time.

I was willing to wait as long as he needed.

He dropped his hips to mine, and I responded in kind, lifting my ass slightly from the bed and meeting him. He slid inside me, and I let out a shaky breath as I settled back down and he pushed in deep. Pressure formed below my navel, and I leaned into it, letting it build and build as he gave me more of

his length before he filled me up. I sighed against his lips as he kissed me, and his hand came up to brush my hair away from my face.

I got lost in his eyes.

When we'd first met, I'd thought his eyes cold, stern, and distant. Now, lying beneath him, I saw so much depth and life. Loss, love, pain, pleasure, contentment, reservation...all of it mixed into one. I slid my hand behind his neck and held him to me as we became one and I found myself wishing the moment would never end.

His hips drove deep.

I whispered his name against his throat and showed my gratitude with soft kisses.

Together, we descended into bliss, and when we were both spent he fell to the side, lying on his back beside me with his chest rising and falling in rhythm to my own.

I smiled dazedly at him. "That was a nice surprise."

North rolled over, pulled me in close, and kissed me. "I needed you."

My heart did a little hop-step in my chest. "Do you still need me?"

He murmured, "Yes," before nuzzling his face into my shoulder and kissing my neck. Perhaps he had not yet been satiated. I giggled and pushed at his chest, and he pulled me more firmly against him.

I suspected we would not be getting much sleep tonight.

CHAPTER 27



NORTH

Justin and I leaned back against the windowsill. At our backs, the cold winter air seeped through the window of the heritage house, but the crackling fireplace added warmth while we watched Winter and Cami decorate the tree for the new buyers.

The two women sipped on eggnog lattes while they worked barefoot and in leggings. Winter had brought a bag of business clothes with her so we could go into the office later, but I liked seeing her like this best—a bit undone and casual. The fact that the leggings hugged her curves and showed off her ass was nice, too. I caught myself staring every time she went to her tiptoes to hang an ornament on a higher branch, at both her ass and the curve of her back.

Sexy. Way too sexy.

Justin crossed one leg over the other and brought his coffee to his lips. I felt his eyes on me.

“What?” I asked.

“You’re staring.”

“I assume you are, too.”

He chuckled. “Yes, well, it can’t be helped with an ass like ___”

“Can you knock it off?” I shot him a dark, menacing glare. “Winter isn’t here for you to ogle her. She’s here to do you and your buyers a favor, as she’s done several times this month,

and continuously indulging in checking her out is a shitty way to repay the favor.”

Justin frowned. “Fuck. What crawled up your ass and died?”

“I’m not messing around, Justin. Lay off.”

He shrugged. “Fine. It was all in good fun. You know I don’t think of her as just a hot chick, right? I know how talented she is. Kind, too. And I know how much you like her.”

I kept my eyes down on my coffee and didn’t say anything.

“Ah yes,” Justin mused, “always radio silence whenever I’m on to something. This isn’t about my horndog ways. This is about you feeling like she’s yours. Right?”

I rolled one shoulder. “So what if it is?”

He grinned. “Love that for you, man.”

“Let’s change the subject.”

Justin shifted gears. “How’s business?”

“Good.” I stood up straighter. Talking about work was much more comfortable than talking about the feelings I’d developed for my intern. “Really good, actually. I have one last contract I’m trying to secure with the director of New York City’s Mall. Stubborn bastard. Real picky, too. He’s debating between us and another company they’ve gone with for the last decade, but they botched the job last year royally. I swooped in and managed to get them a tree on site within a forty-eight-hour time frame, but the ripple effects weren’t good for business. If I can get him to sign with us for this year, I think we’ll have them in our pocket for life. He just has to make the jump.”

“When do you meet with him next?”

I checked my watch. “A few hours. I’m bringing her with me this time.” I nodded at Winter, who was giggling as she wielded a candy cane like a fencing sword and jabbed at the air around Cami. Cami shrieked and raced around the side of

the tree. A smile curled my lips. “She’ll charm his pants off, I’m sure.”

“She’s a closer.”

“And how’s business for you?” I set my now empty coffee mug on the windowsill. “Things still going smoothly?”

Justin nodded. “Better than smoothly. I’m done until the new year, thank God, and then it will be full steam ahead. The Christmas party brought in some new leads of people who want to list their properties with me. I have eight potential new clients who I’m meeting in the first half of next month. Ideally, I’d like to secure six of the eight. If I can get them all? Even better. I have a feeling next year will be a record breaker for me. It’s too bad, though,” he added.

“What is?”

“That Winter won’t be around. Otherwise I’d use her to stage all my open houses.”

Right.

By the new year, which was now only twelve days away, Winter would be back in Portland. Hell, she’d be back in Portland sooner than that. We had made our way through most of our large events for the season. Every single day had been packed with work, meetings with clients, video calls, and design boards. Winter had found her groove and had already done almost nineteen trees for different events. She’d collected quite a portfolio of her work, which she’d shown me last night after I walked her back to her cabin when we got back from St. Louis. She’d compiled everything into an online folder website that looked polished and professional, and she added a Christmas tab, which showed off the trees she’d done as well as Justin’s heritage house staging.

I’d have hired her faster than I could blink based on the presentation alone.

I watched as she strained to hang a star-shaped ornament on a high branch.

What was life going to look like when she was gone? Who was I when she wasn’t here? How quickly would I sink back

into my isolated ways?

Instantly, I thought somberly.

“We should throw her a party or something before she goes home,” Justin said. “A big hoorah to thank her for everything she’s done for us and to make sure she knows she’s always welcome back here. I know it’s probably not a hot spot for her career, but you never know, maybe Maple Hill charmed her. Or someone here did,” he added with a wink.

“Yeah, maybe so,” I muttered, knowing full well Winter’s spirit and potential were far too big for a town like this.



Winter shifted her weight from side to side as we rode the elevator up to the top floor where the mall director’s office was. I could sense her nervousness, and I reached out and put a hand in the small of her back.

“You’re going to do great. You always do. And I’ll be in there with you. We’re a team.”

She gave me an uneasy smile. “You just made it sound like this client is kind of a big deal. Like this contract could be game-changing for your business.”

“It is.”

She gulped. “That’s not helping. You were supposed to say they’d be nice to have in your pocket, but it’s not a big deal if we lose them.”

I smiled. “It would be nice to have them in our pocket, but it’s not a big deal if we lose them.”

She gave me a deadpan stare.

Chuckling, I leaned in and gave her a sweet kiss. “Relax, baby. I’ll be right there with you. The guy might be a bit severe, but treat him like you’ve treated everyone else, and it will be just fine.”

“And if it isn’t?”

“We leave and go grab dinner somewhere.”

She perked up. “Can we grab dinner regardless?”

I chuckled. I should have known. The way to Winter’s heart was through her stomach. Besides, it might be the last chance we had to have a meal together for some time. As of tomorrow morning, the farm would officially open to the public to come and purchase their Christmas trees.

I’d spent several evenings over the past two weeks cutting down trees and setting them up in a fenced area for people to pick from, but there was also a section of field where people could use one of our axes and cut down their own tree. It almost always resulted in a fun, spirited match between several men who wanted to see who could cut down their tree the fastest, impressing their women and children alike.

Truth be told, the women didn’t care. Sometimes the kids did, but they’d grow bored and start asking for something from the donut and hot chocolate truck parked nearby.

Over the years, the event had grown. This year we had a local farmer bringing his horses by. They’d pull some sleds through the fields, where some of my staff had decorated the trees on the path with lights. The sleds were full of thick, fleece blankets for people to stay warm for the ride, and jingle bells had been affixed to the horses’ reins. If all went well, I intended to invite the farmer back and keep the new tradition alive.

We also had a donation drive running. Volunteers like Cami, who would be dressed as elves, would collect toys and invite kids into a pop-up heated wooden structure I’d rented from one of the local home improvement warehouses. It was heated and comfortable, and Cami and the other elves would work with the kids to sort through the donations by children’s ages before enjoying a gingerbread man and making their own wrapping paper with stamps and markers.

It was still a modest operation, but I had plans to improve upon it every year. I’d make sure all the ticket-purchasers received a survey afterward to find out what worked and what didn’t, and what they hoped to see next year.

Winter was excited to check it out, too. She'd been talking about it nonstop this morning over breakfast—I'd brought her coffee and some of Maurice's fresh baked croissants and homemade jam before we headed to Justin's heritage house. Naturally, she had some suggestions of her own for the event, including having a visit from Santa or adding a lighting ceremony of sorts, where all the Christmas lights on the house, cabin, and surrounding trees for the sleigh ride went on at once accompanied by Christmas music.

It wasn't a half-bad idea.

I wished she would be here next year to see it all come to fruition.

The elevator doors opened and Winter gave me a wary look.

I stepped out first and she followed, gaining—or feigning—confidence as we were greeted by the receptionist and led to a nicely appointed meeting room, complete with an artificial tree with glittery branches and fading white lights that played in a sequence. We were offered hot coffee and biscotti, which we accepted, and left to wait for the director, who was apparently running late.

Winter dipped her biscotti in her coffee and took a bite. She nodded appreciatively.

“Good?” I mused.

“Delicious.”

Her lips sealed over the hard cookie, and I had a sudden flash of her lips pursing over something else. Clearing my throat, I shifted in my seat. Now was not the time for a hard-on or dirty thoughts about my intern.

Now was the time to keep our eye on the prize.

CHAPTER 28



WINTER

The mall director looked like he'd been plucked out of a nineties' mobster film.

He wore a pinstripe black suit with a dark red pocket square that matched his thick tie. His glasses were perhaps the only modern thing about him with trendy half-frames and designer labels. A pocket watch hung in the front vest pocket of his suit, and the chain disappeared somewhere amongst the panel of his jacket, and as he lowered himself into his seat, he curled his thick finger around the chain like a woman curled her finger around a lock of hair.

"Nice to see you again, Mr. Waylon," the director said. He had a voice like gravel, and based on the scent of cigar smoke wafting off him, I assumed he was a committed smoker. "And who do you have here?" His dark eyes slid to me and brightened some. Perhaps he wasn't as severe as his first impression made him out to be.

North turned his chair toward me. "This is my design expert, Winter Dodson. Winter, this is Mr. O'Malley."

"Please," O'Malley purred as he extended his hand for me to shake. "Call me Roger."

"Nice to meet you, Roger," I said, all politeness and professionalism. In the back of my head the words "design expert" were ringing. North hadn't introduced me as his intern.

Roger leaned back in his chair and pressed all of his fingertips together. He had arthritis in his hands—I noticed from the thickness of his knuckles, much like my father's—

and wore an old school gold watch on his left wrist. “Thank you for making the time to come talk to me today. As you know, I’m torn between you and the company we’ve worked with for the past ten years.”

“I understand,” North said. “I’m not here to bid for your favor or try to convince you, but I am here to answer any questions you might have, or any concerns. And I brought Winter with me so you could pick her brain about design. She’s been impressing clients all season with her innovative creations. She even landed some spotlight features on some design socials.” North pulled out his phone and showed off some of the work I’d done, and I tried to sit there looking dignified, and not like the giddy six-year-old I felt like inside.

“Pick her brain, huh?” Roger’s dark eyes fell on me once more, and instead of seeing an outdated mobster wannabe, I saw a grandfather.

Between us, a framed picture of him and three kids under seven grinned at the lens. He looked like a totally different man in the photo than he did behind his desk, and I wondered if the suit and the hard-ass image were to maintain order in his job.

As a mall director.

Weird, I thought.

But who was I to judge? He probably had to deal with a lot of company CEOs and a lot of bullshit on a daily basis.

“I’m all yours,” I said, perhaps a little too eagerly. I giggled nervously and shot North a look. He gave me an encouraging nod. “I’ve been up to my eyeballs in fun with decorating Christmas trees for the company this year, Mr. O’Malley.”

“Roger,” he said.

“Right, sorry, Roger,” I said. “Every time I sit down and meet a client, I soak up what I can about them personally and listen to the things they aren’t saying as well as their requests. Then I come up with a design. It’s like art,” I explained. “We all see art through our own lens of perception and experience.

So, on that note, who is this tree most important to? Who cares the most?"

He studied me over his pressed fingertips before letting his gaze slide back to North. "She's good."

Before North had a chance to answer, I said, "I'm only getting started."

The men chuckled, but not at my expense.

I could feel the atmosphere in the room, and my opinion held just as much weight as theirs. This was the feeling I'd been chasing through all my years of study. All I wanted was for professionals to take me seriously and give me room to express myself creatively. I knew I could meet and exceed needs. I'd known it for a long time. Finally, I had a chance to prove it, and this job?

Well, it carried a lot of weight.

Roger leaned forward in his chair. Sunlight shining through the window glinted off the face of his watch before it disappeared under his suit sleeve. "I suppose it matters most to my patrons. Guests of the mall. Shoppers and consumers who've been coming here to do their Christmas shopping for generations. They've seen it all, Miss Dodson."

"Winter," I said.

"Winter," he corrected, giving me a knowing smile. "Do you know what happened last year?"

"A bit," I admitted. "No specific details though, only that you were left high and dry for a tree, and Waylon Farms provided one in a pinch."

He nodded. "Yes, yes, precisely. It was a beautiful tree, of course. Healthy. Vibrant. Nicely decorated. But due to the time crunch, we did not have time to make it a true masterpiece. This year I want to make up for the error and bring something to my mall that people haven't seen before. Something fresh but also rooted in the bones of tradition and holiday spirit. What do you think of that?"

"Where does your mall Santa go?" I asked.

Roger frowned. “Sorry?”

I realized the question came out of left field, but my creative juices were already flowing.

“Your mall Santa,” I reiterated. “Is he near the tree, or in a different location?”

“Different location.” Roger shared a look with North, whose attention shifted right back to me as if steering the conversation back into my power. Roger cleared his throat. “Usually the tree is used as a photo-op, and Santa is set up in a different mall square to keep the kids and the adults a little more separate.”

“That hardly seems like the spirit of Christmas,” I said.

Roger blinked.

North hid his smile behind his hand as he ran a thumb along his jaw.

I felt like I had the reins, and I wasn't going to lose momentum now. I scooted to the very edge of my seat. “Picture this. Santa's village is set up at the base of a grand, towering, swoon-worthy Christmas tree—the sort of tree you'd imagine would be in the North Pole. Full of silver and gold ribbon, red and green baubles, and chaotically wrapped Christmas presents. Elves are all around, hurrying around the base of the tree and *inside* it, leading the line of kids to visit Santa through a tunnel cut into the low branches. Inside, there can be places to stop for photo-ops for families and maybe a gift-wrapping station.” I pressed a finger to my chin as more ideas surged to the foreground. “Ideally, the tunnel through the tree would feel transportive for the kids, like they actually *had* stepped into Santa's village, and when they emerge back into the mall, Santa is there to invite them onto his lap, ask them their wish list, and take some photos.”

North looked across the table at Roger.

I held my breath.

“Hmm,” Roger said, lips pressed firmly together in a straight line that betrayed nothing. “You can pull this off in the days you have?”

No idea.

“Yes,” I said with a confident nod.

North stepped up to the plate to close the deal. He shifted into his business demeanor, all smooth talk and sales figures, and I sat back, watching the master work while I concocted more ideas of how glamorous and magical the tree could be for the kids. They were who this was all about, after all. They were the ones who mattered. Sure, Roger might have thought his generational shoppers, basically consumers, were the ones he needed to impress, but I didn’t agree with that.

