

*Be Mine in
Valentine*



ANGIE ELLINGTON

**Be Mine
in Valentine**

ANGIE ELLINGTON

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Table of Contents

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

Chapter Seven

Chapter Eight

Chapter Nine

Chapter Ten

Chapter Eleven

Chapter Twelve

Chapter Thirteen

Sample of Christmas at Mistletoe Ridge

About the Author

CHAPTER ONE

Charley Rhodes poured a bag of coffee beans into a grinder. Pressing the start button, she lunged one foot over to press the kick-bin beneath a cabinet, while flicking a coffee brewer switch on to heat up in preparation for the ground beans.

“Trash bin’s open for ya, Will. Don’t trip,” Charley said.

“Thanks, Charley,” her co-worker replied with prayer hands as he approached. “You know I still want to bend down and pull that thing open every time.” Will tossed soiled paper towels into the bin as if shooting a basket on a court. “Two points,” he said pumping his fist into the air.

“I see last night’s closing crew didn’t wipe down the counters again,” Charley groaned, rolling her eyes while tying her barista apron around her waist.

“You know that no one on the night crew takes the pride that you do, and they know that, too. So...they know you’ll make sure everything is spotless before opening. It’s your own fault, really,” Will chuckled, as he washed his hands in the sink. “Time to make the doughnuts. Well, you know. Put out the pastries that were made by the bakery up the street.”

Charley grinned. “You always know how to lighten the mood. I’m sorry if I’m grumpy this morning. My best friend is crashing with me, and her latest two-week- *love of her life* stayed over last night,” she replied, fingering air quotations.

“They kept me up all night playing video games, or at least, I hope that’s what they were doing since I heard phrases like *wield your shield* and *pay your dowry to the King*. After that, I popped in ear buds. Then, I guess they wanted a snack and ate my last two yogurts, so I haven’t had breakfast.”

“Have an apple scone. It always makes you feel better,” Will offered.

“The last thing I need after stuffing my face all winter like a squirrel in fall is another pastry, but I guess that new year-new-me-resolution went out the window after making a raccoon trail through a box of cookies Laura forced on me the first week of January when she showed up on my doorstep, a duffel bag in one hand, and gourmet cookies in the other,” Charley sighed, reaching to take the scone from Will who was waving it around in a circle. “I can’t believe I’ve avoided the delicious pastries from The Cookie Jar as long as I have since the holidays.”

“Your friend always takes you down one rabbit hole or another. I thought she was only in town for a week or two. It’s been more than a month now.”

“Laura’s super needy, but she’s been there for me through some dark stuff, too. I needed a roommate anyway. My aunt’s cottage has been a great project for me, but it gets lonely and Laura’s no freeloader. She now works from home on a permanent basis, so she can live anywhere. For the time being, it’s back here in Valentine, and since we have always led gypsy spirited lives; you know the excuse we give for changing jobs and avoiding commitments, she naturally set up her temporary home with me. She does our laundry together to help out, but that’s also how I ended up in her jeans yesterday and face-planted on cold wet dead grass heading to my car.”

“That story is all I needed to hear to get through my shift. I’ll picture your 5’4” frame in trip-over jeans the rest of the day. I just don’t want to see anyone take advantage of you.”

“Laura is complicated, but she’s not one to take advantage without giving something in return, even if it’s later on. We became fast friends because she is fiercely protective

and loves so big. She understood when I wore my mom's seventies style clothes in high school that she'd kept because she was convinced they'd be trendy again one day. Mom wasn't wrong, but still. Laura complimented my flare legged jeans on the first day of ninth, when two juniors walked by whispering and giggling about them. She made it a point to belt out how Brooke from One Tree Hill could be my twin. I was popular for about two days after that before settling back into my comfort zone of mediocrity on the scale of attention. She also flew in from Denver to console me when I needed help picking up the pieces of my only real relationship. So, she's a keeper."

"Did you introduce Laura to her latest soulmate? You know everyone thinks you have some matchmaking sixth sense or something. I know you've introduced at least five couples who have either married, gotten engaged, or are still riding on the love train since I've been working here. That includes Leah and I."

"Well, I knew she was into guys with southern charm and glasses, and you, my North Carolina friend, fit the bill perfectly. I really didn't do anything. I just asked her to cover my shift on your second day."

"Well, we thank ya, ma'am. Now, if only you would let us help you find your own Prince Charming. It is Valentine's Day this weekend. Leah and the paper hearts all over the cafe won't let me forget."

"I think in my case, I'm meant to help others, but I'm not sure if romance is in the cards for me right now. After my fiance jumped ship a week before Valentine's Day, which also happened to be a few weeks shy of our wedding date, I've sworn off Valentine fix-ups, which is hard to do living in a town named for love. Besides, I date. I just haven't met anyone who makes me smile without knowing it like the way you and Leah do. I'd rather focus on saving enough to buy this place from Carol next year when she retires. Mom says I need to commit to something now that I'm approaching thirty. She's one to talk. She dragged me around from city to city my entire

childhood until she met Wayne. We lived in a bus before it was cool.”

“I still don’t think it’s cool, but to each their own, I guess,” Will said, wiping down the counter. “I grew up in a house with four sisters, so I can’t imagine being cramped up in a bus with my whole family.”

“I don’t think that would have worked,” Charley chuckled. “It was different for us. Just mom and I and the music. I loved watching her sing on stage in any dive bar that would let a kid in.”

“How am I just hearing of this roadie lifestyle? Your voice is like an angel, so we’re all glad you share it with us on Friday nights. Knowing your mom is a singer, too, is super cool. Why hasn’t she been in to sing?”

“She still sings.; only now it’s in the church choir, and in the car, which is totally fine. She said when she met Wayne, she knew she’d found her “home” and she no longer needed to keep searching for it. At fifteen, I had no idea what the heck that meant, but I get it more now. I never really felt like I’d found “home” with Craig, so it’s probably best that I didn’t marry him, but it still makes me a bit sour about Valentine’s Day. Don’t get me wrong. I love the boxes of chocolates, the flowers, and the fun of it, but it also reminds me that I’m alone, and that makes me feel a bit detached from myself. I guess that’s why I feel attuned to finding love for others. It helps balance my mood or something. So does performing. That’s why I’m here every Friday night for your listening pleasure,” Charley said laughing, spinning around with a vanilla drizzled biscotti as a microphone.

The sounds of three brewers percolated awaiting the freshly ground beans as Will placed the last of the pastries in the display case.

Charley began pouring the grounds into the brewers.

“Let’s get this show on the road.” She turned to take a quick two bites of her apple scone, wiped her mouth, and tucked it inside of a plastic container for later on. “I’m going to wash up and turn on the music. Let’s go with something

more upbeat than yesterday's spa theme. What do you think about Celtic?"

Will poured water into a large glass pitcher and set out a few plastic cups for patrons. "Sounds good to me. I could use a little virtual vacation to the Emerald Isle or the Scottish Highlands. Cliffs and lakes in summer sound pretty inviting right about now."

"My view is of the castles and lush gardens. Either set of imagery is better than the reality of the winter wonder-not that is beginning to form outside as we speak," Charley harrumphed.

She returned, flipping the switch to illuminate the Open sign. She paused for a moment, folding her arms and leaned against the exposed brick interior, watching the snow fall and swirling up in different directions. If she weren't feeling grumpy, she'd have to admit it was rather pretty as the flakes formed pillowcases of fluffy cotton outside the fogged windows of the coffeehouse. She loved snow, but even that didn't seem to lift her melancholy mood. Soon the streets would be cleared again for likely the third time since midnight, and locals would begin making their way out and about. A small grin curved the sides of her mouth as she thought of people who'd sit home on a perfect fifty degree sunny day in winter, but would be determined to go everywhere during a snowfall. They would stock up because they were preparing to stay home, but then would leave home the first chance they could. Sometimes, she could swear she lived in the South and not central Vermont.

"Here comes Jerry. You know he's going to be the first one in even in a winter storm," Charley called out to Will with a laugh. She walked over to open the door, waving Jerry inside.

Will poured a cup of Jerry's choice of brew, and reached for a cinnamon roll from the case. He slid it into the warmer after adding an extra brushing of icing over it; just as Jerry requested each morning.