After North’s final pitch, Roger slumped in his chair.

“You make a fine case, Winter Dodson. A fine case. But,” he paused, dark eyes flicking from me, to North, and back to me. “I am unfortunately already locked in contract with the other company.”

North took a slow inhale beside me followed by an even longer exhale.

Without my trying, my eyebrows drew together. “Okay.”

What else was I supposed to say?

North shifted his position in his chair, settling back to cross one leg over the other. How he managed to sit like that when his limbs were all so long and he dwarfed the chair, I had no idea.

“You knew this entire time you wouldn’t be hiring us?” North asked, his voice smooth and seemingly unbothered, but I saw irritation in his eyes—eyes I was beginning to be able to read better than the ones in my own reflection.

Roger splayed his hands in a show of innocence. “I admit I was indulging this meeting to see what you’d come up with. This year has been tight for us, if I’m being transparent, and for business reasons, I’m not in a position to take any risks this year. So, on that note, I’m going to have to say no for now and stick with what we know.”

North rose to his feet. “I understand. Business is business. There’s no hard feelings here. But next time,” he added, a

smile lingering on his lips as his large fist encircled Roger's hand in a shake, "be transparent before we make the drive into the city. This could have been handled via phone."

Roger gave a nervous laugh. "You are right, of course, Mr. Waylon. Before you go, I do have a proposition. Please do not perceive this as me wasting your time."

North stared at the smaller man like he would decide what was a waste of his time, not be told.

I got to my feet, too.

Roger clasped his hands behind his back. "If you're willing, I'd like to take Miss Dodson up on her pitch for next year's tree. Precisely as you pitched it, my dear." He tipped his head to me. "I think your idea is quite clever, and I'd love to see it executed. We can sign paperwork right now to set it in stone. A Waylon tree, and design managed by Winter Dodson."

My heart raced.

A contract? That was *mine*?

North spoke before I had a chance. "Shall I step out of the room while the pair of you negotiate compensation?"

Roger watched me expectantly, and even though I wanted North to stay to be my security blanket, I gave him a grateful smile and told him we wouldn't be long. North put a hand on my shoulder and squeezed while looking into my eyes. It was a silent and subtle way of saying *you got this*, and as he walked out, it made me feel confident enough to lift my chin and know my worth as Roger opened the door for the money talk.

He started low, and I countered high, and we settled in the middle with a number that seemed outlandishly high to me.

I kept my cool as we shook hands and signed paperwork in the form of e-documents he sent to my email. This was my first official, real, hired, paid, negotiated gig, and I had a fleeting thought that I might frame the contract and hang it in my room, when I had a room of my own to hang it in that wasn't a dorm or a temporary cabin.

I promised *my* client that I would be in touch with him next summer to start the ball rolling early, and our first interaction would be a video call to establish needs, go over my pitch to keep it fresh in his memory, and set up a milestone-based plan for the project. He agreed, and I walked out smiling like an idiot to greet North in the waiting room.

He stood from his seat in the corner when he saw me coming. “Act cool.”

I tried to smother my smile but it was damn near impossible. As soon as we were on the elevator and the doors closed behind me, I let out a squeal and shimmied on the spot, dancing my feet in quick back and forth motions.

North threw his head back and laughed. “Congratulations. You killed it in there!”

I wound back one hand and he high-fived me.

“Thank you! I couldn’t have done it without you,” I gushed. A straight fact. “I was so nervous, and now I have my own client and my first job! *Eek!*” I grabbed his wrist. “Next year, you and me? We’re officially in business together. I’m not going to be your measly little intern come next December.” I hip bumped him as his laughter dropped to a low chuckle.

“I’m proud of you,” he said.

His words made my chest swell, and I stretched to the tips of my toes for a kiss, the real reward.

He indulged me, cupping my cheek and kissing me deeply.

If only I could keep him in my pocket and get a kiss like this every time I had a victory.

CHAPTER 29



NORTH

Cami planted her fists on her hips and glared down at her feet, where jingle bells dangled from the curled toes of her elf shoes.

“I hardly think the shoes are necessary,” she muttered, wiggling her toes to make the bells jingle.

“It’s all in the details,” I said.

She shot me a menacing look—well, as menacing a look as a five foot three, curly-haired pixie girl dressed like a Christmas elf could manage. “You’re having far too much fun with this.”

“You were top of my mind when I looked at different costumes. I kept thinking, which one would Cami like most? You’re lucky. I could’ve picked the one that came with the pointy ears, too.”

“How sweet of you.”

Chuckling, I handed her the hat that matched the shoes. “And this.”

“Are you kidding me?”

“Our guests are going to be here any minute. You have to look the part. Put it on.”

Cami sighed dramatically and placed the hat on her head. One of the other elf volunteers came over with bobby pins and helped secure it to her curly hair. She stomped off toward the

wooden structure and the warmth, where she would be helping kids make wrapping paper and collecting donations.

A bit to the right, the sled and horses waited to take guests on their first ride through the snowy fields. That would begin fifteen minutes after the lighting ceremony this evening. So far, everything was running on schedule. The gates at the front of the property would open soon. Ground staff manning the gates had already radioed over to me that we had upward of a hundred people in line. That had been twenty minutes ago, and I'd instructed the gate keeper to let the cars through so everyone could park on the property. We'd set up a plowed area on the side of the driveway big enough to fit ten parked cars across. The house had originally been built for my grandfather to park his boats and motorhome there. It would work perfectly as a spot for the cars to park nearby where we could drag the trees to and strap them to the roofs.

Justin stood with Marge sipping hot cider, and a few of my other employees were gathered around, making small talk. I wandered over to say hello.

"This looks incredible," Marge told me, holding her paper cup in two hands to warm herself up. "I see a lot of success coming from this. Where's your intern? She did a wonderful job."

I looked around. "She's here somewhere."

Winter had been flitting around like an elf herself all afternoon, working diligently to make sure everything was just right. I suspected she was still riding the high of securing her first independent design contract for New York City's mall yesterday. I couldn't blame her. It was a big deal, and she'd earned it fairly.

"Justin tells me you're going to host a party at the house before she goes back to Portland?"

Justin hushed Marge. "Keep your voice down. It's supposed to be a surprise." He looked around for Winter, but she was nowhere to be seen. "The girl deserves a celebration. Her birthday is on the twenty-first, too. We were going to have the party then, but that's the day of the lighting ceremony in

town and North is providing the tree. So the twentieth it is. We're all grateful to her. Cami is involved, too."

"It's going to be intimate," I said, reminding Justin to scale back. He'd tried to invite over fifty people, but I had a feeling Winter would prefer to spend her second to last night here with the people she'd connected with most. Her new friends, not a fraction of Maple Hill. "Just the people she's bonded with most or who are in close proximity to her."

"Good idea," Marge said. "I'm sure she'll love it. Let me know if there's anything I can do to help."

The walkie-talkie on my hip chirped. I unclipped it and brought it to my ear as a static-filled voice crackled on the other end. "Mr. Waylon, the gates are opening and guests are making their way to you."

"Thanks," I said before clipping it back on my belt and raising my voice to address the staff and volunteers gathered around. "Okay, people, this is it. We're about to get hit with fifty-some families. Elves, slap on those smiles for the kids. Volunteers, make sure your lanyards are showing so people know who you are. Staff? You know what to do. Stick to your posts, wish everyone a Merry Christmas, and radio me if you need anything. Has anyone seen Winter?"

Suddenly, Winter's head popped up from the back of the sled attached to the horses. She wore a white, sparkly knitted hat with a pompom on it that danced ridiculously as she looked from side to side until she spotted me. "Oh, hi!" she called with a wave. "Sorry, almost done here."

"What are you doing?"

"You'll see!"

Marge and Justin chuckled.

"Does she ever stop working?" Justin asked.

"Nope." I shook my head. "She's relentless."

"Like someone else we know." Marge nudged my hip before nodding in the direction of the hot cider station. "I'm

going to top off my cup and take my place in the gift wrapping lodge where it's warm. See you two hooligans in a bit."

Justin and I watched her go.

He looked up, finding me staring expectantly at him. "What?"

"Don't you have somewhere to be, too?"

He chuckled and started backing away. "Yes, my lord." He dropped into a gracious bow. "I only wish to serve."

Rolling my eyes, I trudged through the four inches of snow we'd gotten in the last hour up to the gate at the side of the house, where I greeted the guests who vibrated with excitement at coming to pick out their Christmas tree. I welcomed them with enthusiasm I knew I never would have possessed if this year hadn't been so...

Well, joyful.

Last year I'd have sent someone else to greet them. My heart still hadn't been in the season. I'd been pining after Veronica, aching to have her by my side, longing to wake up on Christmas morning to her in my bed, giving me a sleepy smile and tugging at my arm to go downstairs with her so we could open gifts. She'd never outgrown the childlike glee that surrounded Christmas morning—that and she was a sucker for all things sparkly, and she just wanted to get to whatever diamond-encrusted gift I'd picked out for her that year.

Had she made it to Christmas that fateful year, she'd have found a beautiful pair of sapphire earrings in a velvet box on a high branch of our tree. Those were in my safe along with my mother's wedding rings.

Yes, I still missed her desperately this year, but the ache wasn't as painful, and when I thought of her, I pictured her smiling face and heard her voice whispering that she was happy to see me smile. She never would have wanted me to sink into the depths of my own soul like I had since I lost her. She'd have wanted me to pick up the pieces of my life and start over. Dive back in. Find someone else. Lean into my purpose and my passion.

I hadn't been able to do it on my own, but with Winter here?

She'd made it easy.

As soon as I opened the side gate of the house, children burst through and charged toward the Christmas scene we'd put together in the first field of trees. They herded into the fenced area like sheep and squealed gleefully as Cami and others dressed like elves came out to meet them, the bells on their shoes jingling. The parents followed suit, some of the ones with familiar faces pausing to shake my hand and telling me how much they were looking forward to this.

I brought up the rear of the line as one of the elves with a microphone announced that the lighting ceremony would happen in ten minutes. A group of carolers launched into a cheerful rendition of "Rudolph the Red Nose Reindeer," and a group of boys started an enthusiastic snowball fight that soon had the attention of their fathers. Snow burst against the side of the wrapping shed next to Cami's head, who yelped—a very authentic elf sound.

Laughing, I made my way over to the sled, where Winter was still working diligently on her knees.

I leaned up against it. "What on earth are you doing over here?"

She popped up with rosy cheeks and a devious little smile. "Decorating."

"Naturally." Leaning over, I peered into the row of seats she was working at. I spotted extension cables she was tucking safely to the back, as well as a string of Christmas lights that I realized wrapped all the way around the edge of the sled, the reins of the horses, and down. I whistled. "How long have you been at this?"

"Not long." She pursed her lips. "An hour maybe?"

"Can I help?"

Winter shook her head. "Nope. I'm done." She hopped out of the sleigh, caught the toe of her boot on the lip, and pitched forward with a shriek.

I caught her in my arms and lowered her to the snow.

She giggled and fixed her white hat. “Thank you.”

Taking her hand, I led her to the hot cider stand and ordered us each a cup. Most of the hard work for the night was done—until I had to help customers get their trees out to and on top of their cars, of course—and I wanted to savor a little moment with my girl.

My intern.

Whatever.

A few minutes later, with drinks in hand, we found a good spot to stand back and observe the first ever lighting ceremony of Waylon Farms. Winter had outdone herself and added even more décor to the grounds, including twinkling white reindeer amongst the trees that looked rather unimpressive unlit, but would look beautiful and almost romantic once they were on. She’d added some lights sporadically to trees deeper in the fields, saying it would give the farm depth once night fell. I think I’d bought more extension cords in the last twenty-four hours than I had in my entire life.

All worth it, though.

Cami, a crowd-pleaser at heart, took to the stage where the carolers were performing to host the countdown to the lighting ceremony. Children ceased their playing to rush to their parents’ sides. Mothers whispered in the ears of their sons to hush. Fathers lifted their young daughters onto their shoulders so they could see. Grandparents cozied up together, men pressing wrinkled kisses to warm foreheads. Winter and I looked around, soaking up all the love and the magic of the evening.

She stretched to her toes as she always did when she wanted to whisper something to me, or steal a kiss, and I leaned over, thinking it would be the former. She pressed a warm kiss to my cheek just as Cami’s countdown reached one, and the whole farm came to life in a dazzling snap of light that painted the snowy ground in rainbows.

The crowd gasped, and despite myself, I did too.

Winter smiled radiantly. The lights reflected in her eyes, and her beauty stole all of my attention as the crowd made a huge fuss, and even my employees got caught up in the magic of the moment.

“Merry Christmas, Winter,” I whispered.

She turned to me, gathered the front of my jacket in her small fists, and whispered, “Merry Christmas, North.”

CHAPTER 30



WINTER

Cami stood shoulder to shoulder with me as we leaned against the fence, watching families pull away from the estate with their trees strapped to their roofs. A few stragglers were still in the parking area, and as I watched, North hefted one tree onto his shoulder like it weighed nothing, carried it over to the nearest car, and laid it out gently on the roof, keeping hold of the trunk to avoid scratching the paint while the father used tie-downs to secure it. Beside them, Justin and two other men struggled to do the same.

North was a beast. After all the physical labor over the past hour of tying down trees, he'd removed his jacket and worked in his Henley shirt. Steam rose off his broad shoulders and back, and I imagined how nice it would feel to snuggle up against him and steal his warmth.

Cami giggled.

"What?" I asked innocently.

"You're biting your lip and staring."

I un-pinched my lower lip from between my teeth. "Can you blame me? Look at him. He's like a... a *God*," I gushed.

"I've always seen him as something of an older brother, but I get it. Women in town have always gone crazy for him."

Sighing, I wrapped my arms tighter around myself and snuggled my chin into my scarf. "It's going to be hard to say goodbye. Six more days. They're going to be over before I know it."

“But you get to see your folks.” Cami gave me an encouraging smile. “I know how much you’re looking forward to seeing them. Just think. You’re only six days from sitting in their cozy living room drinking spiked eggnog and unwrapping stocking stuffers.”

I’d told Cami all about some of our special family traditions one afternoon when I was particularly homesick. “I’m surprised you remember all that.”

“Of course I do! They’ll lift your spirits when you get home. Besides, Maple Hill isn’t so hard to get to.”

“It’s on the other side of the country.”

“True, but it’s a direct flight, and North has money.” She pumped her eyebrows. “I’m sure you two could arrange to keep in touch or make something work long distance if you really wanted to. Go home. Finish your studies. Keep your rich hunky side piece in your back pocket. Then come back here when you’re ready and start your career.”

Giggling, I tipped my head back to the heavy, starless sky. Snow was coming. “That doesn’t sound so bad.”

“Good, because I’m going to miss you when you’re gone. And Maple Hill is a lot of fun in the summertime. We have a swimming hole, hay wagon parties, pumpkin ale festivals, and some of the best farmer’s markets you’ve ever seen when the weather gets good. I think you’d like it here.”

“I already like it here.”

Cami pushed off the fence. “Here comes your tall drink of water. I’m going to make myself scarce before Justin notices I’m still here and tries to convince me to go for drinks with him. Touch base tomorrow?”

“Sounds good,” I said.

Cami hurried off through the snow and made her way out to her car. Her headlights lit North up from the back and shone between his legs as he walked with his jacket under his arm. Most of the stragglers had left, and there was only a handful of people wishing each other goodnight in the parking lot.

He nodded at me. “Can I walk you to the cabin?”

“Yes please.”

North shared his genuine excitement over how well the event at the farm had gone. He would be open for business every evening until Christmas Day going forward, but this had been the right kickoff and had exceeded his expectations. He thanked me for my work on the sleigh ride, telling me all about how my added Christmas lights made the ride even more magical for people. He lost count of how many folks stopped to take pictures with the horses and sled.

I listened to him talk. He’d *never* been this chatty. Words kept pouring out of him, and I soaked them all up, reveling in his enthusiasm as our boots crunched on the snow.

Up ahead, my little cabin came into view. It had been such a good home to me over the past few weeks, and I was already sad to have to leave it. I’d fallen in love with its bathtub and the soft, deep, cozy mattress on the bed. I loved the simplicity of the place and waking up in the mornings to a fresh blanket of snow in the fields and a hot cup of coffee on the stove.

Those mornings truly felt like the start of a Hallmark Christmas movie. I never thought that would be an aesthetic I’d want to chase, but now I was all in.

When we drew closer, I noticed something new on the front porch that hadn’t been there when I left. I stopped at the bottom of the porch steps, but North climbed them and grabbed the top of a pine tree that had been propped up against my front door.

“I picked this out for you and had one of the boys drive it over for you.” He gave the tree a little shake, and the needles rustled as if in greeting. “I thought we could decorate it together tonight?”

“You did?”

“If you’re up to it, of course.”

“Up for it? Absolutely!”

He grinned, and I shouldered open the door and held it open for him to pull the tree in. He used a bucket that had also been delivered and got the tree propped up just in time for a knock at the door. I opened it, confused, and smiled when I found Maurice and one of his kitchen assistants bundled up against the cold with sealed food platters in hand.

“Bon appetit,” Maurice said, teeth chattering.

Giggling, I took the platter. “Thank you. Would you like to come in and get warm for a moment?”

Maurice crammed his hands into his armpits and shook his head. When he spoke, his French accent seemed even thicker than usual. “No, Miss. If I come in, I fear I won’t ever leave. You two enjoy.” He and his assistant hurried off, disappearing into the field of trees, and I turned with the tray of food to find North already in the kitchen pulling plates down from the cupboard.

“You’ve had this planned,” I said.

He shot me a cheesy smile over his shoulder. “I’ve been looking forward to having you all to myself.”

I brought the food into the kitchen and put it on the island. The rich smell wafted out from under the lid, and my mouth immediately began watering. With all the hustle and bustle of the day, I hadn’t even noticed how hungry I was. Right on cue, my stomach gave an obnoxious rumble.

North laughed and set out the plates, along with cutlery. “Perfect timing.”

We filled up our plates with Maurice’s delicious meal, a healthy serving of fresh pasta in marinara sauce with fresh-baked French bread. Rather than eating at the table, we got comfortable on the sofa and discussed how we were going to decorate the tree once we were finished eating. There was still a box out on the porch, which North told me was full of random ornaments from old decorating jobs back when Marge used to run the show. He had no idea what was in them, which sounded like a fun little adventure to me.

We left our dishes in the sink and he dragged the box inside. He opened the lid, and we both peered into the box of mismatched ornaments, garland, and lights.

“This is *old*.” I leaned over and began pulling out strings of pearls strewn together in a garland that had probably been made in the late eighties. Parts of it were in rough shape, but it felt nostalgic and similar to one my grandmother used to own and put on her tree every year, until it eventually fell apart and the pearls went scattering across her Christmas tree skirt. She’d shed a tear over them.

We found other treasures in the box, old silver tinsel, lights with liquid in them that bubbled like lava lamps, a string of plug-in angels whose halos lit up, and a tree topper that was so ugly it left me in stitches as I fell into the corner of the sofa.

North swiped it out of my hands with a laugh to get a good look at it. “Holy hell. This is hideous!”

The angel, or rather what used to be an angel, was practically headless. Her head hung on by a thread, and her halo, which had been sewn on, had untangled and hung down her back between her yellow wings, which I assumed used to be white.

Cringing, I told him to let me climb on his back.

“You’re not going to put that up there, are you?”

“I sure am,” I said, prodding him in the spine to get him to bend over as I stepped up on the sofa. I needed extra height to get up on his back. “Sometimes the ugliest things are the best parts of a tree. And this angel is full of history. She was beautiful once. I bet someone was very excited to buy her when they saw her all sparkly and new in the store window.”

“I love how you look at things.”

He helped me up onto his back, and we managed to get the angel perched on the very top branch. It took some effort to make her straight, but once she was up there, we moved on to the lights, testing each strand before adding it to the tree. The lights were followed by garland, and finally we were able to start hanging ornaments.

“I haven’t done this in ages,” North admitted as he hung a red cardinal on a high branch. “Not since...” He trailed off.

“Since you did it with Veronica?”

He nodded.

“What was her favorite part of it all? Of Christmas?” Before, talking about his dead wife felt off limits, but now things between us were different. He wasn’t shut off. He was open and alive, and in my humble opinion, I always thought that Christmas was a time to remember the people we missed and invite their memory back into the room.

He smiled. “The presents.”

I laughed. “Really.”

“Yep. She used to deny it because it wasn’t the ‘spirit of Christmas,’ as she’d always say, but I could see right through her. She loved the surprise. The excitement. The anticipation. And I’m a pretty good gift giver, so her high expectations were almost always met.”

“Almost?”

He chuckled. “I got a swat to the backside of the head the year I bought her a gift card to a spa.”

“Uh oh. Gift cards amongst partners? That’s a no-no.”

“Yeah, I learned that the hard way and never made that mistake again.” He returned to the ornament box, picked out a simple silver bauble, and threaded a hook through it. “She’d have loved today. And she’d have loved you, too.”

“You think?”

“I know. She gravitated to happy people. Bright people. She would have thought you were almost too bright to look at. As I do.”

My cheeks burned and my eyes stung. “I bet I would have liked her, too.”

He hung the bauble, cleared his throat, and rubbed his hands together. “We need some Christmas music in here.”

We spent the next hour decorating the tree, taking breaks to snuggle on the couch, share some kisses, and pour some wine. I reveled in his company, knowing how fleeting these moments were, and thought about what Cami had said about trying to make long distance work. I wasn't opposed to the idea. There was no doubt in my mind how real my feelings were for this man. He wasn't just a Christmas fling.

North was someone I wanted my parents to meet, and that spoke volumes.

"I can't believe how incredible this internship has been." I sighed as I settled against him on the sofa when we were all done. The tree twinkled, the lights glinting off the tinsel. "I'm so grateful for these past few weeks and for everything you've taught me. If I had the option, I wouldn't leave at all."

North stared at the tree.

I chewed the inside of my cheek. "I'm going to miss this. But mostly, I'm going to miss you." I resisted the cringing, insecure urge to ask if he'd miss me, too.

Still, he held his tongue. Suddenly, it felt as if all the romance and Christmas joy had been sucked out of the room.

I studied his features and the way his brows had drawn together.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

He shook his head. "Nothing. Nothing is wrong."

"Really?"

Nothing? It doesn't feel wrong to you that we have to end this before it had a chance to get started? It doesn't feel wrong that we have to say goodbye?

He cleared his throat and stood up abruptly, leaving me staring up at him as he grabbed his coat from the back of the armchair by the window. He shrugged it on.

"Where are you going?"

He fixed the collar of his jacket, pulling it up against his throat. "We should call it an early night. We have an early start

tomorrow to get moving on the town square's Christmas tree. This was fun." His eyes flicked to the tree. "It looks good."

"Yeah... yeah it does."

His features softened when he leaned over and gave me a kiss. "I'll see you in the morning."

With that, he was gone, leaving my head spinning. Had I been foolish to think he was going to spend the night with me? My cabin felt hollow and silent, and the tree felt a little less magical without him here.

CHAPTER 31



NORTH

Justin settled into the brown leather sofa by the fire in my living room. “No tree?”

“Haven’t had the time,” I said, which was true. All my time this month had been split between work and the pretty girl staying in my cabin. Now that it was coming to an end, I kind of wished I’d bothered to put up a tree in the living room.

Veronica never would have let this stand.

“You’re quiet tonight,” Justin said.

“Just beat, I guess.”

“So it has nothing to do with Winter leaving in five days?”

“Why would it?”

He laughed. “Because you’ve fallen head over heels for her. Everyone knows it. You’ve been the talk of the town for weeks already. Cami said Winter wants to come back.”

“Oh yeah?”

He cocked his head to the side. “I thought that would make you excited?”

Excited?

Not really.

We’d strung this thing along between us too long, and neither one of us had pulled our heads out of our asses long enough to realize it wasn’t sustainable. All that truth came crashing down on me last night after we finished decorating

the tree in Winter's cabin. She had to go home, and I had to stay here. She had a whole life carved out for herself back in Portland, and her future was only just beginning. Being ten years younger than me, she had a whole facet of life to experience that I couldn't be a part of. She had to lay her foundation, whereas I'd already done that.

I refused to be the reason she missed out on huge life experiences.

This was a Christmas fling. Nothing more. Nothing less.

One of us had to face the music.

"I know that look," Justin said.

"Uh huh."

"You're going to gut her, man."

"We were both being naïve," I said. "When she goes home, she shouldn't spend her time thinking about me or the farm. She should immerse herself in her studies and think about her future. I don't want to be the thing that holds her back."

"And what makes you qualified to make that decision?"

"Don't start with me, Justin. I've made up my mind. I know it's the right thing to do. It might hurt her in the short term, but in the long term, it's what's best for her."

He shook his head. "And what about you?"

"What about me?"

"When are you going to start thinking about doing what's best for you? You can hide behind your righteous self-sacrificing ways all you want, but I know you, North. Things just got real, and you're taking the easy way out."

"You don't know what you're talking about."

"Says the guy who's fallen in love and is willing to let it all go because he *thinks* he knows what's right."

"And you know better?" I asked sharply, silencing him with my stare. "You're chronically single, and the only girl you've ever pursued is Cami, who has made it clear to you a

thousand times over that she's not, and never will be, interested. I hardly think you're the person to give me advice on love, Justin."

He arched an eyebrow. "Spicy."

Rolling my eyes, I turned and stared into the crackling flames of the fireplace. I felt the darkness closing back in around me like someone had drawn curtains around my heart, where Winter had pulled them back and let the sun thaw me out.

Justin shifted in his chair. "I hope you let her down easy."

"I will."

"After her party?"

I shook my head. "No. Tonight. I won't string her along anymore."

Justin studied me but held his tongue. I was sure he was feeling a great deal of things, too. Winter had touched more hearts than just mine. And like me, he probably wanted to keep her around for his own gain. She'd been good for me, for him, for Cami—for everyone she came into contact with.

But we had to stop holding on to her. She was meant to touch more people than just the souls in Maple Hill.



Later that night, long after the clouds had cleared and the almost-full moon appeared, I made my way to Winter's cabin. I took the long route, stopping to check on all my traps on my way. I told myself I was doing it for the animals, but deep down, I suspected I was just delaying the inevitable.

While I wandered the grounds, checking trap after trap, I wondered what she was up to right now.

Having a bath, perhaps?

She did love that little ritual of hers. Maybe she'd be wrapped up in a robe with wet hair when I arrived. Or maybe

she'd be curled up in a corner of her sofa with a book on her lap. Always a romance book, I'd noticed. Or perhaps she'd be on the phone with her folks. They'd been playing a bit of phone tag the last few days trying to get in touch, and I knew she missed them. With a night to herself, she might have finally made things work, and knowing her, she'd talk to them for hours.

They were lucky to have a daughter like her.

Sometimes, on my loneliest nights after losing Veronica, I'd wished we had children of our own so I wouldn't be so dismally alone. I could look into their eyes and see their mother staring back at me. I could hold them close and promise them all the things Veronica and I had dreamed up for our future family, and I could follow through. They'd have held me accountable. They'd have forced me to keep the curtains open.

But no.

There were no kids.

No family.

Nobody.

Just me and a big house full of old memories that were drifting further and further away.

Around a bend, I happened upon a trap that wasn't empty like all the others. A coyote lay in the snow, her foot snared and straight out in front of her. She wasn't wounded, just stuck, and she licked anxiously at the cord around her paw. When she saw me she froze, and a low, guttural growl came out of her.

I stopped and held up both hands. "Let's get you out of there."

The snare attached to the rest of the trap about fifteen feet away, putting safe distance between me and the wild animal. Her eyes tracked me as I went to the snare, gripped the cord, and set the release. The snare came free with a soft click, releasing her paw, and she leapt up and scurried a few feet away before stopping.

Crouched down in the snow, I watched her sniff the air, catching my scent.

I could have caught her and released her further away, but something about the fear in her eyes caught and held me.

Just like for me, the farm was her home.

She lifted a foot and crept tentatively forward, curious more than anything. I rose to my feet and lifted my arms in a shooing motion. She bolted and disappeared among the trees.

“That’s it,” I said softly, breath steaming on the air. “It’s time to go now.”

CHAPTER 32



WINTER

“I’ll be home before you know it,” I said to my parents, whose smiling faces filled my phone screen. We were video chatting, which had taken them some time to figure out, but at least I could see their faces and not just their chins like the last few times.

Behind them, the Christmas tree twinkled, and I could hear Bing Crosby playing in the background. I imagined the whole house smelled like cloves and shortbread—Mom always made a third batch of shortbread cookies to bring to open houses the week leading up to Christmas, and drop off at neighbors’ houses.

“Five days isn’t soon enough,” Dad said, wagging his finger at the phone.

My mother swatted his hand down. “Five days will be here before you know it, and it will give us time to get your room ready. I bought new flannel sheets,” she added in a sing-song voice.

I smiled, and it took me a little effort. “You’re the best.”

Mom and Dad shared a look.

“Don’t worry about me,” I said, beating them to the punch. “I’m fine over here. There are just a lot of special people I’m going to be really sad to say goodbye to.”

And one special person in particular.

“Oh, honey,” Mom sighed, “goodbyes are never easy. But maybe you can visit them on spring break?”

“Yeah, maybe.”

“It will be harder for them to say goodbye,” Dad said, always my cheerleader. “You’ve probably made waves over there.”

Laughing, I rolled my eyes. “I’ve made friends. I don’t know about waves.”

“You’re a wonderful person, daughter of mine,” Dad said. “I’d bet our retirement savings that there will be some broken hearts in your wake.”

Mom nodded her agreement. “What he said, minus betting our retirement savings. I have my eye on a new treadmill.”

Laughing, I wished my parents a good night and told them I’d see them soon. They still hadn’t quite got the hang of ending video chats, so I listened to them bicker playfully before finally ending the call myself, smiling and shaking my head at their antics. At least I had their warm welcome to go home to.

Padding into the kitchen, I topped off my tea mug with some hot water, swirled it around, and added a splash of honey. I’d spent the late afternoon and evening keeping to myself in the cabin, knowing North was up at the house with Justin after our long day in town working on the tree for the lighting ceremony. People had stopped every few minutes to talk to us, which cut into our productivity, but spared us some awkwardness.