"Good morning, Jerry," Charley said, placing a newspaper on the corner table Jerry had sat at almost every morning for

the last four years since the opening of The Bold Brew Coffeehouse.

Jerry only missed a few days along the way when he wasn't feeling well, or visited his son when he was stateside. He'd shared every tour his son, Lee, had been on since he started coming into the coffeehouse. He'd shared pictures of his visits to see Lee and his wife, and his two grandchildren each time he'd returned from visiting them in Norfolk, and had brought them for coffee and hot cocoa for the two grands when they'd visited him for the holidays. Charley loved her regular customers; her Rooster Crows as she referred to them. She even made up coffee mugs especially for the five daily customers who came in at least four times a week as part of their morning routine.

Will brought over Jerry's coffee and a cinnamon bun, placing them carefully on the round wooden table.

"How are my favorite baristas this morning?" Jerry pinched an edge of the cinnamon roll and dipped it in his coffee.

"We're hoping the snow won't cause much trouble for the visitors coming in this weekend, but it looks like it's getting pretty bad out there already."

Will turned on the switches to the two electric fireplaces, and straightened a shelf of books before walking over to the table. "I hope you don't plan to work all day, Jerry. This may be a little more than we expected. I just checked my weather app on my phone and it's looking like the four inches we were expecting is looking more like eight. Where I'm from in North Carolina, that's a lot."

"Oh, pish posh. I think we have too many old people like me driving around and that's why they can't drive. We forget our glasses and such. Snow? That's just a normal day in New England. We've gotten lucky the past two winters with only a few inches here and there. I have a four-wheel drive truck and unless there's ice, I don't usually worry, but you southerners are not used to it. I hope our cold winters don't run you back south."

“I don’t plan on going anywhere,” Will replied. “I like it here. Vermont has cold winters, but we have heat and humidity that will stifle you back home, so although I’ll always be a North Carolina boy, I don’t miss that. I’ve always loved the snow, so I’m like a kid at Christmas when it snows. My girlfriend thinks I’m nuts.”

“Enjoy your paper, and if you need anything, just call out,” Charley said as the bell clanked to announce another patron entering.

Charley turned to see a man brushing snow from his wool gloves over the dispensary can as he removed them. Pivoting, he made his way over to a table by one of the fireplaces, and removed a long black pea coat, placing it over the back of a wooden chair. Charley approached as he pulled a laptop from a brown faux leather tote.

His warm caramel eyes met hers of hazel and lingered there for a moment. A hint of a smile curved the corners of his lips as he nodded in acknowledgment.

“I like your hat,” Charley said. “I have one similar to it.”

The patron tugged at a wool hat with a blue pom on the top. Charley expected to see his hair spread upward as if he’d just placed a finger in an electrical socket, as hers did when she removed her beanie hats, but it didn’t. The thick dark mane fell perfectly into place, slightly covering his forehead.

The man blushed as he ran his hands through his hair and placed the stocking hat along the corner of the chair over his coat. “Gift from my niece. I promised I’d wear it if it snowed. I hoped I wouldn’t see any this year. As you can see, I lost that bet. She texted me requesting a photo. Well, my sister texted me for her. I’m waiting for that Uncle of the Year trophy to arrive next week,” he chuckled.

“It’s not every man who can rock a stocking hat with a pom on the top. You wear it well. I mean—” she said, as her cheeks flushed. “You can pull off the look.” Charley cleared her throat. “May I get you a cup of coffee or a bagel?” She handed him a menu.

A warm smile spread across his lips. “Compliments with coffee. I like this place already. I’ll take a look at the pastries in a minute.”

Charley nodded, still feeling the redness in her cheeks heating her skin.

“Feel free to peruse the display cases and read the board if you prefer to order from the counter or just call me over. I’m Charley.”

“Will do. I’m Dean. Nice to make your acquaintance, Charley.”

“Welcome to The Bold Brew.”

“Are you the owner by chance?”

“No, I’m a barista and the manager,” Charley said, placing her hands on her hips. “Basically, if it needs to be done here, I’m the one they call.”

“She also rocks the house on Friday nights. You need to come tonight to listen,” Will called out as he flipped on the frothing machine.

“Sounds like you keep a full plate,” Dean said, lifting his chin upward focusing his gaze to Charley in a way that seemed to freeze her from movement.

“What about you? That laptop is for something other than watching the latest season of something, I’m sure,” she managed to say after breaking his stare.

Dean chuckled, sliding into his chair more comfortably. “I’m a travel reviewer. It’s what brings me to your lakeside town, that although currently frozen over, is still a bucket list location for those who want a romantic getaway, from what I hear.”

Charley shrugged. “A travel reviewer? Like a blogger or a full-blown scowling face critic? That—well, that sounds like a really fun job, actually.”

“It can be,” Dean chuckled, rising from his chair and removing lip balm from his pocket. “I prefer the term reviewer for that very mixed comparison. I don’t talk about the avocado

toast and how the staff didn't kiss my butt enough, but I also don't like the Grinch-y sound of critic. It just makes me sound like I'm looking for trouble. Technically, it's what my title still is at the company for now, though. They're a bit old school."

Charley's eyes followed the balm as he moved it over his full lips. Losing her balance, along with her control over the rising temperature of her insides, Charley stumbled over her feet as she tried to catch herself from tumbling forward. Dean caught her arms, bringing them inches from each other. He smiled softly, as Charley straightened and regained her footing.

"I forgot to add clumsy coffee girl to my list of job duties. So, was it your choice to review our town on the most soul-crushing day of the year, or...?" She released an internal breath in an effort to keep the handsome patron from running out the door thinking she had come to work intoxicated or something.

But he was intoxicating.

Dean gave a cynical half laugh. "No. It was not my choice. I lost a Super Bowl bet to my now former friend and colleague. Just kidding. He won fair and square. I got stuck in a town of hearts and flowers, while he gets to review a new ski resort in Aspen. FYI, I love to ski, and he doesn't, so in retrospect, I'm not sure he would agree that he got the better end of the deal. He hates cold weather, so either place wouldn't have been his cup of tea."

"Do you work for a magazine or something?"

"I work for Travel-Makers; we have a quarterly magazine, the digital platforms for blogs and reviews, and a bi-weekly podcast and TV show that's streaming only, so it's not glamorous, but it pays the bills from advertising and such. When you spend half the month staying in resorts, hotels, and inns, you don't have many bills, so it works for someone like me. Guess I'm a vagabond. Always have been. Comes from being an Army kid. I never lived anywhere for more than a couple of years growing up, and have lived in a few other countries, so travel is just in my blood. The difference now is

I'm in control, well somewhat, of my travel, and when I'm not working, I crash with either my sister and her family, or my parents, so I'm not going to be the kind of guy who knows much about community and romantic comedy romances that a town like this is probably known for."

"Well, not everyone here shares the sentiment of love and soulmates just because our town is named Valentine, but we do have a reputation for helping people find love. I'm not one of those people, mind you. Just let me know if you need anything," Charley offered, feeling a bit more like her feet were touching the floor again.

"I'll go ahead and take a cup of a light roast. I need the extra caffeine."

"Sure. Coming right up. Suitcase Traveler."

"Huh?"

"Suitcase traveler. That's a great title for you. It's one I know well for different reasons. Be right back."

Dean nodded approvingly at the job title suggestion and slid into the chair facing the counter, and opened his laptop. Leaning forward to rest over his fists, his eyes wandered upward to take in another view of the beautiful barista. Losing that bet had been something he'd dreaded, hoping he could be fair in his review of the Willow Lake Inn, and Valentine. He had already sworn he would no longer be a fan of the team that lost the Super Bowl game, but maybe spending a weekend in Vermont wouldn't be so bad, after all. Catching Charley looking back at him, he rubbed his chin, and looked down at his laptop as his mood continued to brighten.

This definitely is not the worst place I've visited for work.

CHAPTER TWO

Charley wiped off a table next to the door, after a customer had questioned her for almost five minutes on which she should choose between hazelnut and caramel, and if she should get decaf since she'd already had a cup at the office after going in early to beat the heavier snow. She'd had to miss the chance to continue her conversation with the handsome suitcase traveler and send Will over to his table with his coffee order. She moved around to the side of the table where she could sneak a peek at Dean, when three young women pushed the door to enter. A rush of wind and a few flakes followed swirling Charley's hair into her face. To avoid Dean and everyone else thinking she had become Cousin It from the Addams Family, she swiftly pulled her hair into a ponytail from the trusted hair tie she kept around her wrist.