North had been off since last night.

I couldn’t put my finger on it, but there was something on his mind, and it was heavy. Whatever it was, it had to come out sooner or later. Probably sooner, seeing as how I would be going home soon.

It scared me to think what it might be.

Don’t think about it, I thought as I went back to my corner of the sofa, curled up, and pulled a thick knitted blanket into my lap. I retrieved my book from where it lay open and face down on the armrest, placed it on my thigh, and stared at the

Christmas tree by the fire. *He's probably just trying to get his footing like you, thinking about saying goodbye.*

I read a page.

Or rather *tried* to read a page. Retention wasn't happening, so I had to go over it again, and again, before finally giving up with a sigh and accepting the fact that my head wasn't in it and my thoughts were elsewhere.

On the man I'd fallen in love with.

The truth had been evasive for the last week. I knew I had deep feelings for him, and I knew they continued to grow every time I was with him, but it was undeniable now.

This feeling?

This overwhelming, jaw-aching, chest-tightening, heart-pounding, stomach-fluttering, thought-consuming jumble of sensations?

It was love. It had to be.

Should I tell him before I go home?

Will he resent me for leaving him on that note? Will he offer to make this work long distance? Will he make plans to come see me in the new year? Will he invite me to spend my first long weekend from school back here at the estate?

Am I worth the effort?

Groaning, I tipped my head back against the sofa and closed my eyes. "Get it together, Winter. You're embarrassing yourself."

Just then, a knock came at the door.

I yelped, sloshed hot tea over the edge of my mug onto my lap, and cursed as it burned and simultaneously made it look like I'd peed myself. Grumbling, I peeled the now wet blanket off my lap and went to the door.

North stood on the porch, hands in his pockets, nose frost-red.

“Hey,” I said, pulling the door open wide. “I was just thinking about you.”

He moved inside. “Hey.”

“Don’t mind me.” I gestured down at my wet leggings. “I just spilled tea on myself. I did not pee my pants,” I added with a self-conscious giggle.

He looked around, eyes lingering on the tree for a moment. “Right.”

His mind wasn’t here.

It was somewhere else.

My stomach dropped. “Why are you here?”

His gaze slid back to me. “We... we need to talk, Winter. Can we sit?”

Oh no.

Eyeing the sofa, I stayed where I was. “Do we have to?”

He moved to the sofa, took off his jacket, and sat. “Not if you don’t want to.”

I crossed my arms and shook my head. No, I didn’t want to.

North took a breath like he was bracing himself, and my mind raced ahead of the current timeline, filling in all the blanks he was about to. We were over. This was done. It was fun while it lasted, but it’s just not tangible. Thanks for the month. And your hard work. You were great. It’s not you, it’s me. I’m not ready for this. Can we end on a good note?

My eyes stung as tears threatened to build, and I cleared my throat and shook my head. *Hold it together. You can’t start crying before he even says a word.*

North met my gaze. “I’ve been thinking.”

“Yes?”

“It’s senseless for you to stay until the end of the week. I’ve arranged for a car to pick you up tomorrow morning and take you to the airport. You can have extra time with your

family before the holidays. I can handle the rest of the events here on my own.”

His words hit me like a punch to the chest. I breathed through the pain.

“Tomorrow? That’s... that’s... so soon.”

“It’s for the best.”

“For who?”

“For you,” he said, brows drawing together.

“Says who? You?”

He shrugged. “Yes.”

How could he be so cold? So to the point? So direct? Did this not hurt him at all? Had he considered my feelings at all? Had he given any thought to the fact that I too had been thinking about him and our dwindling time, and thanking my lucky stars I still had a few days left to soak in the final memories we stood to make together?

How dare he?

I found my voice. “I don’t know what to say.”

Fuck you.

That’s what I wanted to say—or scream.

“You don’t have to say anything.” North got to his feet. “I just thought it would be better to address this head on rather than wait and let things... fester.”

“Fester how?”

He stared at me like he didn’t expect me to have any follow-ups. “You know what I mean, Winter.”

“No actually, I don’t. One minute you’re surprising me with a tree decorating date and dinner, and the next you’re acting like this never meant anything to you. Like *I* never meant anything to you. Three weeks ago, I might have believed that. But now? After everything?” I shook my head, gathering steam and anger. “I’m not buying it, North. You’re

doing this to protect yourself. This isn't about me or what's best for us. This is about what hurts less for *you*."

"Maybe."

"Maybe?" I scoffed. "That's all you've got?"

"This was an internship, Winter. Nothing more. We got carried away. We let the Christmas season—"

"Don't." I held up a finger. "This has nothing to do with Christmas lights or music. Don't pass the blame. And don't belittle this. It started as an internship. It hasn't been 'just' that for a long time, and it hurts that you're trying to make it seem that way."

Like a coward, he moved to the door.

"Who are you?" I breathed. "Where is this coldness coming from? What did I do?"

"Nothing." He opened the door. A blast of air as cold as his heart came rushing in. "The car will come for you at ten. I'll send someone to help with your bags, and I've already taken care of your flight changes. I'll email your tickets to you when I get back up to the house. Do you need anything else from me?"

The tears fell.

I couldn't stop them.

I tried, failed, and gave in, letting them fall down my cheeks and drip onto my sweater. I shook my head as my chin trembled. "No. I don't want anything else from you."

He took a tentative step forward, reached for me, thought better of it, and let his hand fall to his side. "I'll attach a reference letter for your counselor as well, and any future employers. Goodnight."

With that, he was gone, leaving me staring at the closed door feeling shell-shocked and like he'd just ripped my heart out and stomped all over it with his massive feet. The tears continued to fall, but no sobs broke free. I felt too numb to cry in earnest. Too rattled.

Grabbing my phone from the kitchen counter, I texted Cami and asked her to come get me. I couldn't spend the night here. She called me back, but I said I couldn't talk. I just needed to get out. She said she was on her way in fifteen minutes, which gave me just enough time to pack my bags, strip the bedding, unplug the Christmas tree, and give the cabin one last longing look before dragging all my bags through the snowy fields up to the main house, where I waited in the freezing cold outside the front door for my ride.

Finally, the crying started in earnest.

CHAPTER 33



NORTH

Burl Ives played through the diner speakers. Beside me, perched on the edge of his red leather and chrome stool, Justin tapped his foot in rhythm to the music while he feverishly replied to client emails on his phone.

Even though the diner was bustling with activity one week before Christmas and every face was joyful and bright, the mood felt solemn and heavy. I leaned over my tiny ceramic coffee cup and gave it a swirl before taking a sip. The coffee here had always been mediocre at best.

“Done.” Justin set his phone down on its face on the diner counter. On the other side, waitresses hustled around with coffee pitchers, teapots, and plates of food, running orders from the kitchen to tables. “Sorry about that. Business just keeps getting more and more hectic. I’ve told all these people it’s the holidays and we’ll catch up in the new year, but they’re relentless.”

“More clients?”

“They just keep falling into my lap. I have people contacting me from out of town. Hell, I have out of country clients looking to buy investment properties or places to use as Air BnB’s. Not sure how I feel about bringing too much of that into town, though.”

“Business is business.”

“But Maple Hill is still a small town, and people like us have to do our part to preserve its integrity. Bringing in a bunch of out of city or out of country money could jeopardize

that. I have to decide how I feel about it.” He turned his coffee mug around in slow circles, studiously weighing his options. The Justin I used to know would have jumped at the chance to make more money and wouldn’t have spared Maple Hill a second thought. “It’s just money, right?”

“If you say so.”

He gave my arm a back-handed smack. “Cheer up, dude. You were the one who let her go, not the other way around. Quit brooding around town like you’re the one who got dumped.”

I opened my mouth to give him a smart ass comment, but he was right, so I promptly closed it again to sip my coffee.

Justin shook his head disapprovingly. “Didn’t even get a chance to tell her goodbye because you botched it.”

“I did.” Cami appeared in front of us with our breakfast orders and set my plate down particularly hard in front of me, before gently placing Justin’s in front of him. “And it was the worst, most gut-wrenching goodbye I’ve ever had to give. Thanks to *someone*,” she added scornfully.

Justin pulled his plate close to himself, like he was afraid his perfectly poached eggs would be destroyed on the battlefield between Cami and me.

She glared down the length of her nose at me. Well, sort of down. Seated on the barstool, I was basically the same height as her. Her lips pressed into a firm, merciless smile. “Eat up.”

Blinking down at my food, I wondered if she’d sabotaged it or if she just wanted me to think she had.

Justin shoveled shredded hashbrowns into his mouth and watched me out of the corner of his eye.

“She cried her eyes out the whole drive to the airport in the morning, just so you know,” Cami said.

“I didn’t ask,” I said.

She leaned forward, resting her elbows on the counter. “And no matter how many times I told her you were an ass, she kept trying to justify what you’d done. She said she

understood even though it hurt, and that you weren't ready, and she respected that. She just wished you'd done it differently. With a bit more grace and kindness, perhaps." She shook her head in disdain. "She has more compassion in her pinky finger than you do in your entire, gigantic, freak-sized body."

Justin chuckled and tried to cover it with a snort when I glared at him. He scooped more food into his mouth and nodded to Cami that it was good. She didn't even look at him. Her menacing stare remained fixed on me.

"I did what I had to do," I said. "It's easier for her to hate me. She can move on faster."

"That's not how it works, and I thought you were man enough to realize you don't get the liberty of making those decisions for other people. You took away all her choices," Cami said imploringly. "Don't you see how fucked up that is, North? After everything she did this month, for you and for us and everyone she met, you thanked her by snipping away all her options, telling her how it was going to be, and shipping her off like she'd been nothing more than a blip on your radar. It was so unfair. So cold."

"I get it."

"I don't think you do."

"Damn it, Cami," I growled, "of course I do! Do you think it was easy for me?"

My voice carried across the diner, and heads turned.

Justin laughed uneasily and forced an appeasing realtor's smile onto his face. "Just a heated debate, folks, nothing to see here. Back to your pancakes and bacon now."

The attention on us faded away.

Cami clicked her tongue. "You're missing the point. It would have done her some good to know it *wasn't* easy on you. To know that you were hurting just as much as she was. To know she meant something to you."

I looked at Justin for aid.

He shook his head and looked down at his plate. “Nope. Don’t look at me. I tried to save you from yourself but you told me to stick it where the sun don’t shine. Now she’s on the other side of the country.”

“Probably crying into her pillow,” Cami added.

“Or throwing darts at your picture,” Justin said.

“Are you two done?”

“I won’t be done until you admit you were wrong,” Cami said.

Justin pointed at her. “What she said.”

I fixed him with a glare.

He backed down. “Sort of.”

Cami sighed and rolled her eyes. “Coward.”

“Listen,” I grated, “everything that happened between Winter and me was just that. Between Winter and I. Not the pair of you. I know you had feelings invested because you cared about her as well, but in the end, I had to cut her loose. If you don’t understand that, it isn’t my problem. As soon as I realized I was in love with her I knew I couldn’t stand between her and finishing her degree. She has too much potential to squander the remainder of her studies for a place like Maple Hill. This is a town you come to when your dreams are established. When you have a foundation. Not when you’re starting out. She deserves to have the world at her feet.”

Cami blinked rapidly.

“I don’t care if you agree with me or not,” I said. “Do your worst.”

“Did you say you were in love with her?” Cami cocked her head to the side.

Justin nodded eagerly and pointed his fork at me. “Awesome, right?”

She worked to unglue her tongue from the roof of her mouth. “I didn’t see that coming. You’re in love with her, but

you let her go? North, for once in four years, don't you think you deserve to have something good?"

"At the expense of her future?" I shook my head. "No."

"But why do you get to choose that future for her? You saw Winter in action." Cami looked around as if suddenly remembering she was at work. She hurried off to top off coffees and take a few orders before returning while Justin and I shoveled the last bits of breakfast into our mouths. "Winter gets shit done. Whatever it is, however big the obstacle, she sees that it is removed from her path and she exceeds any and all expectations placed upon her. Do you really think Maple Hill would hold her down that much? Do you really think she wouldn't make long distance work with you? She has one year of school left, North. *One year*. That's nothing in the grand scheme of things!"

I reached into my pocket, pulled out my wallet, and dropped cash on the counter. "Thanks for breakfast."

Justin hurried to his feet to follow suit, struggling to get his wallet out of his particularly tight jeans.

Cami took the cash with a scowl. "Typical. You're turning your back and walking away right when things get good."

"At least I'm consistent," I said.

Justin threw his cash down, too. "Are you two done? How long am I going to have to listen to this? Because honestly, it's already getting old."

"Shut up, Justin," Cami and I said in unison.

He shrugged into his coat and wrapped his plaid navy and green scarf around his neck. "Assholes."

Cami called after us that she'd see us at the tree lighting ceremony the day after tomorrow as we ducked under the diner door. A small bell chimed above our heads just as a blast of cold air hit our bare faces. Justin clapped his hands and rubbed them together vigorously as we walked to our parked cars in the lot. He was heading to his realty office, and I was heading back to the estate to fell more trees for this evening's shoppers.

The tree farm had been seeing upward of fifty people a night coming to buy trees, many of them not local to Maple Hill, who had seen pictures on social media. We hadn't even done any of our own marketing this year. It amazed me to think how big this event could be next year with the right advertising platform.

"I'll see you around, man," Justin said, leaning on the roof of his Lexus. "Don't be too hard on yourself after all that shit Cami said in there, all right? She's her friend. It's her job to pick Winter's side."

"It's the only side to pick." I opened the door to my Land Rover. "She didn't do anything wrong."

Justin shrugged. "Maybe you two will find your way back to each other. A Christmas miracle or something. Those still happen you know."

Not in my world.

CHAPTER 34



WINTER

My father came up behind me on the sofa with a cup of tea in one hand and a Christmas napkin in the other. He reached down, showing me two shortbread cookies and a nanaimo bar on the Christmas-tree-printed napkin—both homemade goodies my mom had whipped up this past week.

“Some sweet treats for my sweet kid,” he said.

Smiling, I took them from him, followed by the tea, and made myself comfortable in the corner of the sofa.

“How long before your call with your counselor?” Dad asked.

I glanced at the time on my laptop, which was open on the side table. “About eight minutes. She’s usually a few minutes early though.”

He came and sat in the opposite corner of the sofa and patted my ankle. “You’ve been quiet since you got home. Maybe tonight after your mother goes to bed, you and I can pop in a Christmas movie, eat some garbage food, and talk about what happened?”

I loved how he still said “pop in” a movie like we had a VHS player and grainy tapes of old holiday films like “It’s a Wonderful Life”—his favorite.

My parents didn’t know anything about North, or my love story, or how it had all blown up in my face. At this point they both thought my coming home early and the way I wore my sorrow on my sleeve was work related.

“That would be nice,” I said.

“Should I go buy us some wine? An Argentinian red, perhaps? A Malbec? Your favorite.” He winked.

I laughed. “Sure, Dad, that sounds perfect.”

He gave my ankle another affectionate pat before getting up. “I’ll make myself scarce. Your mother and I will be in the kitchen when you’re done. She’s putting me to work, like usual. Icing cookies with these fat fingers.” He flashed his arthritic knuckles. “Your aunt and cousins are going to get some ugly snowmen shortbread this year, that’s for sure.”

I giggled, which was all he was after, and he took his leave, letting me sip my tea and indulge in a shortbread before starting the call with my counselor.

Dr. Allison Kent’s face appeared on my screen, and she waved into her camera while I unmuted myself. “Good morning, Winter. It’s nice to see you. How’s the weather where you are?”

I turned the computer so she could see out the large window in my parents’ living room. The Christmas tree sat tucked in the corner, but through the open blinds, rain battered the streets. “Cold and wet. I’m back in Portland with my folks. Where are you?”

“Visiting extended family for the holidays in Montana,” she said. “It’s very cold and *lots* of snow here. I don’t think I’m quite cut out for it.” She pushed her glasses higher up the bridge of her nose. “How was your month in New York? Did you learn a lot? I have an email here with some glowing references, one of which indicates you already secured a design contract for next December. Is this true?”

Despite how badly everything had ended in Maple Hill, I still felt a rush of pride at the mention of my New York City Mall contract. “Yes, it is. I’ve been contracted to design the Christmas tree and main square of New York City Mall for the holidays next year.”

Dr. Kent nodded approvingly. “I knew you’d impress people. My dear friend Marge says you were an absolute

pleasure to have around.”

“Marge was wonderful. Super inviting.”

“She says the same about you, and how you made waves in town, helped sell a house with your interior designs, and—I’m not sure what she meant by this—mended a broken heart.”

I blushed. “Oh, um, just a silly inside joke.”

Dr. Kent chuckled softly, and through an open doorway behind her, I saw a small child in pajamas go racing down the hall. She apologized, got out of her chair, and stuck her head into the hallway, where I heard her muted yells for the kids to stop acting like hooligans while she was on her call. She told her husband to put their snowsuits on and go play in the yard before slumping back into her chair.

“Holidays,” she said, clicking her tongue. “Great for everyone except mothers.”

I smiled.

She fixed her glasses once more. “Well, Winter, normally there’s a bit more back and forth with these kinds of meetings, but I know you probably have some festivities to get to or quality time with family, as do I, so let’s not beat around the bush here. I want to put you up first for the selective design program that starts in the spring. I know you had some reservations about it, but I’m hoping your internship has changed your mind. With feedback like this and a secured contract of your own, I am even more confident than I was a month ago that you’re the right person for this program. It’s going to propel you forward in ways you can’t begin to understand yet.”

“I’ll do it.”

She perked up. “Just like that?”

I nodded. I needed something to throw myself into—something that was mine, that I could define success within, and that nobody could strip away from me or make it less than.

“Just like that.” I smiled.

“That’s wonderful news!” She clapped her hands together excitedly. “I’ll send you an email with a registration link. It’s fairly straightforward. You have until January fourth to select your classes. As you go through your options, please keep in mind how crucial business courses are to your success out in the real world. You have all the creativity in the world for design, and I think giving yourself a business edge will make you even more of a competitor.”

“Got it,” I said.

“If you have any questions at all you know how to reach me. I’ll be away from my phone and emails as of tomorrow through to December twenty-eighth, so any time after that.”

“I won’t bother you. I hope you have an amazing Christmas and you get some downtime. You deserve it, Dr. Kent.”

“So do you, Winter. So do you.”

We said goodbye and I closed my laptop with a sigh, leaning immediately to the side table to retrieve my tea and sip it between bites of shortbread. It melted on my tongue.

At least I was no longer staring down the barrel of a year off. After everything that had happened, I felt in my gut that taking the program was the right choice. At the very least, it would help me forget I’d ever met North.

My phone chimed.

I picked it up and saw Cami’s name flash across the screen. She sent me three texts in rapid succession before apparently deciding that was too much effort and calling me.

I held the phone to my ear. “Someone’s impatient.”

“Hey! Is now a good time?”

“Sure. What’s up?”

“I just saw North this morning.”

I groaned and let my head fall against the back of the sofa. “Never mind. Not a good time. Unless you want to talk about literally anything else.”

“Hear me out.”

“Cami...”

“Please?”

Sighing dramatically, I managed a, “Fine.”

“He and Justin came into the diner this morning for breakfast. Just so you know, I gave him a piece of my mind.” She paused for recognition. When I didn’t applaud her, she kept going. “After berating him for a good ten or so minutes, he went on a bit of a tangent to shut me up, and three little words slipped out, I think before he knew what he was saying.”

Three little words?

“Can you guess what they were?” Cami pressed.

“Why are you telling me this?”

“Because he’s in love with you! *Because* he’s a total dingbat who is head over heels for you, who thought he was doing the right thing by sending you home with a chip on your shoulder. He said he thought it would be easier for you to move on if you hated him. Look, I know the guy hurt you, badly, and I’m not trying to justify how he handled things, but as you know, he’s kind of an enigma.”

“You could say that again,” I muttered.

“He’s kind of an enigma.”

“Ha. Ha.”

Cami laughed. “His moral compass has always pointed due north, no pun intended, and he will always do the right thing, even if the right thing means hurting someone. He has his head up his own ass. Either way, he’s in love with you, girl, and I thought you needed to know. And if this makes things even harder on you, well, shit, then I’m sorry, but I didn’t know what to do with the information.”

I stared up at my parents’ popcorn ceiling. As a kid, I used to lie on my back with my head hanging off the edge of the sofa, picturing animals within the texture. I spotted the part of

the ceiling that used to look like a Poodle to me. My imagination couldn't quite conjure it the same way it did when I was eight, but the remnants were there.

“What am I supposed to do about this, Cami? What do you want me to do?”

“What do *I* want you to do? Nothing,” she said hurriedly. “This isn't about me. It's about you and that overgrown idiot you have wrapped around your finger. If you see a future with him, maybe he's worth fighting for. If not? Well then let him go. I can come visit you in the spring and we'll both have walked away winners because we have each other now.”

I smiled. Her optimism had been my favorite thing about her when we first met.

“Are you smiling?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“Good. Then this is where I'm going to leave you, because I don't want to say anything that influences your decision. I love you, I'm here for you, and I trust you to do what's best for *you*. Nobody else.”

“Yes, *Mom*.”

“Oh, and for what it's worth he looks like a miserable sack of bones lately.” Cami hung up the phone.

Still smiling, I looked back up at the ceiling as my head spun with thoughts about North—about how cold he'd been when he ended things with me, versus how sweet he'd been just the night before when he surprised me with a Christmas tree for the cabin.

Love.

After everything he'd been through and lost, did he deserve a bit more grace than I was giving him? We all made missteps along our journeys. It only made sense that this could have overwhelmed him and left him feeling like he needed an out.

Should I have fought harder not to let him take it?

My father knocked on the archway into the living room.
“Penny for your thoughts?”

CHAPTER 35



NORTH

Marge waddled over to me. She wore her red velvet Mrs. Claus outfit that she'd owned for several years now. It had a fluffy white collar full of silver glitter that tickled her chin, matching cuffs, and faux crystal buttons down the front of the jacket. Marge had always insisted that Mrs. Claus loved all things sparkly and that it added to the magic. I couldn't fault her for that. She certainly looked the part.

"It's a good turnout this year." She put her hand on my arm and looked around, surveying the Maple Hill town square in all its Christmas glory.

The city officials and I had worked together over the past couple of months to pull tonight off. We'd brought in vendors to have a night market where people could sell handmade goods, baked treats, and all kinds of odds and ends for people to finish up some last-minute Christmas shopping. We'd also made sure there were food vendors, including a hot cocoa stand, a mac and cheese food truck, an espresso bar, and a sandwich truck with plenty of vegan and vegetarian friendly options.

Beyond the food and the market stands, we had live entertainment, a jazz band played on a stage to the accompaniment of the Maple Hill Catholic Church choir, who currently sang a lively rendition of "Little Drummer Boy."

Children chased each other through the market and were scolded for throwing snowballs. Parents tugged tiny children behind them on miniature sleds. Family dogs stuck their noses everywhere they could, pausing and tugging desperately at

leashes when they got close to food. Seniors who'd been picked up by volunteers from the Maple Hill Senior Home sang along to the choir while standing bundled up under space heaters. Christmas lights twinkled everywhere, and half-sucked candy canes littered the snow from where children had abandoned them in favor of games.

"I'd say it might be our best year yet," I told Marge.

She gave my arm a squeeze. "How've you been, North? Really?"

"Good."

She gave me that same wise, twinkly stare she used to give me when I was a boy and she knew I was lying about washing my hands before dinner. "Are you, or do you just want me to believe that? A little birdie told me you were going through some things and that you missed a certain someone."

"Does that little birdie happen to have curly hair and a big mouth?"

Marge laughed. "Cami can't help herself. In another life, I suspect she was a matchmaker."

"Or a lawyer, always sticking her nose where it doesn't belong."

"You're her friend, and so is Winter. Who says it doesn't belong?"

Grumbling, I tucked my hands in my pockets.

Marge smiled an easy smile. "You don't have to tell me anything, North. It's okay. I just want you to know that I'm here for you if you did decide you wanted a listening ear. I could come up to the estate for an evening. It's been a while since I enjoyed Maurice's cooking."

"He'd be happy to see you."

"Is that an invitation?"

"Sure," I said. "Pick a night. Mine are all wide open now."

"Indeed," she said. "I'll check my calendar."

A kid in a parka too big for him that made his arms stick out at ninety-degree angles went flying past us. He was quickly followed by more kids, all of them shrieking at the top of their lungs.

Marge laughed jovially—the way a true Mrs. Claus would. “I remember when you were that little. Cami, too. And wee little Justin.”

“He’s still small.”

“Of stature, maybe, but his character has grown over the years. Thank goodness. Tedious young man, that one used to be.” She watched the children rush across the messy snow in front of the choir before collapsing onto their backs to make sloppy snow angels. “If only we could turn back the clock and go back, just for a little while. Don’t you think that would be nice?”

There’d been a time when I would have given anything for control over time.

I could stop Veronica from taking the Land Rover out that night. I could save her. I could change the entire trajectory of our future.

“It would be nice,” I said.

Marge seemed to realize the implication of what she’d said because she looked up at me, an apology written in her eyes. “She’d have loved to be here tonight.”

I tipped my head back to look at the tree. It was a monstrous, sixty-foot, full, gorgeous spruce, and it had naturally grown in a near perfect triangle. Winter had decorated it, and we were all about to see it in all its glory when the lights went on.

“Yes, she would have,” I agreed, and I realized I was speaking both about Veronica and about Winter.

“Same with your folks.”

I chuckled. “Dad would’ve dropped dead if he saw the kinds of trees we were doing now. The reach of the Waylon Farm. He’d be impressed. Overwhelmed but impressed.”

“Your father was always overwhelmed.”

It was true. My old man always had one hand on the wheel and another fanning the flames of his stress. He was one of those guys who never felt like he was on top of everything. Now there was a good name for it—imposter syndrome. He always felt behind, like he hadn’t done enough work, hadn’t accomplished enough, wasn’t ever doing enough. In reality, he’d laid the foundation of growth that made the farm what it was today. I’d just propelled it forward using modern resources. He’d done all the grunt work.

“He’d have hated the choir,” I said.

Marge gave a full belly laugh. “You’re right, he certainly would have. He’d be looking for a rock band.”

“Mom would have liked them though.”

“She’d have wanted to be up there singing with them. They’re all here with us in spirit. My family, too. Everyone who’s gone isn’t really *gone*.” Marge patted my arm one last time. “This old girl needs a hot drink to keep these brittle bones warm. Good luck with your speech. Enough of this mushy stuff.”

I leaned down and gave her a hug, pressing a kiss to her soft, wrinkled cheek. “Merry Christmas, Marge.”

She beamed up at me. “Merry Christmas, North.”

I watched my dear old friend disappear into the crowd on a hunt for hot chocolate or something stronger. Amidst the swirling bodies, I spotted Justin and Cami wandering up and down the rows of vendors in the market section. She wore a wrap around her ears with a silver pin that sparkled whenever it caught the light and matching gloves, one of which just happened to be wrapped around Justin’s hand.

I narrowed my eyes.

What on earth was going on there? Had he finally worn down her defenses?

No way, I thought, straining to see over the tops of everyone’s heads to get a better look. I was about to try to

creep closer when the choir ceased their song, and one of the city officials took to the microphone on stage to invite me up to lead the lighting ceremony.

All heads whirled to me.

I gave everyone an appeasing smile and wave and cursed the moment for giving Cami and Justin a chance to leap apart. Perhaps it had been my imagination.

The crowd cleared for me to make my way through the snow to the stage, where the city official handed over the microphone.

“Everyone, please welcome Mr. North Waylon, our generous sponsor for this evening and Maple Hill’s leading live Christmas tree supplier. He’s put us on the map in more ways than one. Put your hands together, people!”

The crowd rumbled with enthusiasm.

I found my place in the middle of the stage under the single spotlight mounted on a rack above my head. I feathered my fingers across the microphone, unsure where to start. I should have written something down. My gaze raked across the crowd, landing on Justin first and sliding to Cami, who wiggled her fingers at me to say hello.

Maybe she would forgive me sooner than I thought.

Clearing my throat, I spotted Marge in the crowd, and I found her eyes the easiest to hold while I spoke.

“Welcome back to another annual tree lighting ceremony, Maple Hill.” My voice carried through the speakers and rang back at me. “It’s good to see all your faces. Some familiar. Some new. For those of you who’ve never been before and who are new here, we’re glad to have you. We’re simple people from a simple town, but whenever Christmas rolls around, we have a tendency to get, well, a little extra.”

People snickered in the crowd—mostly those who’d lived here a while.

I continued. “You know, I’ve been doing this for a long time. My whole life, practically. Waylon Farms started two

generations ago with my grandfather, who found a piece of property in this population fifteen hundred town and turned it into his dream. If you haven't been to Waylon Farms yet, you're more than welcome to. We're open every evening straight through until Christmas Eve, our last day of business. Anyway, I'm getting distracted. What I'm trying to say is I'm grateful for this place. For you people. For my home."

Marge clasped her hands together under her chin and nodded encouragingly.

"Admittedly, some of us have fallen on some hard times," I said, "but this year showed me that there is always a way through the darkness. Even if the path is poorly lit and narrow, there is good waiting on the other side. And I know that Christmas isn't always merry. Not for everyone. So if you're having a hard year this year, just know you're not alone. You're just not clear of the rockiest part of your path yet, and that's okay. Christmas can still come with lights and song, and grief can exist right alongside it. Someone very special to me taught me that this year, and I'm indebted to her for it." I cleared my throat, suddenly caught off guard by my own vulnerability. I rolled my shoulders as if to shrug it off. "Her name is Winter Dodson. Unfortunately, she's not here tonight, but she's the one responsible for making this tree magical, as you'll all soon see. She's also responsible for showing me the way out. And through. If she were here, I'd thank her. I'd..." I trailed off. "Well, I'd tell her everything I should have said before she left. If you have someone who's been there for you, I encourage you to tell them what they mean to you. Christmas is and always has been about giving. Give your truth. It's the best gift of all."

The crowd whispered, and I looked down at Marge, who had gathered something of an entourage. Cami and Justin were there, as well as Cami's mother, Leslie.

"Now enough of this mushy stuff," I said, stealing one of Marge's lines. "What do you say we light this tree, Maple Hill?"