The giggling squad of college girls made their way across the coffee shop toward the counter, brushing snow from their hair and coats.

Will greeted them to take their order as he overheard the women discussing their pleasure with accommodations at the inn down the street.

"You must be in town for the annual Willow Lake Inn Valentine's Day social."

The three exchanged giggles like schoolgirls.

"Is it true that there's a ninety percent success rate with finding your soulmate at their Mix and Mingle mixer? That's what I heard from someone who attended last year," one of the

women said, pulling her friends in closer with a hug as one took a selfie with her phone.

Will fidgeted with the tablet, scratching his head. “Not sure. I’ve only lived here for a few months, but I did meet my girlfriend working here at The Bold Brew,” he shrugged. “I guess there’s some truth to it. The town is named Valentine, after all. Our resident matchmaker is over there cleaning tables. I’d say she would be better at answering that question.” Will motioned to Charley to come over.

Hesitantly, she approached. “What’s up?”

“These ladies want to know the percentage of successful matches at Willow Lake Inn’s Valentine event,” Will replied with an uncomfortable grin.

The three women stared intently at Charley. “He said you’re the one who’s the matchmaker around town,” one said twirling her hair around a finger. “Have you seen any of the bachelors in town yet? We just arrived.”

Charley shot a look of disapproval toward Will, as he took a step back, leaning against the counter in satisfaction.

“We don’t think of love in terms of numbers here. Some find it. Some don’t. I think it’s a matter of whether your heart is open and your expectations. If someone is looking to find their soulmate after one night of dinner and dancing, I don’t think that’s a realistic expectation, but if they’re open to having some fun, and seeing what happens, I’d say there would be a better chance at maybe a second or third date, and then who knows? Just have fun. No statistics needed for that.”

“See, she just gave you solid matchmaking advice right there. We’re more than a coffeehouse. We have an in-house Cupid Queen, too,” Will chuckled.

“Seriously, though, just enjoy your weekend, girls. Stop in here tonight if you want. We usually have a few people come over from the inn on weekends for trivia and karaoke.”

“Our Cupid Queen here also shares her musical talents with us, too. You don’t want to miss that.”

Charley waved Will off, as Dean approached.

She turned, meeting him closer than expected. “Hi, again. Did you need a refill on your coffee?”

Dean tucked his hands in his front pockets. “No, no refill right now. I overheard part of that conversation, though. Are you performing here tonight?”

“I don’t know if I’d call it performing. More like singing covers of my favorite actual performers.”

“I’d love to hear you do your thing, whatever you want to call it. Sounds like something to share in my review of the inn and the town. I’d rather spend some time away from the inn if I can anyway. That’s why I’m here now. The snow is keeping me from doing much else to review.”

“Umm. Not sure I want that kind of pressure on me. I’m really just average.”

“No, she’s not. She’s anything but,” Will called out as he swirled whipped cream over a maple cinnamon latte for one of the love-seeker trio members.

“I have to head back over to the inn soon to meet with the owners and complete a Zoom meeting for work. I have an early dinner interview scheduled with them. I tried to sneak into town anonymously, but that went out the window when Mrs. Kline overheard my phone conversation with my boss letting him know I’d have my review & post ready of the inn and town by the middle of next week. Now, she’s literally sending people to my room or calling every few hours to offer me complimentary champagne, late night tea on the veranda, and asking if there was anything on the breakfast menu that they should add. I don’t want all of that attention. It honestly hinders my ability to review fairly, so I turned down all of it and told her the menu looked good to me. It’s hard to stay neutral without sounding like a jerk, though.”

“I totally get it. Mrs. Kline is the sweetest lady, but she stresses herself out over that inn. They both love it, but she is more invested in personal touches. The Valentine event started three years ago, about six months after they bought the property. I can only imagine how nervous it makes her having a travel critic staying there during such a busy weekend. Go

easy on them if you can, although I can't imagine why anyone wouldn't love to visit if they're looking for what we offer."

"What's that? What do you offer around here that's so special?" Will folded his arms, and smiled with a look of curiosity that Charley felt rush over her like a warm breeze in summer; unlike the reality of the wind rushing inside again as the three women departed.

"You'll have to figure that out for yourself, Mr....what is your last name?"

Dean extended his hand, as Charley slowly lifted hers to take it. They held the grip for longer than any handshake should, as Will, Jerry, who'd looked up from his paper, and other patrons were drawn to notice a match possibly being made under their noses. Even the three women peered back in from the window in time to catch a glimpse, slapping hands with each other in hopes that this really was a town where love was in the air.

Will clanked a mug, breaking their unintended handshake that had turned almost into hand-holding.

Charley adjusted her red waist apron over her black leggings.

Dean cleared his throat. "It's Corbett. Dean Corbett. Critic of all things romantic. And yours is?"

"Charley Rhodes. Matchmaker of others; not for myself."

"That must be by choice."

Charley beamed at the compliment. "Mostly, yes. Having a break-up near Valentine's Day and being in a town where all eligible candidates are taken play a large part in that, but I'm also too busy worrying about fixing up the cottage my aunt left to me, and trying to convince myself that I should stay here when like you, I've spent most of my life moving on."

"We have that in common," Dean replied taking a sip of his coffee. "I have yet to find anywhere that's convinced me it's where I want to stay either. I leave a hundred reviews each year, and not once, have I felt like there was a place that would

ground me. And relationships? Well, those have rarely been more than a few months for the same reason I guess.”

Charley shuffled her feet. “I’m sorry you haven’t found a place that feels like somewhere you could see yourself living in, but one thing’s for sure about those of us who’ve spent so much time in different places; we get to enjoy the ride, ya know?” Charley let out a sigh. “There’s freedom in not having commitments to anyone or anywhere, but I guess sometimes it can flip the coin and be a little lonely, too.”

“It sure can,” Dean agreed, “if you allow yourself to go there. I try not to fall down that rabbit hole too often, but in a town like this on a weekend like this, I kind of feel like it’s a pie to the face situation reminding me of what I don’t have. Well, this conversation turned a bit deep for two people who just met. I’m starting to see that maybe your co-worker is on to something about you. You have this, I don’t know, quality that makes me want to tell any deep dark secrets to you, like where I hid my sister’s Halloween candy when we were kids or whatever,” Dean chuckled, running his hands through his thick hair.

“I don’t know why I have that knack for pulling things from people or if I overshare to the point they feel compelled to do the same or what, but I like being open and it’s nice when people feel they can be the same with me. So, that’ll be an extra five dollars for the couch session,” Charley teased holding out her palm.

“I’ll get ya back tonight when I return to hear you rock the house. It’ll be a nice escape from the first night of the Mix and Mingle event. I think it’s supposed to be a game night with randomly matched people being put in groups to play Monopoly or cards and then a deejay follows with an open bar. I think I’ll return in time for the open bar, but if I can find an excuse not to attend, I’m all for it. I’m not sure if I can avoid tomorrow night’s dinner and whatever they decide to toss in. I’m hoping I can just eat and head back to my room.”

“You won’t get that lucky if Mrs. Kline is in charge. I expect she’ll have you on the auction block by the time you meet for dinner if not before.”

Dean blew out his cheeks. “I hope you’re wrong, but I have a feeling she may be already planning a summer wedding.”

Charley’s cheeks rounded as she burst into laughter. “I’ll RSVP and sing for you and your bride.”

Dean shook his head. “Don’t even put that out in the universe.”

Another group entered the coffeehouse. Charley waved to them.

“Back to work. I do hope you’ll come over tonight. It’s nice to have a little crowd to cheer me on, or at least not boo me into the kitchen.”

“I’m going to finish up some work, and head out in a few, but I’ll definitely be back tonight,” Dean offered up in a more enthusiastic response than he’d expected. His chiseled jaw tipped his lips into a smile as he reached for his laptop and slid it into a backpack.

Charley returned to the counter dropping a shaker she’d picked up to try and distract herself from watching Dean leave.

That smile could literally melt the cake pops in the display case. Stop. You don’t do mushy love thoughts for yourself. But for someone else, anyone but me, he could be as perfect as the best candy heart in the box. But..not...for me.