The crowd cheered.

I hosted the countdown, and the voices of people I'd known my whole life counted down with me, our chant rising up into the starry night sky like thunder. At the count of one, the tree burst into light. People gasped and shielded their eyes as the tree dazzled them with a magnificent tribute to the town itself.

Winter had outdone herself with this one.

She had wanted the tree to speak to the town, as if to remind them of who they were, and she'd done so by using lights and projectors to blast images of Maple Hill's monuments, buildings, and heritage houses onto the tree itself. Where the projections didn't play, the tree was done up in twinkling warm lights and classic decorations.

I stepped back to admire it before turning to grin at my friends, all of whom gazed up with their mouths hanging open.

All but one.

A slender, dark-haired young woman in a white hat with a pompom on top, who wore a smile brighter than the tree itself.

CHAPTER 36



WINTER

North dropped the microphone.

It landed and rolled on the stage, undoubtedly giving the audio people a migraine as they tried to switch everything off while the sound of the rolling mic filled the speakers. He tried to chase after it, but it fell off the back of the stage into the snow with a *whoosh* and a *plop*. I covered my mouth and giggled.

Cami turned around. “Winter!”

Justin followed. “What are you doing here?”

I wanted to answer him, but my eyes were glued to North, who dropped off the front of the stage and moved forward, brushing past people and closing a hand on Justin’s shoulder to move him aside. I felt eyes on me—a lot of eyes—but the only pair I cared about were North’s, and he was looking right at me.

Or into me.

“Hi,” I said shakily.

“Hey.”

“Nice speech.”

“Not bad, huh?”

“And you didn’t even write it down?” I arched an eyebrow.
“I’m impressed.”

“I thought it was time to speak from the heart.”

Nat King Cole began playing through the speakers, and the choir members mingled amongst friends and family. North reached out to take my hand, but right before our fingers touched, Justin and Cami exploded onto the scene with eager grins plastered on their faces.

“Winter!” Cami threw her arms around me and bounced up and down, squealing.

Laughing, I hugged her fiercely back. “It’s good to see you, too.”

Justin nudged Cami aside so he could steal a hug as well. He gave me a friendly squeeze and stood back, holding me at arm’s length. “What are you doing back here?”

“Erm...” I trailed off and looked up at North.

“Right!” Justin let me go. “Of course, you’re here for the big guy. Remember that thing I said about Christmas miracles?” He winked up at North.

North slid his hands into his pockets. “Don’t you have somewhere to be?”

Justin held up his hands. “Whoa. Whoa. Shots fired. Cami, what do you say we go grab ourselves a hot drink and give these two a chance to catch up?”

Cami tapped the side of her nose. “Good idea.”

Just then, right when I thought I was going to get my moment alone with North, a woman with frizzy hair and big glasses came and stole him away, asking him to pose for some pictures with all his donation checks to local charities. He offered me a wordless apology before letting her steer him to stand in front of the tree to take picture after picture.

I bounced up and down on the balls of my feet to keep warm.

Cami draped an arm around my shoulders. “Come with us to get a drink. He’s going to be a little while.”

Justin and Cami wouldn’t take no for an answer, so I followed them through the market vendors to the espresso bar, where I ordered a caramel latte that tasted like heaven in a cup.

I sipped whipped cream off the top that had been dusted in tiny, caramelized sugar pieces. While we drank, we wandered and talked.

“When did you decide to come back?” Cami licked whipped cream from her upper lip. “After our phone call?”

“I talked to my folks after we hung up and told them everything that happened here in Maple Hill. They know me better than anyone, and I asked them what I should do. My heart has felt so stuck since North sent me away. I couldn’t trust it to make its own decision. As soon as I breathed in the fresh air of Maple Hill I knew I’d made the right choice.”

“And just what are you here to do exactly?” Justin asked.

Good question.

I still didn’t have a defined answer for that.

“North and I need to talk,” I said. “I don’t know what’s going to come of it, but I refuse to leave things as we did. It’s not fair to either of us. There’s a lot weighing on me that I need to say and he owes me a chance to air them out.”

“Yeah, girl,” Cami said, nodding proudly.

Justin kicked snow out of our path. “But what about you? What do you want? If you could control the outcome, what would you hope for?”

Overhead, the stars began to disappear behind a heavy, snow-filled cloud. I could smell snowflakes that hadn’t fallen yet.

“I’m hopeful for a lot of things,” I said softly. “But I’m going to keep it to myself for now. I don’t have any expectations. He could tell me the same thing he did the other night. But at least I’ll know I put it all out there.”

Justin stopped walking and so did we. “Did you not hear his speech?”

Cami rolled her eyes. “Of course she did, she was standing right there.”

“I’m not talking to you,” Justin said.

Cami scoffed. “For once.”

He turned his attention back to me. “You heard him, Winter. Ever since you left, he’s been brooding all around town, missing you. We tried to talk sense into him, but you know how he can be. It’s like talking to a very thick, very stubborn, very large brick wall.”

“I know.” I smiled.

“He’s not going to be able to tell you no twice,” Justin said, his voice ringing with confidence. “Mark my words. Saying goodbye to you the first time gutted him. He’s not going to do it again.”

I turned to Cami.

My friend nodded. “For once, I agree with Justin.”



I spent the bulk of the lighting ceremony event being approached by people who’d heard from word of mouth who I was. They had questions about my design experience, where I went to school, and why I’d come to Maple Hill in the first place. I tried to answer them as best I could while not getting distracted by North, who was always close by but just out of reach.

This town sure loved him.

For such a grumpy guy, he’d made decades’ worth of good impressions on these people. A few days ago, I felt like I knew the ins and outs of his soul, including the darkest and brightest corners, but now I felt like there was so much more left to learn about him. So many more mysteries to solve.

I hoped he’d give me the chance to solve them.

When Justin and Cami had peppered me with questions, I’d been too afraid to tell them what I’d really wanted.

I wanted North back.

I wanted to make this work.

Yes, I wanted to speak my piece, but at the end of the day, all I wanted was for him to acknowledge that this love between us was not mundane, and it wouldn't come around twice, and we'd be fools not to lean into it.

If I said all of that, it would become real, and I wouldn't be able to face them if he turned me down again. For now, I had to play things close to the vest.

Marge and Leslie approached me at one point, and Marge had a motherly glint in her eye as she told me all about how happy she was to see that I hadn't given up on North, who she affectionately referred to as "my boy."

"Not yet," I assured her. "The real question is if he's given up on me."

Marge shook her head, and her permed hair danced across her forehead. "Don't worry yourself over it, dear. That speech he gave earlier? That wasn't for us or for the tree. It was for you. Everything he has done and become this month has been for you. I think he finally knows it." She nodded across the way to the hot chocolate stand, where North was being bombarded by kids after offering to treat them to hot chocolates.

I giggled into the warmth of my white glove.

The kids kept on coming, emerging from the crowd like dogs being called to their bowls by a bell, and North continued to supply them with hot chocolate, laughing that booming but rare laugh of his as they tugged at his pants and jacket, competing for his attention and whichever cup he was handing down at the time.

"He'll be a great father someday," Marge said.

Leslie, her dear friend, nodded beside her. "Like his daddy before him."

I studied the older women who'd known North his whole life. "He mentioned on a trip he wanted kids. Does he really want a family?"

"He used to," Leslie said.

“Before Veronica died?” I asked.

Both women nodded.

Marge found her voice first. “They had dreams of having two children, perhaps three. North wanted to break the family tradition of only having one child, and always sons. He wanted a little girl. Over the years I think he has forgotten that dream. But with you around? Well, let’s just say he usually avoids children like the plague.”

I watched the man of my dreams as he knelt down in the snow, handing over the final hot chocolate to a tiny girl who couldn’t have been more than three and a half, perhaps four. Her hair, short and curly, was tied off in two tiny pigtails and secured with little red bows that matched the ones on her red boots. North said something to her that made her shy and bashful, and she looked down at the snow before he lifted her chin, said something else, and earned himself a radiant little smile.

I’d never felt so full of desire and need before—and this wasn’t sexual desire. I wanted North more than I wanted anything in my life. He’d shaken things up for me like I lived in a snow globe. All at once, I’d come out to the other side, and the world was bigger here. Scarier. Brighter.

But it was nothing without him.

Marge put her hand on my back. “Go talk to him.”

“I will.”

“What are you waiting for?”

I watched as North bundled up a tiny snowball and hurled it at the back of a boy’s head. It burst apart on contact and rained down into his hood, which North promptly pulled up over his head, smothering the boy in more snow, before taking off like an oversized child himself.

Grinning, I said, “I’m waiting for a chance for us to be alone so we can talk properly.”

CHAPTER 37



NORTH

I stomped snow off my boots while Winter unfurled her white scarf from around her neck. She hung it on the coat rack, along with her white pompom hat and jacket, and combed her fingers through her hair. Shorter strands stuck up with static from the cold, dry air and her knitted hat.

“Can I get you anything?” I offered. “Tea? Wine? Water? Anything else.”

She smoothed her hands down the front of her jeans and shook her head. “I’m okay for now, thanks.”

Now that we were alone, I felt like I’d lost my footing. Back at the town square I’d been full of confidence to see her again, but now that the impending moment of truth had finally landed, I wasn’t sure where to start, where we were going, or how we would get there.

All I knew was we had to start talking.

Winter followed me deep into the house. I’d dismissed most of the staff for the holidays, even Maurice, who’d flown back to Montreal to spend the holidays with his daughter, son-in-law, and their two young children. Undoubtedly, he’d return in the new year with dozens of pictures to show me, and I’d have to indulge him.

I didn’t want him spitting in my food. Not that he ever would.

In the living room, I guided Winter to a comfortable corner of the sofa, indented and softened by Justin’s ass because it

was his go-to spot, and began building a fire. She sat with one leg crossed over the other, her elbow on the armrest, her chin in her hand, and watched.

“When did you get here?” I asked.

“Three. I caught a ride straight here after my flight landed.”

“Where are your bags?”

“I didn’t bring any.”

Oh. Did that mean she had no intention of staying long?

“The tree looked good,” she said.

“Didn’t it? I thought so too. The projections were a great idea.”

She smiled.

Sparks caught on the kindling, and I began adding thin pieces of sheared wood to grow the flames before stacking larger logs on top. While I worked, I was painfully aware of the fact that we were both beating around the bush, talking about unimportant things to buy time before we got to the main event.

“Justin and Cami looked chummy tonight.”

I turned, resting a hand on my knee. “I’m glad I’m not the only one who noticed. I think they were holding hands earlier when they thought nobody was looking.”

“Really? And here I was, falling hook, line, and sinker for her act that she hated his guts.”

“Cami hate Justin?” I chuckled and shook my head, adding another log. “Nah. He’s just an easy punching bag for her sense of humor. They’ve been close friends for a long time.”

“Maybe more than that now.”

“Maybe.”

I straightened, closed the grate in front of the fire, and deliberated where I should sit. In my month with Winter I’d never been so unsure of how to act—well, minus those first

few days where I had to get used to her incessant chit chat and bubbly personality. I'd found it grating then. In the last few days since she left? I'd have given anything for her company.

I sat in the opposite corner of the sofa from her.

She angled her body toward me, drew one leg up, and tucked it under herself. "How have you been?"

"Pretty bad, to be honest. You?"

"Same."

"I... I'm sorry, Winter. I thought... fuck. I thought I was doing the right thing when I told you to leave." I raked my fingers through my hair and leaned forward to rest my elbows on my knees. The fire crackled and the flames reached to lick the cavern of the chimney. "But as soon as you were gone, I started to question myself. Everyone was quick to tell me how badly I'd messed up, by the way."

She stared at her hands. "Why did you send me home? Why did you think it was the right thing?"

I resisted the urge to clam up and shut down. "I couldn't rationalize letting you pick me over your studies. No matter which way I cut it, I kept coming to the same conclusion, which was that you had more opportunities and more life to live back in Portland. If I didn't send you home, I worried you'd bow out of the spring program."

"You didn't think it was worth a conversation?"

I splayed my fingers, exasperated with myself. "At the time? No. I didn't want to give you a chance to talk me out of it."

"And now?"

"Now I wish I'd done it all differently."

She nodded slowly, digesting, processing. "I wish you had, too."

"Veronica had dreams, too."

Winter looked over at me.

I stared into the fire. “She wanted to be a mother. Badly. She wanted to fill this house with kids, and I kept putting it off, and putting it off, all because I was too busy worrying about work. It was always work. I picked it over her every time, even when she asked me to choose her. I made her seek out my attention...” I trailed off, guilt wrapping itself around my windpipe like an anaconda. “I regret a lot of things in my life, Winter, but nothing compares to the regret I have from my marriage. Veronica deserved better. She deserved a husband who got up and walked away from his desk when she came looking for him at eight o’clock at night. I wasn’t that guy for her, and I never faced the music until she was gone. It’s haunted me ever since. I was terrified of making the same mistake with you.”

“We aren’t the same,” she whispered. “You have never made me feel like that. You made me feel special.”

“That’s not what I mean. If I’d prioritized Veronica’s dreams alongside mine, she’d still be alive. The car wreck never would have happened. But I didn’t, and I can’t help her. I could, however, help you.” I looked pointedly at her. “I know it’s fucked up. I know I can’t use my past to justify the mistakes I’ve made with you. But I’m starting to understand myself better, and sending you home made me realize that not only was I trying to protect you from giving up your future, but I was trying to protect myself.”

“From what?” she whispered.

“Pain.”

Winter shifted and moved onto the middle sofa cushion so she could reach out and put her hand on my knee. “North.”

I closed my hand over hers. “I thought if I walled myself off, nothing could hurt me again. I was wrong. Being alone is harder. And being with you taught me that. I don’t want to move forward without you. And I don’t want you to give up school, either.”

“Since when can I only have one or the other?” She searched my eyes. “You’re playing by a set of rules I don’t subscribe to. I can have my cake and eat it too. We both can. I

never wanted to lose you. You're why I came back." Her eyes grew glassy and she giggled. "I told my parents about you. About how you make me laugh and how I feel when you walk into a room. I told them how you challenged me and made me grow, and how you set a high standard, and how more than anything I wanted to make you proud of me. I told them you were a brooding grouch on the inside, but once I got to know you, I discovered that you were the kindest, steadiest, most loyal man I'd ever met." She sniffled as a tear fell free. "How can you expect me to walk away from all that?"

"I'm sorry," I whispered.

"I know."

"I'll never hurt you again."

"The people we love always hurt us," she said. "Just don't ever send me away again, and don't make my choices for me."

"I promise." I brought her hand to my lips and kissed her knuckles. "Did you say *love*?"

Her cheeks turned neon pink. "Maybe."

My heart thundered in my chest. "I love you too, Winter Dodson."

She fell into me, lips softer than velvet sealing against mine, cold hands gathering the collar of my shirt so she could hold on for dear life. If I had it my way, I'd never let her go.

CHAPTER 38



WINTER

North's callused hand brushed my cheek and slid into my hair, easing it behind my ear and holding it there against the nape of my neck in a fist. His fingers pressed into my tendons, as if forcing me to part my lips for his kiss. I did. His tongue dipped between my teeth, and he lowered me down on the sofa, devouring my mouth as I slid a leg along his.

"Come home with me for Christmas," I whispered into our kiss.