Charley pulled in a deep breath, raised her chin, and tried to relieve the sudden full-body warmth that felt as if she’d just finished a glass of wine.

CHAPTER THREE

Approaching the Willow Lake Inn, Dean pulled out his phone for a few exterior images, as a few others seemed to be doing the same. He suddenly felt that recurring familiarity with being lost in a sea of so-called influencers and self-proclaimed travel bloggers. Dean twitched his nose, sniffing the brisk air. He scratched his neck, as he often did when he felt frustration. Never one to complain when having to pack up and start over, little ticks had been the only way his family had known his struggle with leaving friends and little league teams to having to miss the marching band's rendition of holiday favorites at the town Christmas parade his first year of high school. Feeling like he had no solid place to call home or anyone he could be close to without having to leave was still all too familiar.

"Mr. Corbett, over here," a high-pitched voice called out. Dean adjusted his scarf, and waved.

Great. Mrs. Kline is with three other women. This can't be good.

Joan beamed as Dean approached. "Mr. Corbett," she began.

"Dean, please," Dean offered as he tucked his phone into his coat pocket.

"Very well, Dean. I love that name, by the way. You know, James Dean was my mother's favorite actor, and I have a room with some framed prints of him. I should've placed you in that room," Joan replied with a satisfied chuckle.

She's laying it on thick. Why would I want to have photos of this guy checking out my every move. I mean, sure, James Dean was awesome in Rebel Without a Cause, but I draw the line at watching him in old flicks with my grandparents.

Dean tucked his hands into his coat pockets and forced on a falsely pleased grin.

“My room is perfectly lovely, Mrs. Kline. I’m enjoying my stay at your eclectic inn.”

“I do hope you like eclectic. Is that a three or five star word?” Joan leaned closer, brows arched.

Dean released an I-know-what-you’re-doing snicker. “I wouldn’t worry about the review, Mrs. Kline. From what I’ve seen so far, you seem to have pleased guests and that’s the most important thing.”

“Yes, I suppose it is. And do call us Joan and Jim. We really go all out for our guests. That’s why we started the Valentine social weekend of activities. I haven’t seen you joining in yet. I looked for you at the wine tasting earlier. Where did you wander off to?”

Dean tugged at his stocking hat. “I had some work to do. I’ve spent most of the day at the coffeehouse.”

Joan’s oval face shifted into a more rounded look of glee as if she’d just discovered the secret to eternal life or something.

“Was Charley Rhodes working today? She’s a wonderful young woman.”

“Yes, I did meet Ms. Rhodes. I plan to go back over tonight after our dinner to listen to her set. I hear she’s a talented musician and singer.”

“That she is. However, that wonderful girl is gifted with helping others find love and sadly isn’t open to finding it for herself. She says she’s too busy to come over for the Mix and Mingle tomorrow. She offered to swing by long enough to provide a little music for us, though. Speaking of tomorrow, I notice you haven’t completed your love card.”

“My what now?” Dean knitted his brows.

“Your love card. You know; for the Mix and Mingle. The card tells us your favorite food, if you prefer wine or beer or whatever, hobbies, and the one habit that you consider a deal-breaker in a mate.”

Dean coughed a laugh and removed his stocking hat. “I’ll be observing. I don’t plan on participating.”

“Oh, but you must,” Joan interrupted. “Otherwise, all the ladies will wonder why such a good-looking available young man like yourself isn’t on the market. You are single, I presume. If you weren’t, I would certainly think you’d have brought your significant other with you this weekend. After all, it is Valentine’s Day,” she remarked with a shrug. The other ladies who worked at the inn all seemed to join her in closing in on Dean.

Feeling as if he were trapped in an elevator, Dean stepped back, adjusting his backpack.

This. This is exactly why I never stay in places like this around holidays. Any holidays. Why can’t I be reviewing the ski lodge and hitting the slopes or at this point, I’d settle for a run down motel on the side of a highway with three deadbolt locks.

“I have a date. I asked Charley Rhodes to join me and she said she would. I think her schedule opened up. So, I’m all set.”

I totally pulled that one out of my...

“Charley is coming with you as your date? I’m glad she can join us for more than a half hour show after dinner now, but don’t think that gets either of you out of completing the love cards. I’ll give you one to take over to her tonight at The Bold Brew. Both of you must turn them in tomorrow before noon, though. Please, give an old woman a bone here.

Four women and two men walked up the snowy sidewalk.

“See. We have more women than men at the moment. I do hope the snow doesn’t change anyone’s plans. There should be an even number as that’s how I planned it for tickets or I’m

going to have to round up any eligible bachelor in town that I have to drag kicking and screaming to come join in. It's even better that Charley will be here. She has that magic about her that draws people together. Apparently, she's already putting a bit of a spell on you, it seems. I mean, you asked her out after only just meeting her for a few hours at the coffee shop when you have so many lovely ladies you could meet instead," Joan pronounced as if she were solving a mystery.

"I wouldn't go that far," Dean corrected.

"Oh no? Then, let's put it to the test. We'll have both of you go through the Mix and Mingle cocktail hour after dinner tomorrow. Then, perhaps both of you will find out if you're a match made in heaven or not."

"I think I'll stick to the one partner. We'll fix up a cocktail, but I'm more of a one on one kind of guy. I get that feeling from her, as well."

Please let me convince this woman I've known for a couple of hours to play along as if we're smitten like frisking kittens or whatever it takes to avoid the giggle crew from the coffeehouse earlier.

"It's getting colder out here. That outdoor heater is great, but you ladies should be inside. The snow's picking up again."

"You're right. See you in an hour for our private dinner with my husband and I."

"See you both soon."

Finally making it through the balloons and streamers hanging along the lobby of the inn, Dean plopped onto the bed, tossing his hat onto the floor. Face-palming, he shook his head and let out a nervous laugh. "What have I gotten myself into? It could only happen to me. First, I'm hanging on by a thread with my job, losing out to social media, and now I'm spending Valentine's Day weekend in an inn in a town named after the holiday," he continued stifling his laughter. "Apparently, I've also created a date with someone who hasn't even said yes yet."

CHAPTER FOUR

A woman dressed in coat so heavy with a hood so large she could hardly see to pull open the door to the coffeehouse drew the attention of most inside, as she blew out her cheeks and swept the hood from her face. Noticing the onlookers, she shrugged in irritation. Charley returned from the kitchen to find her best friend, bundled like a snowman, with a scowl across her round face.

“Laura, you’re too pretty to look like you just spent the night in a jail cell. You lived in Manhattan for three years, and you’re from here. It’s not as if snow is new to you.”

Laura tugged at her gloves as her eyes went round. “Help me get this thirty pound coat off, please,” she harrumphed.

Giving a chortle, Will approached just in time to assist. “Here, Laura. Allow me.”

“Thanks, Will. You’re such a true southern gentleman. Why don’t you have a brother?” Laura rested her elbow on Will’s shoulder.

Will gave a forced grin. “I’ll hang your coat on the rack in the corner. Would you like your matcha with water or milk today?”

“See? He knows what I order too. Yes, please. A matcha latte would be fab.” Laura tipped his chin with a finger.

“Coming right up,” Will assured as he swiftly walked away to hang Laura’s coat.

“Laura, you know Will’s taken.”

“I know. I wasn’t flirting. I asked if he had a brother. What’s wrong with that?”

“Nothing. Never mind. Where’s Kane?”

“Hopefully half-way to Iowa by now,” Laura scoffed, removing her red scarf. “We’re so over.”

Charley pulled her lips in and nodded, trying to keep an *I told you so* from spilling out.

Laura waved a finger. “I know that look. You were right. I moved too fast, but what can I say? I’m a romantic. If I don’t feel sparks and hear distant wedding bells on day one, then there’s no way that guy could be the one.”

“I hear you. I won’t waste my breath trying to convince you to stop looking and the one will magically appear, because that hasn’t worked out for me either. I think I gave up on the idea of the one a long time ago.”

“You’re so good at helping others find love, though. Your track record speaks for itself.”

“Track record? I have a track record for matchmaking? Wow. Not sure that’s something I’d like to be known for anymore. Just because a few couples met through me when I first returned to Valentine doesn’t make me charmed or anything.”

“Hey, Laura. Your matcha latte is ready,” Will called out from behind the counter.

Laura pulled Charley’s arm leading her with her to the end of the counter. “Didn’t you say you and your girlfriend met through Charley?”

“Yes, but we both work here. She just asked us to cover one night when she had something to do, and business happened to be slow. We talked and well, the rest is history.”

“See, I didn’t do anything.”

“I wouldn’t say you didn’t do anything. You did hire me on the spot when you saw me ordering a cold brew from Leah. That’s why we call you Cupid Queen.”

“Cupid Queen. I love it,” Laura added as Charley waved them off.

“Okay. No more matchmaking comments, but please give me some advice. I don’t need to meet the man of my dreams this weekend, but I did stop by Willow Lake Inn on my way here and bought you and I tickets to the Mix and Mingle tomorrow night. Please go with me. Pretty please with whipped cream and cherries or candy hearts on top?” Laura clasped her hands together, poking out her lower lip.

“Fine,” Charley groaned. “I’ll go with you,” she said remembering the handsome travel critic who was staying at the inn would be there. It couldn’t hurt to see him. He’d probably be the bachelor of the night like a prized hog at a county fair, but at least she’d be around someone else who didn’t want to be there.”

CHAPTER FIVE

Dean opened the curtains in his room for the first time since his arrival. He'd closed them upon arrival the night before and hadn't bothered to open them up when he awoke to the smells of breakfast from the dining room below. Rather than enjoying the little details of comfort that most do when staying in an inn, for Dean, those things were so familiar with his work, that he hardly noticed them anymore. He smiled as he ran his fingers over the red cardinal appliques. He turned on his heel to reach for his notepad; something he did often to remind himself of things to include in his review. Stopping as he reached the desk, he spun round to face the window once more, walking back over to it and folding his arms to enjoy the view of the fresh fallen snow and two strangers meeting for the first time as they shook hands gently. A soothing comfort washed over him that was almost unfamiliar as he thought the two strangers may be falling in love as he watched from the upstairs window. Shaking his head, he chuckled.

“What is happening to me?”

Falling onto the bed, he supported the back of his head with his arms. He wouldn't have to remind himself of the beautiful curtains or the smell of fresh bacon. He wouldn't have to take notes about the feel of the soft falling snowflakes against his cheeks. For once, every sense seemed to be heightening. His thoughts drifted to the enchanting woman he'd spent stealing glances of and replaying their conversations. He couldn't wait to see her again.

A buzzing sound from the bedside table zapped him from replaying his conversations with the beautiful brunette like an eighties mix-tape in his mind. Reaching for his cell, Dean

shifted onto the bed, piling fuzzy white throw pillows underneath his head.

“Hey, Colin. How’s Aspen?”

“Cold. Bitter cold. Even indoors,” his co-worker groaned.

“What happened to the woman of your dreams from whichever app you met her on? I thought you’d be proposing by now after twenty-four hours together.”

“She was more interested in our ski group leader than me. I don’t get it. We had such a connection.”

“You had a connection with someone you talked to on the phone maybe three times and had never met in person, Colin. I’m sorry, man, but maybe you should try meeting someone in person before planning out your lives from swiping right and a few texts. You could catch a red-eye to Vermont and go to this dinner and mingle thing here tomorrow night. I’ve seen groups of single ladies outnumbering the guys, so say the word, and you can bunk with me in the only room that has two beds.”

“I’m already looking up flights. There’s one in two hours with three seats left. I’ll see ya in the morning. I’ll crash at the airport hotel in Burlington. Can ya come pick me up?”

“Sure. Valentine is sandwiched in between Burlington and Montpelier so I can be there in a half hour once they clear the snow that apparently has started up again,” Dean said looking over toward the window with the curtains still drawn to the sides. String lights along the pergola below illuminated the dancing snowflakes as they shimmered outside the glass.

Dean hopped to his feet, noticing that the clouds of light gray had been replaced with a darker hue as evening replaced the day. A sly grin twisted his lips upward to one side as he thought about seeing Charley again and listening to her perform.

“So, I’ve gotta run, man. I’ll call ya in the morning before I head up to Burlington. I’ve gotta see if I can bribe or beg someone to pretend to be my date tomorrow night, while you search for a real one.”

“Why would you do that? I don’t get you. Surrounded by women looking for love or a weekend of fun and you’re trying to create a fake date situation to avoid them.”

Dean stretched his arms. Bringing his phone back to his ear, he chuckled. “Well, I have to attend this thing tomorrow and a mix and mingle among the singles isn’t exactly the best plan for an actual date request.”

“If you’d met her any other day, would she be someone you’d ask out for real?”

Dean rubbed the back of his neck, leaning against the wall by the window where the coffeehouse was in view, dusted in falling snow.

“Let’s just say, I’ve gotta go see about a girl.”

Colin gave a sardonic chortle. “I hear ya, quoting Good Will Hunting. She must have really grabbed your attention. Who is this rare woman? Does she work at the inn or something?”

“You’ll say nothing to her about this conversation. You hear me? That’s if I can convince her to be my fake Valentine for one night so I can focus on finishing this article and then I’ll leave her and this little town unscathed.”

“Unscathed. Why do you think you’re the worst person to date? Just because you’ve had a few bumps in the road or night doesn’t mean you’re not worthy of all the hearts and candy stuff, too.”

“Awe shucks, Colin. You’re such a romantic. The girls will love you here tomorrow.”

“Hope so. Maybe one will be the one. Ya never know. Maybe this one will be the one for you, too, dude.”

“Later, Doctor Love,” Dean said shaking his head.

“I’ll send ya my bill if it all works out,” Colin harrumphed.

CHAPTER SIX

Charley pressed against her bedroom wall, forcing her feet into her snow boots that although cuter than the old daily ones she wore to work and about town, felt two sizes too small until she broke them in, which typically took one season of wear to do so.

Laura entered from the hall shaking her long curls from the spray she'd just applied in the hallway while bent over.

“Having trouble with your boots? I just wear double layer socks and rain shoes. I can't take the headache and swear words that come with breaking in those type of snow boots with laces.”

Charley let out a sigh of accomplishment after getting her boots on. “Now for the easy part. Tying them up.” She plopped onto the edge of her bed.

Laura sat in a chair next to a dresser and mirror. “They are cute, though. Love the white lace top and dark jeans. They work with the boots surprisingly.”

“Well, that's why I went with black. You're going to wish you had on more than those duck shoes when your socks get wet.”

“I don't plan to walk around outside further than your SUV and into the coffeehouse.”

“Neither do I. Again, how have you made it in New York City?”

“Mass transit, delivery apps, and working from home when it snows. Oh, and asking nicely to the guy in the next apartment when I needed something and he was going to the bodega or Duane Reed,” Laura said with a shoulder pop and a satisfied smile. “I’m thinking Nashville or maybe San Diego as my next home. Now that I can work from anywhere, who knows? I may meet the man of my dreams tomorrow night and settle into a farmhouse; the new style, not an old one from a hundred years ago, and raise some goats for cuteness and yoga.”

“No, Country Living magazine called and said they refuse to grant you a subscription. You are a great friend, romantic dreamer, and the best web designer I know, but you’re not made for rural living. You’re allergic to almost every animal on earth, even though you love them all, and you wouldn’t last two days without super high speed internet, twenty-four hour food joints, glitzy wine bars, and overpriced cocktails on rooftops. Queens would’ve been perfect for you forever if you liked the cold, but it’s obvious being back in Valentine isn’t your jam, either.”

“Yes, I’m also not a big fan of jam, which we have like four festivals named after within an hour’s drive each year. You’re much better at the small town northeast Stars Hollow lifestyle than I. Still, if the right man came along, who knows what I may want? I would give up some of the nightlife, but I’m not ready to live where I have to drive again. I’m still shocked there are ride shares in Valentine now.”

“There usually aren’t. They come in for special event weekends, even snowy ones, apparently.”

“So, you ready to put on a show for that guy you were checking out at The Bold Brew earlier? I bet he’ll be at a front row table. If only he had a friend traveling with him.”

“Let’s go. We’re going to be late.”

“Dodging my question, are you? When are you going to stop guarding that heart of yours? It’s been long enough, ya know.”

“History repeats itself.”

“Yeah, well, all history isn’t bad. You can’t live your life afraid to share it again. How can you just seem to know when people are near their soulmate and yet not be open to meeting your own? It’s time, Charley. It’s time to find your future and stop letting the past hold you back.”