He paused and smiled down at me. "Really? That's a big step."

"Bigger than getting on an airplane to ask the guy who stomped on my heart to take me back?"

"Is that what you were doing?" he mused.

I pushed playfully at his chest. "Just say yes. My parents want to meet you."

"There's a lot that needs tending to on the farm."

"It can wait."

"Marge will miss our standing Christmas Eve date."

"Tell Justin and Cami to take her."

He pursed his lips.

I closed a fist in the front of his shirt and dragged him back down to my lips for more kisses. "*Say. Yes.*"

His chest rumbled with a deep, masculine chuckle. "Yes."

I pictured Christmas Eve back at my parents' house with North occupying half a sofa to himself. He and my dad would hit it off—I could already hear their laughter in the kitchen while Mom and I eavesdropped from the living room. She'd tell me he was handsome within three minutes of him walking through the front door, I was sure. Dad would joke that he always hoped I'd marry into money. Mom would scold him. And North?

Well, he'd see where I got it from. My eyes from my mom, sense of humor from my dad, my love of the holidays from both of them. He'd be on my arm at my aunt's crazy open house party, and I'd be able to whisper in his ear about all my relatives and which ones to stay away from while we ate pigs in a blanket and sipped mulled wine.

He would be the talk of the entire party, I was sure. I couldn't just show up with a real-life lumberjack of my own and expect people *not* to talk. My cousins would be obnoxiously jealous. The littler ones would probably think North was the coolest thing on legs. The aunts would check him out every time his back was turned. The uncles would want to be him—and he might just get stolen away to the garage to look at my uncle's old Yamaha motorcycle, drink beer, and “shoot the shit” as the guys liked to say.

“What are you smiling about?” North asked, grazing his nose across mine.

“I'm daydreaming.”

“About me I hope.”

“No, some other guy who's just a bit taller with nicer abs and—”

He pinched my ribs and I broke off into laughter. The tickling gave way to more kisses

My heart swelled in my chest. Draping an arm behind his neck, I ran my fingers through his hair. He nuzzled my face to the side so he could kiss my neck. The warmth from the fire saved me from goose bumps as he worked my sweater off over my head and let it fall to the floor. I worked to undo the

buttons on his shirt, which shortly joined mine, and I arched my back and pressed up to feel the warmth of his skin against mine.

Soon, my jeans were undone.

Then they were gathered around my thighs.

He rubbed me over my panties while our kisses deepened, and by the time he pulled the thin lace fabric to the side and felt how wet I was, I could barely catch my breath between kisses. He praised me as he stroked me, telling me how good I was—and how good I felt—and nipping at my lips in between. I whimpered, wiggled, and silently pleaded with him to stop teasing me.

But he had his own agenda.

I lifted my hips, daring his fingers to slip, and he clicked his tongue.

“Patience.”

Whimpering, I let my ass fall back down to the sofa as he made his way down my body, kissing down my stomach and over my hips. He worked me out of my jeans, socks, and panties. Now totally naked beneath him, I ached to be filled. I couldn't wait any longer.

He settled between my thighs, kissed the soft skin between my legs, and finally tasted me. I gasped. He swirled his tongue over my clit and worshiped me. Every lick brought me closer to losing control. I clawed at the pillows behind my head, writhed in his arms, and finally he draped his forearms over my hips so he could hold me down.

Good thing, too.

When I came, I bucked wildly, like I'd lost the ability to control any and all muscle function. North let out a primal growl of satisfaction against my flesh that left me feeling like an exposed nerve.

More.

He eased a finger inside me.

More.

And another.

“Yes,” I moaned. Something inside me caught fire and burned hotter than the one crackling behind us. I dragged his face back up to mine for more kisses and murmured sweet thank you’s against his lips as he found the rhythm I liked best and stuck with it. Slow, deep, steady.

I lost all sense of time and space lying beneath him on the sofa. We might have been messing around for hours or minutes. I would never know for certain. Eventually, after several orgasms that left me with unreliable knees for walking, he scooped me up and carried me upstairs to his bedroom—pausing on the way to make sure I didn’t forget that he had complete and total control over me. By the time he laid me on the bed, I was buzzing with lust.

I had to show him just how grateful I was.

While he stripped out of his pants, I slid off the edge of the bed into a crouch in front of him. The room was dimly lit, but his eyes burned bright as I unzipped his fly, pulled his pants and boxers down, and freed him. I stroked his length and knew full well that this time he wouldn’t run.

This time?

He was mine.

I teased him with kisses first, exploring him and all his sensitive spots with deliberate slowness. He reached down and stroked my hair, gently nudging my head forward as if asking me to give him more, but he’d teased me downstairs, and I wanted to maintain my brief hold of power for as long as I could. It would be fleeting, but it would be glorious, and he couldn’t rush me.

He groaned when my lips puckered and the kisses grew wetter.

“Come on, baby,” he growled.

Steadying myself with my hands on his powerful thighs, I drew him into my mouth inch by inch. From one moment to

the other, I owned him. He was like putty in my hands. I took him deeper until he pressed against the back of my throat, and as I held him there I watched him struggle to stay in control of himself. If I could have smiled, I would have.

After plenty of teasing—merciless teasing that wasn't very festive of me and perhaps had a bit to do with payback—I indulged his desires and worshiped his cock like he deserved.

For him, I gave it all up.

Everything.

Until he decided he'd had his fill, grabbed a fistful of my hair, pulled me up, spun me around, and bent me over the edge of the bed. He slapped my ass. Hard. I yelped, wiggled my hips, and pushed back, asking for more. He barked at me to stay where I was so he could get a condom, and I didn't dare move.

When he returned, he positioned his knee between my thighs, forcing my legs apart, and rubbed me in slow circles while he masterfully unwrapped and put the condom on with his other hand. My whole body felt like it had been pulled tight, like a tight-walking rope, and the slightest touch or amount of pressure sent vibrations through every strained muscle and into every nerve ending.

“Please,” I pleaded.

North ran his length between my thighs. “Please what, baby?”

I let my head hang back, my hair grazing my spine, so I could look at him. He caught my chin and let his large hand rest around my neck. His thumb grazed my lower lip.

“Fuck me,” I whispered.

North eased inside me, filling me up until my thighs quivered and tiny stars exploded behind my eyes. I smiled against his thumb still resting on my lip, opened my mouth, and let him trace my teeth. I rolled my hips in a circle, loving how he pressed into me, and pushed back, taking him right to the hilt. He pulled more firmly under my chin, guiding my lips

to his, and he rocked slowly, like holding me was something to be done with care.

“I love you,” he said, his voice strained.

I wrapped an arm behind his neck. “I love you, too.”

We went down on the bed together, him still behind me, and he laid me flat on my stomach and took me from behind. I muffled my cries in the blankets, which quickly became bunched up and messy beneath me.

When he rolled me onto my back, I wrapped my legs around his waist and encouraged his thrusts with my heels, silently telling him just how I liked it. The muscles in his shoulders stood at attention, as did the tendons and veins in his forearms, and I found myself tracing them with my fingertips, marveling at the fact that this man was mine to love, and I was his.

How could a month change so many things?

North cupped the back of my head and kissed me deeply. I clung to him, and when his rhythm quickened we broke our kiss and I pressed my teeth to the swell of his shoulder to stop myself from crying out as he drove in deep and hard. I came in a rush. Euphoria spilled through me. His climax followed shortly after, and we both fell apart, breathless and sweaty, to lay on our backs and pant up at his ceiling.

“Good thing I came back, huh?” I managed between labored breaths.

North rolled onto his side and propped himself up on one elbow. His cock still reached for his navel, hard and proud. I tried not to stare. I wasn’t sure I could take any more.

“I’d have come to Portland eventually.”

Laughing, I asked, “Oh really?”

“Either out of sheer heartbreak or because Cami would ship me across the country unconscious and deliver me to your front door.”

I laughed harder. “The crazy thing? I can actually see her doing that.”

“And charging it to Justin’s credit card.”

Snickering, I leaned in for more kisses. “Why are we talking about those bozos when we’re both still naked and have lost time to make up for?”

He wrapped an arm around my waist and dragged me to him effortlessly, holding me close to his body. “Good question. Where to next? Shower or jacuzzi?”

“You have a jacuzzi? You just keep getting better and better, North Waylon.”

CHAPTER 39



NORTH

“Where is she?” Cami hurried past me at the bottom of the staircase, a collection of helium-filled balloons dancing over her shoulder as she went. “We still have time, right?”

I checked my phone. “Fifteen minutes, people! Birthday girl is here in fifteen minutes!”

“Crap!” Cami picked up her pace and disappeared around the corner. Seconds later, I heard her barking orders.

With no notice at all, I’d contacted close friends and townsfolk and told them that Winter’s party was back on. Only this time it wasn’t a farewell party, it was a birthday party, and we were throwing it all together in less than four hours.

Somehow, I’d managed to talk Winter into leaving the house this afternoon, sending her off to run some errands and meet up with a prospective client who needed their house remodeled. Justin had helped me make it happen, and Winter left excited with her portfolio under her arm.

She thought she’d be coming home to dinner for the two of us and a slow, easy evening at home before getting ready to fly to Portland the day after tomorrow, but that wasn’t the case. Tonight would be all about celebrating *her*.

Marge came through the front door with snow in her hair and bags of ice in hand. “Where do you want these?”

“Kitchen,” I said.

“Is Maurice here?”

I shook my head. “He’s in Montreal with the family. People have been bringing appetizers. Potluck style. Just throw the bags in the freezer for cocktails.”

Marge hurried on past, and I heard her and Cami meet in the kitchen. Their voices carried almost all the way through the whole damn house.

Justin sauntered in next, and he had bottles of liquor in brown paper bags. He and I went into the dining room to set up the bar.

“Do you think she has any idea?” he asked as he turned labels to face outward.

“Not a clue,” I boasted. “This party is going to knock her on her ass.”

“She likes surprises, right?”

“I think so.”

“You *think* so?”

I gave him a side-eyed stare. “Do you really think someone as enthusiastic and extroverted as Winter wouldn’t like surprises?”

“Touché.” Justin scratched his chin. “Hopefully she isn’t expecting a romantic evening with just the two of you and wants that more than a party.”

“She and I have plenty of time for romantic evenings. No more bullshit. No more gray area. We’re together. We’re going to make this work.” I unpacked the last bottle of wine and turned to my friend. “Speaking of romantic evenings. You and Cami have seemed kind of cuddly lately.”

“Cuddly?” He scoffed loudly, shook his head, dismissed me with a wave of his hand, snorted, and shook his head again.

Overcompensation much?

“We’re not cuddly,” he said. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Oh no? So you weren’t holding her hand yesterday at the lighting ceremony?”

“Our hands were cold.”

“Don’t bullshit me, Justin. If you two are together I’m happy for you. You don’t have to keep it a secret.”

He spoke out of the corner of his mouth and kept his voice low. “I’m not trying to keep it a secret from you, man. I’m trying to keep it a secret from *everyone*. Cami doesn’t want this to go public yet. She’s still...”

“Ashamed that she caught feelings for a fool like you?”

He nodded. “You get it.”

Laughing, I shook my head. “Listen, not that I’m one to give advice on relationships, but if you two are going to do this thing, you can’t be worried about what people think. If Cami can’t be proud about being with you? Maybe she isn’t your girl.”

He balked. “I’ve had the hots for her for ages. If she wants to keep me hidden under the bed, locked in the trunk, or crammed away in a dark corner? So be it. I’ll be her dirty little secret as long as she needs me to be.”

“You’ve got several screws loose, Justin.”

“It’s part of my charm. Ask Cami.”

My phone buzzed. “Ten minutes!” I cried.

The house felt suddenly more chaotic. The last bit of streamers went up. It had been impossible to find non-Christmas colors so close to the holiday, so we’d opted for white and silver. The theme was sort of cohesive. It could have been better, and certainly would have been if Winter had a hand in planning things, but that was off the table for obvious reasons.

Cami came hurrying over to us. “What are you two doing? Standing around chitchatting like high school girls? Justin.” She clapped aggressively, three times in rapid succession, to get his attention. “I need your help with the balloon arch. North? You need to corral people and tell them where they should hide for the surprise. I was thinking in front of the

fireplace in the living room, but it's your party, so you call the shots. Let's go, Justin, oh my gosh!"

She grabbed his hand and yanked him off his feet, hauling him into the living room.

He smirked over his shoulder at me like he'd just won the lottery and nobody knew it yet.

That remained to be seen.

In the final minutes before Winter arrived, I managed to get all the guests gathered in the living room and told them to hunker down when she got home so they could leap out and yell surprise when I led her into the kitchen under the guise of surprising her with dinner. They all huddled in front of the windows, which were trimmed in white Christmas lights that glowed on the freshly fallen snow out in the fields beyond. Winter's decorations from the tree market still stood—the glistening white reindeer and the occasionally illuminated tree.

Cami ran around like a mad woman collecting spare decorating items like stray tape, scissors, and torn streamers or banners that weren't used. She joined the group just as headlights flashed through the windows at the front door.

"She's here!" Cami cried. "Justin, stop talking so loud."

"I wasn't saying anything—"

"*Shh!*"

People snickered, me included.

"All right, folks," I said softly. "As soon as she and I come around the corner, that's your cue. Sit tight. And keep quiet. Everything echoes in this damn house."

I set off toward the front door and reached it just in time to open it for Winter, who stood on the front step bundled up for the cold and looking cute as hell. She wore a red lip and Christmas-wreath earrings. Once she removed her jacket, she revealed a white turtleneck and red, high-waisted pants she must have bought in town before the meeting. She looked like a festive dessert, and I'd have eaten her up if people weren't lying in wait in my living room.

“How did the meeting with the client go?” I asked, taking her jacket and hanging it up.

“So good!” She spoke excitedly, the cadence of her voice rising and falling for dramatic effect, as she followed me down the hall toward the kitchen. I didn’t even have to work to distract her. She was too caught up in the excitement of the day to notice anything was up.

Until we came to the end of the hall and the whole house shook as people leapt forward and screamed *happy birthday*.

Winter yelped and grabbed hold of my arm before descending into a fit of hysterical laughter. “What is this?”

I kissed the top of her head. “Happy birthday, baby.”

“You planned me a surprise party?”

Cami had already reached us. “*We* planned you a surprise party.”

Winter laughed. “Yes, of course, team effort all around, I’m sure. You guys, this so nice!”

“Good thing you didn’t jump his bones right when you got home,” Justin said before giving her a birthday hug.

Cami swatted him. “Why do you say the things you do?”

“It was a joke.”

“*You’re* a joke,” Cami said.

“And you’re my punchline,” he teased, attempting to wrap an arm around her waist.

Cami squirmed her way free with an eye roll, but there was a sliver of a smile curling the corner of her lip, too.

Winter said her hellos to everyone at the party, and once the niceties were over with and the music started to play, I poured her a glass of wine from the bar, and we found ourselves standing at the back window gazing out at the snow-covered fields of trees.

“Nobody has ever thrown me a surprise party before,” she said.

“I hope you like it. If you’d rather it just be us I can kick them all out. They’re a bunch of hooligans, anyway.”

She smiled over her shoulder at Justin and Cami, who were teaching people a lively drinking game of some sort at the kitchen island. Marge was there, laughing her butt off as the first round went underway and people threw back shots of what appeared to be Fireball.