“I’ll give you twenty bucks to switch off the light and walk out of this door. We have to go,” Charley demanded, waving her arms from Laura to the doorway.

Laura stuck out her tongue in tandem with a shoulder pop. “Okay, Okay. Let’s get you on the stage, diva.”

Charley’s expression relaxed. “I’m not the diva of the two of us, but I love you anyway,” she laughed, closing the door, and nudging Laura’s side. “Be careful in those rain shoes. We don’t have time for a pit stop by the hospital.”

“If I didn’t have on Gucci gloves, I’d so throw a snowball at you,” Laura quipped.

“I don’t have on Gucci gloves, though,” Charley replied raising her brow.

“Don’t you dare,” Laura yelled jumping inside the SUV as Charley placed her empty arm in pitching position, laughing at her friend’s mad dash to get inside the vehicle.

CHAPTER SEVEN

A modest crowd was quickly growing thanks to the weekend onset of twenty-somethings in an obvious lonely hearts club convention of sorts. A single red rose in a vase was placed on each table of the coffeehouse, along with a Valentine's banner pinned to the backdrop set up as a mock stage for performers.

Charley folded her arms, leaning around from the stockroom. Nervously, she began to nibble on a small fingernail. Laura sneaked up beside her, pulling her hand away from her face.

"Stop that nervous chewing. You're amazing. You will kill it. Just think of them in their underwear. Then, again, don't. Some of these model-like college girls probably are going commando and some of these guys may be too distracting if you start trying to determine if they prefer boxers or briefs. I don't think I see any tighty whitey guys, though, so that's encouraging."

Charley chuckled as Laura made weird arches with her brows before giving Charley a side hug.

"Thanks, bestie. You always know how to get me out of my head. I'm never nervous when we have about ten people on a typical Friday night, but there's at least thirty and standing room only at this point. That's a lot of people for The Bold Brew at one time. We usually have maybe twenty on a busy night, and usually a handful of those are performers."

"What did I say about killing it?" Laura reassured.

“Right. Killing it. I’m going to go gulp down a glass of wine and then it’s showtime,” Charley said blowing out her cheeks.

“That’s the spirit.”

Charley returned, pulling a guitar strap over her head and underneath one arm.

“Your handsome new customer from earlier is back,” Laura said waving at Dean.

Charley looked up to meet his gorgeous smile and heart-stopping eyes as Dean motioned to ask if he could approach.

“I’ll leave you two to chat,” Laura said softly, with a smile. “Hi. I’m Laura.”

“Hi,” Dean replied as he continued to step closer to Charley.

“Hi.” Charley managed to force the words from her lips. “You made it. Oh, Laura, this is Dean. He’s a travel reviewer in town for the weekend.”

“Oh. You two have clearly met and I obviously wasn’t told.”

Charley shot her a look of disdain. “I think Will needs some help. Would you mind?”

“Sure. Nice to meet you...Dean,” Laura replied fanning herself as she stepped behind him.

“I did make it. I’ve heard good things and it was an excuse to see my new favorite barista again. Also, could you do me a favor?”

“Sure,” Charley replied a little faster than she’d meant to. “I mean, it depends,” she said trying to sound more playful and feeling as if she sounded flippant instead.

“There are a lot of single ladies in the house, and I’m surrounded by them at the inn. What do you say to going with me to the Valentine’s Mix and Mingle tomorrow night as my date?” Dean gave a pleading smile and clasped his hands.

“Your date?” Charley asked in surprise. “You want me to be your date for the Mix and Mingle?”

“You’d be doing me a real favor. A solid for sure, if you could save me from the sea of dances I’m going to have to fulfill otherwise. Mrs. Kline is already trying to plan my night out.”

“So, this would be a favor? Not a real date or anything. I mean, of course, not a real date,” Charley fumbled.

“Well, unless you want it to be.”

Charley tucked a lock of her dark hair behind an ear, as Dean’s stare became impossible to look away from. Charley pulled in a deep breath refocusing.

Dean gave a half smile, and reached for her hand, as he gently wrapped his fingers around hers. Leaning into her, he whispered in her ear.

“No pressure, but people are looking our way, so if we’re doing this, I should kiss you before you go rock the house.”

Charley placed her free hand on Dean’s chest, securing her balance from the hypnotic drunkenness she felt from the softness of his voice in her ear and the closeness of his touch. She took a step back, and looked up to match his pleading gaze.

“A fake date. I could do that. I’m not sure if I want a real date on a weekend like this.”

Dean tipped his chin in agreement. “Same here.” Dean touched Charley’s cheek, letting his fingers cascade the edge of her face, cupping her chin. He took a step closer, and leaned toward her.

Let’s get this show on the road.”

Charley shrugged. “Okay, but are you going to kiss me on the...”

Dean pulled her lips to his, interrupting.

It was only for a moment, but there was nothing that felt pretend behind their kiss.

“Go break a leg,” Dean said, stepping back. “I hope that was okay.”

“It was great,” Charley said enthusiastically. I mean, sure, no problem,” she added dialing down her heart rate in hopes he wouldn’t hear it palpitating from her chest. “People are looking, so I think the charade is on.”

“Thanks, Charley,” Dean replied, with a tenderness in his voice that couldn’t disguise his excitement at their brief kiss or pretending to be a couple. “I can’t wait to cheer on my favorite singer.”

“You haven’t heard me sing yet.”

“I can’t image you wouldn’t be my favorite...at anything you do.”

Charley tilted her head to one side allowing her hair to swing forward as the coffeehouse echoed with cheers for her to take the stage. Without thinking, she blew a kiss toward Dean, beaming before turning on her heel to face the audience of coffee drinkers clapping in tandem as they wasted no time checking out each other to see who could win their hearts by weekend’s end.

Did I just...blow a kiss to my fake boyfriend? Charley thought, her cheeks flushing. She pulled in a deep breath and released, as she began to strum the strings of her guitar. Scanning the crowd, she saw smiles, sways, and people of course checking out possible life or at least weekend matches, as she became one with her music and angelic voice harmonizing in perfect symmetry. Zeroing in on one gorgeous man who had drawn in two college girls by simply appearing unattainable with a kiss on her cheek, Charley noticed his autumnal eyes were firmly fixed on her, and her alone.

He’s really good at this pretend relationship thing, Charley thought as Dean gave her a wink. Really good.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The crowd that once filled the coffeehouse with laughter, cheers, and music, had now fizzled to a quiet few cozied up on the couches and standing post by the windows mesmerized by the snowfall that had morphed a dusty white sidewalk into a full wonderland of puffed cloud-like blankets glistening with hints of pink and blue from the streetlamps and open sign of The Bold Brew.

Charley placed her guitar in the case on a bench, turning to find Dean in front of her, clasped hands releasing and touching again. There it was again. The feeling of not being able to breathe and the fear that Dean could hear her heart beating with expectation. She brushed her hair behind her ears.

“So, what did you think?”

Dean slid his hands into his pockets. “I thought you were great. Charley, you’re really talented. Your voice and your music are gifts and I for one, thank you for sharing them tonight.”

Charley swallowed in pride. “Thanks. I appreciate that. So, what did you think about our rouse? It looked like catch and release of some hearts in here tonight. I saw some definitive interest in reeling you in.”

Dean chuckled, an embarrassed smile filled his lips. “No bait will work on me this weekend. Remember, I’m taken.”

Charley returned his smile. “Yes, we both are. Darn. So, I guess we’ll continue the charade tomorrow night. How’s this going to work? Do you want me to meet you at the inn outside or...?”

“I am a gentleman, Miss Rhodes. Even in somewhat precarious situations. I’ll pick you up. I rented a four-wheel drive truck. I’m all set.”

“It’s supposed to be sunny and almost fifty degrees tomorrow, and the snow has finally stopped. I think most of it will melt away during the day, so if you want to pick me up, I’m good with that. Give me your number and I’ll text you my address.”

“Will do. I see your friend is coming over. Time to say goodnight.”

Charley turned to see Laura, hand on hip, slowly walking over around each table. Charley shot her a wide-eyed look while Dean waved toward Laura.

“One more thing before I head out,” Dean whispered reaching out his hand as if they were signing a business deal.

Charley awkwardly raised her hand expecting the handshake.

Dean reached into his coat pocket and pulled out what appeared to be a pink index card.

“Don’t kill me, but Mrs. Kline insisted we fill these cards out and turn in tomorrow at the mix and mingle. I had hoped our plan would get us out of such tasks, but apparently not,” he chuckled, shrugging.

Charley tapped the card in her hand. “Great. I’ll be sure to get right on this.”

Dean reached for Charley’s hand as she placed it into his.

“A handshake doesn’t feel adequate to me,” Dean said softly as he pulled her to his chest, bringing Charley closer. “Thank you for going with me tomorrow and for tonight. Being your boyfriend for the weekend is becoming easier by the minute,” he said releasing her hand, as she rested against his chest, skin tingling as if a breeze had shuddered her, leaving her in a mild tremble. The sound of his voice; his breath against her cheek-she wanted more of this; more of Dean.

Charley lightly chewed over her lower lip, and shuffled her feet in an effort to calm her racing heart. “It’s not bad having a good-looking guy ogle you and cheer you on when you’re on stage, and have other younger girls swooning at his feet while doing so. I could get used to that, but..” Charley straightened her posture. “Of course, I won’t...get used to it, I mean. It’s just for the weekend.” She nodded firmly.

Dean arched his back, as well. “Yes, ma’am. I promise not to fall in love with you.” He winked.

That was the second time he’d winked at her tonight. This was going to be a problem.

“I’ll text you tomorrow before I leave to come over,” Dean said, pivoting slowly.

“See you tomorrow,” Charley replied, rocking on her heels.

Dean placed his beanie on his head, and pulled on his coat at the door, waving as he left the coffeehouse.

CHAPTER NINE

Charley tugged at her pillow, groaning, as Laura began nudging her behind her shoulders.

“Wake up, sleepyhead; only a few hours to change you from a step-sister into Cinderella for the ball,” Laura giggled.

Charley’s voice was muffled from the pillow as she rolled onto her stomach.

“What’s that you say? You think this guy is in fact, Prince Charming, and he has a friend, brother, or someone hot and single that he doesn’t hate?” Laura continued falling back onto the bed and blowing out her cheeks.

Charley twisted herself onto her side facing her friend. “I said...is it too late to get out of this?”

Laura propped her head on her elbow. “Why would you want to get out of it? I thought you two were going to leave together and I was going to have to hitch a ride from the snowplow guy outside The Bold Brew. He’s probably married, with a dog, a cat, and two kids, so that wouldn’t have turned into a love match for me.”

Charley’s eyes went round. “Stop. You’ll find someone when you stop settling for users. Seriously, Laura. You’ve got the worst taste in men. Remember that guy who gave you left over shower gel from his ex? What about the one who asked to share your Netflix account on the first date? Then, there’s my personal fave; the guy who was supposedly an actor who asked for a \$500 loan before you even finished drinks. You

know, that app does allow more than swiping right and saying yes to every guy you *match* with.”

“I know. Take some of your own advice, though. At least I put myself out there. You don’t let anyone even have a first date. You talk yourself out of them before they even can go wrong...or right.”

Charley sat up in the bed and folded her legs to her chest. “We are the best kind of friends, aren’t we? You set me straight and I, you. For real, though, is this fake date thing a mistake? I mean, it’s not even a real date and what if-?”

“What if you fall for him?” Laura interrupted with a curious grin.

“What if I do? He’s leaving. Why put my heart out there when I know it’s going to be slung across the room boomeranging right back to me?”

“What if he takes it, though? Stop asking the questions and have fun. You do remember how to have fun with a man, right?”

Charley tossed her pillow at Laura. “Okay, fairy godmother. Let’s get this show on the road. At home mani/pedis and trying to find something in this closet to wear while we wait for the snow to melt. You know I’ll be your fairy godmother, too. You would look gorgeous in this,” Charley said excitedly pulling a black strappy satin and lace dress from the back of her closet. “I wore this once, when I had that benefit to attend with he who shall not be named again.”

Laura reached for the dress. “Ooh la la. I love it.” She tossed it onto the bed. “Now, to find one for you since most of what I own is still in suitcases. “No...absolutely not... maybe...” Laura muttered as she slid racks around the closet. “Yes, this one!” She removed a red mid-thigh satin dress with off the shoulder cuff sleeves. “Is there a story with this stunner?”

Charley twirled her hair around a finger, twitching her lips. “No story. You sent that to me two years ago after you

attended a Christmas party in midtown for some guy's work event. You said he quit the next week to follow his dream as a filmmaker and wanted to move in with you. That was the one time I talked you out of letting your kindness and weakness for killer smiles and abs get the better of you. You sent me the dress as a thank you. I've yet to have a reason to wear it."

Laura harrumphed, "Well, no time like the present! Here," she marched over swinging the dress by the hanger. "Get that gorgeous body off the bed and out of those slouchy sweats."

Charley groaned plopping back onto the bed. "I don't know. What if Dean thinks that I think this is a real deal date if I show up in a dress that says *take me now*?" She squished up her nose.

"We've both seen this guy. Would you honestly have a problem with him *taking you*? I know I wouldn't!" Laura continued swaying the dress in front of Charley.

"Fine," Charley relented. "I'll wear the color of love on Valentine's Day. Nothing will scream like desperation more."

"Men find red sexy. Heck, everyone finds red to be sexy. No desperation in owning that you look like a heart-shaped box of candy."

Charley snort-laughed. "Yeah, okay. And like Forrest Gump's mom said, *you never know what you're going to get*. I don't know if I want to send the message of a candy box. What if I'm all the yucky pieces you take one bite of and toss?"

"Stop critiquing yourself. Any man would be honored to get in your box-I didn't mean...oh whatever," Laura said covering her mouth in giggles.

"We've taken a turn here," Charley managed to say in between uncontrolled laughter. "Let's get to those mani/pedis and away from whatever that was."

Charley's cell began to ring. "Hey, Laura, zip the back of this while I answer."

Laura followed behind as Charley continued to pace around the room. "I can't zip if you won't stand still. This is

worse than prom.”

Charley waved her hand motioning Laura to be quiet. “Yes, sure. I can check in on the coffeehouse after the mix and mingle. No problem. Anytime.”

She tossed the phone onto the bed. “Great. I have to go by The Bold Brew after this charade to lock up because Will and Leah are both working and he left his keys at home. Leah had to go in for a few hours to cover for another CNA at the hospital since she’s now working there part-time. That girl has a lot going on. Nursing school, a few shifts a week at The Bold Brew, and random shifts at the hospital. She’s so lucky to have Will, who takes care of so much at their house, on top of working full time at The Bold Brew.”

“You two are the only two full timers there, right?”

“Yeah. If I ever get to own it, I’d make him the manager in a second, but that’s why I’m there. I’ve been saving since I don’t have to pay rent or a mortgage and my aunt left me the other property I sold. I would love to buy the coffeehouse with that money.”

“Are the owners planning to sell?”

“They’ve talked about it. Plans to retire to Charleston for warmer weather have been on their radar since I started here.”

“The other staff will be leaving early, but Will agreed to stay and finish up inventory for me since I got roped into this thing tonight, so he won’t have anyone else with a key there and yeah, he could ask someone to leave their key, but I’m just down the street. It’s no problem. By 10PM, I’m sure Dean will be ready to be rid of me and I, him.”

“You’re in your twenties. Why would you want to call it a night by 10?”

“This thing starts at 5 with drinks and then dinner at 6. The mix and mingle starts at 7 and ends at 10.”

“I’m definitely not in New York City, anymore,” Laura chuckled. “Then again, five hours of boos and singles sounds like a typical night in Manhattan; just with earlier hours.”

CHAPTER TEN

A knock on Dean's door startled him as he awkwardly slid his arms into a button-down black dress shirt. He opened the door pulling the shirt together with his fist.

"Well, Mr. Corbett. If you walked downstairs right now, you could have your pick of any single woman in the room; the entire state I'd imagine," Joan offered with a roaming once-over and a smile of someone with plans to auction off the highest prize of an auction.

Dean lowered his head, blushing from embarrassment. "I apologize, Mrs. Kline. I thought you were my friend, Colin, who should be arriving any minute."

"Nothing to be embarrassed about dear. I have grown sons your age, and I tease them, as well. I'm happy to hear Colin is going to join us this evening. Jim told me you'd added a guest and for a moment, I was concerned that you were off the market for the ladies."