“It’s going to get messy,” I said.

“I like the hooligans.” She shimmied closer to rest her head on my shoulder. “Besides, I won’t be seeing them for a while. After Christmas I’ll be in Portland working to save money for my last semester. This is a perfect goodbye-for-now.”

“You can come work with me until the spring semester starts.”

She tipped her head back and smiled at me. “Oh yeah?”

I cupped her chin. “Definitely. I’ll pay you well, and the benefits are... above average.”

“Sell me on it, Mr. Waylon.”

“Well, accommodations would be covered.”

“Mhm. Go on.”

“Orgasms would be guaranteed.”

“I like the sound of that.”

“Unfortunately there are pests that might hang around. Cling-ons, really.”

She looked pointedly at Cami and Justin. “Free entertainment? Sign me up.”

“And lastly, kisses. Lots and lots and lots of kisses.”

“Good ones?”

“You tell me.”

I pulled her to me, fingers still under her chin, and lifted her face for a soft, inviting, indulgent kiss that left my body

aching for more. Her hands fell to my waist. She tasted like mulled wine and smelled like peppermint.

“Hey! Lovebirds!” Justin’s voice boomed across the living room.

We parted and turned to him and the rest of the crowd.

He held up two shot glasses. “Is this a party, or is this a party?”

Winter laughed. The sound was pure magic. She threaded her fingers through mine and pulled me into the kitchen, already calling out for Justin to tell her the rules and prepare to get his ass handed to him. I reveled in the laughter of my friends and some of the people I’d come to think of as family, like Marge, who caught my eye and winked.

My big old house finally felt like a home again, and I was ready to fill it with new memories.

EPILOGUE



WINTER

One Year Later

Roger O'Malley rocked back on his heels and tipped his head all the way back, straining to see to the top of the Waylon Christmas tree that had been delivered three days ago. He held a cigar in his mouth—or rather, perched on the outermost part of his lower lip—and gave a confident, business-mogul nod.

“Looks good, Winter. Very good. You’ve outdone yourself.”

Standing beside him, I planted my hands on my hips as a cold wind picked up and tousled my hair. I peeled strands away from my lipstick. “Just wait until you see her all lit up, sir. Fifteen more minutes and you’ll see why you paid us the big bucks.”

He chuckled. “Waylon trees have always been worth the big bucks. It’s your eye for detail I’m curious about. I hope it lives up to my expectations.”

Over the past several months of working with Roger, I’d come to the conclusion that I didn’t really like him personally. Sure, he was a nice enough guy, but he had that edge to him that a lot of men who’d “made it” in business sharpened like a weapon. He liked to remind me how young I was, how fresh I was, and would often say things like, *well for the rate I’m paying you, I sure hope the tinsel is included, or, last I*

checked, newbies are supposed to be cheaper than those with experience. He'd tried multiple times to swindle a deal out of me, but I knew my worth and I stuck to it, and now the day was upon us where he would see with his own eyes that I was worth it.

Because damn it, I was.

North had enjoyed Christmas with my parents and crazy family last year. They had immediately taken a liking to him and welcomed him with open arms. I'd gone back to school to finish my degree. I'd made it through my specialty program in the spring with flying colors and finished at the top of my class. Dr. Kent, along with all my professors and multiple professionals in the industry I'd connected with since my time in New York, wrote me glowing recommendations and letters of review, which I treasured like badges of honor. North had sat up late with me one night reading them all shortly after my graduation and glowed with pride—as had my parents. My father even shed a tear.

I couldn't believe most of my victories had come from this past year of my life. I knew I'd been on the right track before that, but Maple Hill changed everything for me.

North changed everything for me.

And I wouldn't have it any other way.

An announcement rang through the outdoor speakers of the mall. *“Ladies and gentlemen, please make your way to the Christmas square at the main entrance to the mall. Our annual tree lighting ceremony will begin in ten minutes. That's ten minutes, folks.”*

Roger puffed excitedly at his cigar, sending bursts of smoke into the air. “Another year, just like that, huh?”

I smiled. “Just like that. I'll be right back, sir. I just have to grab my VIP guests so they have a good spot for the lighting.”

“Off you go, off you go.”

I stepped off the platform in front of the tree and found myself immediately swallowed up by the crowd.

Oops. I should have tried to spot them before I lost the height advantage.

Politely, I picked my way through the crowd, making my way to where I'd seen my guests last. They had to be here somewhere. Cupping my hands to my mouth, I called North's name.

Seconds later, his massive frame appeared, towering a good foot over almost everyone else in attendance. He reached for my hand, pulled me to him, and led me out of the dense crowd to where my parents waited on the outskirts.

My dad stood with his hands in the pockets of his khaki-colored winter coat. He'd owned it for as long as I could remember, and I swore I still caught whiffs of cinnamon on it sometimes from when he spilled cinnamon rum on it years ago at the Christmas Eve open house party. "How's it looking?" he asked. "All smooth sailing?"

I nodded. "All smooth sailing. Do you guys want to come with me? I can get you a better view. Where are Justin and Cami?"

North peered over all the heads. "They're around here somewhere. Ah, there they are." He waved his hands over his head. Seconds later, Cami and Justin appeared.

Their relationship had been on and off again for the past year. It made sense. They made for a bit of a tumultuous pairing. Ninety-five percent of Justin's personality annoyed Cami. He thought she was perfection poured into a tiny, curly-haired, adorable body. They fought about stupid things on a weekly basis, wanted different things for their futures, and complained about each other behind their backs.

To me and North, of course.

It was generally exhausting but I loved them both dearly.

Presently, they were "together," but I had a feeling another break was coming after the holidays, and maybe that would be the one that would show them they weren't destined to be together. That or they'd realize they couldn't sustain their current behaviors and would have to both make some serious

changes if they wanted this relationship to work. For starters, Cami would have to be nicer to Justin, and Justin would have to stop deliberately trying to annoy her.

And practice being less annoying in general, if that was remotely possible.

I led my family and friends back through the crowd as another announcement ran through the speakers.

Eight more minutes.

We climbed up onto the small stage where Roger still puffed on his cigar. He shook North's hand and we made introductions to the others. My dad couldn't stop staring at the tree, and as the minutes passed, I took a moment to look around, soak in the moment, and be grateful.

I'd had the most incredible year of my life.

After graduating my program, I'd moved to Maple Hill to live with North. He'd pushed back against me a bit, challenging me like he did, but in a good way. He wanted to make sure this was the right move for me and that I wasn't sacrificing other dreams I'd had before I met him. I assured him this was no sacrifice. I wanted to be where my man was, and since moving into the estate with him, my career had exploded.

Justin had hooked me up with countless clients in and around the Maple Hill area, who I worked with for remodels and staging, mostly for real estate deals. Word of mouth from those clients spread to more upper scale clients, like hotel owners who hired me to do special events. I had a contract signed for next summer to start working on a remodel for all the hotel rooms in a massive, three-hundred room luxury hotel in New York City.

Sometimes I had to pinch myself because it all felt so surreal.

But this was my life now. My dream.

North had been the supportive man in my corner the whole time. He pumped me up, gave me a safe place to land on days I came home overwhelmed, and reminded me every day how

loved I was. He was very aware of how important my parents were to me, and they came up to visit every two months, sometimes more often. Currently, they were here for the week of Christmas, and they were staying in my little cabin in the fields.

North's company had done some expanding too. Over the past year we'd worked together to lessen some of his workload by hiring capable people to take over certain parts of the business. Cami, for example, had stepped in to work as his personal assistant. Her wit and charm played well with any potential clients she had to interact with, and her no bullshit approach kept North in line on days where he needed a firm hand.

It gave him more time to be home with me, to go back to the basics of what he loved so much, like felling trees on his own, working the market in the fields, and helping families pick trees out to take home. Slowly but surely, we were curating the life we both wanted, and I had a feeling there was even more greatness in store for us next year.

"Five more minutes!"

Justin wrapped an arm around Cami's shoulders. "Five more minutes, sweetheart. Then do you want to go track down some of those mini donuts? All I can smell is cinnamon and sugar."

She kissed his cheek. "Sure, baby, we'll get you your donuts."

My mother shuffled over to me, suppressing a shiver in the chilly night air. "I'm proud of you, sweetheart."

"Thanks, Mom."

The crowd began to close in tighter around the tree as more and more people began to arrive, shopping bags in hand, cell phones in the other, ready to capture the event on film. My stomach tried to climb up my throat from all the nerves. So much was at stake in this moment, and I hoped and prayed everyone loved the outcome.

"Two more minutes!"

North came up behind me and wrapped his arms around me, engulfing me in security and warmth. “It’s going to be great. It always is. Take a breath.”

I inhaled through my nose and exhaled through my mouth.

He rested his chin on my head. “That’s my girl.”

Seconds ticked by.

“One more minute!”

I did a little shimmy in place. The energy continued to grow until it felt electric. Christmas songs looped from one into another. Children grew impatient. Parents bribed them for their attention with sweets and promises of toys to play with later. Some were threatened with the Naughty or Nice list.

“Thirty seconds!”

I gnawed at the inside of my cheek until it was raw. “Here we go.”

Overhead, the stars twinkled. There would be no snow today, but the forecast called for a huge dump of it over Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. A white Christmas at the estate with my folks would be magical. I’d already been daydreaming about what the coming years might look like with babies and young children calling them grandma and grandpa.

The ten second countdown began.

North’s voice rang out clearer over all the others, and I added mine to the chorus. Cami and Justin snuggled up close. My parents held hands and watched as the countdown struck one.

The tree blazed to life.

Gasps rippled through the crowd.

Dazzling light displays lit up the square. The tunnel cut through the center of the tree became suddenly more visible, its interior strung with red and green lights to illuminate the path to a small woodshed decorated to look like a gingerbread house. Seconds after the tree came to life, the door to the little

cabin flung open, and a jolly old Saint Nick in a red costume—who had a real beard, something I would not budge on—emerged.

“Ho! Ho! Ho! Merry Christmas!”

Children started and gasped. Soon they were pointing, and whispers went up all around.

“Is that Santa Claus?”

The tree itself showed off traditional ornaments in red, green, silver, and gold. Ribbon with candy-cane stripes spiraled out in sections, jutting out chaotically. Presents in mismatched wrapping paper looked like they were bursting out of the tree and falling to the floor, held in place by structured wire. My inspiration had been the tree in Santa’s village after a chaotic wrapping day on Christmas Eve. A giant toy sack sat behind Santa’s hut, and it overflowed with some of the same wrapping paper and gifts that were on the tree.

My dad grabbed my shoulders. “You’ve outdone yourself!”

Jingle bells began to ring and Santa strode through one end of the tunnel, emerging out the other to come up on stage beside us. The kids went crazy as he welcomed them to his hut before walking down the other side of the stage and joining the crowd to say hello to all the kids.

I grinned from ear to ear. It was the exact sort of youthful Christmas spirit I’d been after.

Cami and Justin applauded me.

My mom gushed over all my hard work.

And North?

He’d just been here. Where did he go?

I peered into the crowd, wondering if he’d spotted someone he knew, but when I didn’t see him, I turned back to the tree and stopped in my tracks.

He was right there in front of me.

And down on one knee.

I gasped just like all the little kids had when they saw Santa Claus. “What are you doing?”

He took my hand. “I’m giving you an early Christmas present.” He reached into his coat pocket and withdrew a small, red velvet box secured with a sparkly gold bow. He flipped it open with his thumb, revealing a glittering diamond mounted on a gold band.

I covered my mouth with my free hand, and the diamond seemed to twinkle and glow like the lights on the tree. I realized it was just my tear-clouded vision.

“Winter, you came into my life like a tornado, and ever since you showed up, I’ve been a better man. You reminded me what really matters in life. You showed me how to have fun again. How to laugh, how to let go, and how to be in the moment. You gave me something to fight for every day. You. I choose you every day, and I will until my end of days. I love you. I want to build a life with you. If you’ll have me.” He held the ring up. “Winter Nicole Dodson, will you marry me?”

The tears flowed freely. I nodded, unable to speak, but finally managed to croak out a weak, “Yes.” He slid the giant ring onto my trembling finger.

Cami squealed and clapped her hands together.

My mother cried with my father.

Justin snapped pictures.

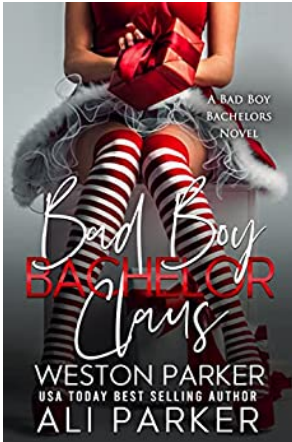
I leapt into North’s arms, and he spun me around, kissing me before finally setting me down, wiping the tears from my cheeks, and holding my face in his hands.

“Merry Christmas,” I whispered, grinning through my tears.

North pressed his forehead to mine. “Merry Christmas, future Mrs. Waylon.”

Enjoy that? I hope so!

If you need some sexy Holiday fun with a good side of love,
pick up [Bad Boy Bachelor Claus!!](#)



They want me to pose as Santa this year.

And the media turns it quickly to “Naughty Santa.”

Say what? You cannot be serious.

But it’s what I’m required to do if I want the billion-dollar family business come New Year’s.

There’s always a catch.

The prize is just worth my efforts this time. Our sprawling chain of department stores are a cash cow like the world has never seen.

And it’s all mine.

New York’s hottest bachelor is on the hunt, dressed up as Mr. Claus and he’s looking for an elf that’ll hop off the shelf and entertain him.

Just my luck that she’s cute, spicy, and doesn’t put up with me. Thankfully she looks stunning in a tutu and elf shoes.

Too bad she hates my guts.

My playboy ways and smart-mouth remarks haven’t won me any favors with her over the last ten years and that’s not ever going to change.

Or is it? It is Christmas after all.

The world thinks I’m calling the shots, but they have no idea my little elf has me wrapped around her pointed little finger.

[Get ready for a good time!](#)

ALI'S ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Ali Parker is a full-time contemporary and new adult romance writer with more than a hundred and twenty books behind her. She loves coffee, watching a great movie and hanging out with her hubs. By hanging out, she means making out. The man is hot. Hello.

She's a creative at heart and loves coming up with more ideas than any one person should be allowed to access. She lives in Tennessee with her hubs, teenage son, two grown daughters and two love-of-her-life grand babies! Telling a good story that revives hope, reminds us of love and gives a

vacation from life is all she's up to.

Questions, comments or concerns? You can always email her at Ali@aliparkerbooks.com.

Let's connect...

Facebook

Instagram ~ The Parker's Playground

WESTON'S ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Hey there. I'm Weston.

Have we met? No? Well, it's time to end that tragedy.

I'm a former firefighter/EMS guy who's picked up the proverbial pen and started writing bad boy romance stories. I co-write with my sister, Ali Parker, but live in Texas with my wife, my two little boys, my daughter, a dog, and a turtle.

Yep. A turtle. You read that right. Don't be jealous.

You're going to find Billionaires, Bad Boys, Military Guys, and loads of sexiness. Something for everyone hopefully. I'd love to connect with you. Check out the links below and come find me.

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[The Parker's Wicked Playground](#)

Bad Boy Bachelor Christmas

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