Dean cleared his throat from a forced laugh.

"No, Colin is just a colleague and friend."

"All good news. The more to mingle, the merrier," Joan beamed.

"I hate to disappoint you, but remember, I already have a date for tonight, so Colin may be the only one mingling."

"Oh, that's right. I had forgotten you're going to bring Charley Rhodes as your date. Well, I hope she brings her beautiful friend, Laura, as well. I bet she's already got a plan

in motion for her to meet someone tonight. I bet it's that young man who opened a brewery. He's from Manhattan, so they have that in common."

"Sounds like you're the matchmaker; not Charley. I'm sure she'd gladly pass the torch."

"I like to match-make. She just does it without intention. That's the difference. Her matches work out better than mine," Joan sighed.

"I think you bring people to the table with your events. What happens from there is up to them. You've done your part and provide a stay that feels like a warm hug on a cold winter's night."

"Oh, please say that will be in your review," Joan bellowed out, clasping her hands with glee.

"Rest assured, Mrs. -, I mean, Joan," Dean cajoled. "I've only found reasons to return and invite others to do the same."

A handsome guest approached as Joan turned to leave.

"Oh my, yes, you'll be a hit," Joan surmised tapping Colin's shoulder as a look of bewilderment filled in his eyes.

"What did I walk into?" Colin asked as Joan danced down the hallway.

"Don't ask. She owns the inn. She thinks you're going to make some dreams come true or something for one lucky lady tonight," Dean cracked.

"She does know a good thing when she sees it. Who am I to disagree or disappoint?" Colin paraded around the room puffing out his chest. My red hair gets the ladies attention, I tell you."

"It's probably more of the six foot two bodybuilder frame and year-round tan over that pasty skin that gets the attention."

"Hey. Don't hate. You are welcome in the gym with me anytime."

"I hit the gym. Just not as hard as you. I don't hear complaints," Dean assured pulling his unbuttoned shirt open to

reveal his six pack of abs. “I may not be quite as tall, but I do alright.”

“Yeah, it’s the hair for you, dude. I swear, it’s like you’ve got the same hair as that younger Hemsworth actor. I don’t know if the club can handle us both tonight.”

“The club. Yeah, okay. The old school high school dance is more like it.”

“When I checked in, I was given some kind of love card to complete. I had to answer questions about my favorite date, color, type of music, and place to take someone on a first date. I felt like it was an in-person dating site event.”

“Dude, it is.”

“I’m here for it. It’s all good. Since you’re off the market tonight, I don’t have to discuss which girls you’re interested in and rock-paper-scissors for who gets to ask who to dance or whatever. Time for a quick turn for the three ‘s’ words. Are you going to pick up your *date*?” Colin asked air quoting with a chuckle.

“Yes. This weekend is all traditional, so I’m sticking with that and being nothing but a gentleman. We’re both going so you’ll meet her friend.”

“Her friend, you say?” Colin wiggled his brows.

“Yes, but Laura’s off limits. I don’t want to scare off Charley because you creep out her friend.”

“Hey. I don’t creep out anyone. I resent that. Where’s the bro code? You have a date. Why can’t I at least chat up her friend?”

“Fine, but don’t come on too strong.”

“Man, you really think I’m a loser, don’t you?”

“No, not at all. I just don’t want to have any awkward conversations tomorrow about why you didn’t call before leaving town. I know you would have no trouble catching Laura’s attention. She’ll for sure get yours, as well. Just keep in mind that even though this isn’t a real date with Charley, I

would like it to be. I like this girl. If things were different, then-I don't know."

"Does she know that?"

"No. I don't know. Maybe."

"Do you think she feels the same?"

Dean shrugged. "I honestly have no idea. I've never been accused of being good at reading signals."

"I am. I'll be watching you two. I'll find a way to see what her friend thinks."

"No. Leave it be. We're leaving tomorrow afternoon."

Colin held up his hands in defeat. "Whatever you say."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Dean and Colin waited in the hallway for Jim and Joan to leave the entryway to the inn with a group of singles who were eager to get their mingle on. Dean tugged Colin's arm before he was caught in the tiger's stare of one of the beautiful women who seemed to draw him in like a love spell from a coven.

"Do not go into the lion's den," Dean warned.

"Come on, man. Why wouldn't you want to meet attractive women who want the same thing we all do?" Colin furrowed his brow as he leaned against the wall.

"You are talking about love, right?"

Colin shrugged. "Love, conversation, who knows? It would be a nice change to be around women who want to meet someone and not telling me to shove off when I offer to buy them drinks. A weekend of no guessing if they are single, into guys, and not wanting to be alone with their friends is like catching lightning in a bottle," Colin asserted; his whisper almost loud enough to be heard.

"I hear you, but I'm working. You forget why I'm here. I have a review to write."

"That doesn't mean you can't have a little fun along the way."

Dean let out a heavy breath. "Coast is clear. Let's make a run for it."

Colin's eyes went round. "I hope this girl is worth it."

"It's not about her."

"You sure about that?"

Dean's jaw tightened. "Let's go. I need to call Charley and let her know you'll be with me."

As they hopped into the rental, Dean pulled out his phone from his coat pocket. Colin reached for it.

"Why tell her I'm coming? It's not a date. It's a deal. I'm not a blind date for Laura, so let's just get a real reaction from them both. Sometimes the element of surprise can be a good thing."

"Yeah, and sometimes it can be a disaster, but okay. You're right. It's not a date for either of us, so let's just let the chips fall where they may."

Dean pulled into the driveway of Charley's gray cottage and turned off the engine.

"Well, it's too late to turn back now," Colin said with his hand already on the door handle.

Dean nodded in agreement. As they walked toward the steps to the front door, a fireball of energy flooded through Dean causing his hands to slightly tremble. He placed them into a fold, rubbing them together and blew his warm breath over convinced it was from the chill of the late afternoon air.

Colin rang the doorbell before Dean had a chance to calm himself.

"I was going to do that."

"Yeah, well, I'm anxious to see this girl who's making you nervous."

“I’m not—” Dean began, as Charley opened the door.

“Hi,” Charley said, as dimples formed in her cheeks.

Dean gave her a once-over. “Wow. You’re—”

Colin quickly jabbed his arm.

“You’re stunning,” Dean managed to utter.

“You clean up nice, too. No pom stocking hat tonight?”

Dean’s cheeks flushed. “No, not tonight, unless you want me to go up to my room and get it when we get back to the inn.” A calm flowed over him, as the ease Charley brought out in him was instant. All he needed to do was look into her sparkling eyes and he was done for.

“This will be the best non-date I’ve ever had. I can’t imagine anyone else in the room tonight would have my attention with you there.”

Charley brushed her hair behind an ear, biting her lip. “Wow, you’re bringing the charm tonight.”

Colin cleared his throat.

“Oh yeah,” Dean said, shifting his focus. “This is Colin. My friend who was in Aspen. He had a change of plans and will be with us tonight, but he can disappear as soon as we get back,” he chuckled, patting Colin’s shoulder.

“I was wondering if he was your driver or an unexpected kind of date that I didn’t sign up for,” Charley replied laughing as Laura pulled the door open further.

“What’s this? Charley, did you forget to tell me something?” Laura raised her brows as her eyes widened.

“No,” Charley assured softly. “This is Colin. Dean’s friend and I had no idea he was joining us, but the more the merrier since I also invited you.”

“Hi,” Colin reached out his hand. “As has been made clear, I’m Colin.”

“Laura. Charmed, I’m really sure,” she beamed.

“I have no problem with this,” she insisted turning toward Charley with a wink.

“Neither do I,” Colin chimed in. “The snow may have melted a lot, but it’s still cold out here, and you two look hot, but I know you’re ready for coats and the truck heater.”

“Colin!” Dean barked. “What he meant to say is that you both look beautiful.”

Colin shrugged.

Laura handed Charley her coat. “I like both, but I prefer *hot*. Smoking hot works too.”

Dean chuckled reaching for Charley’s hand to walk with her down the stairs. “I think these two will get along just fine.”

“I have no doubt,” Charley replied, more impressed by Dean’s gesture than the chemistry of their friends.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Pink and white paper hearts twirled from the ceiling. Two tables of hors d'oeuvres aligned a corner of the spacious room displaying red velvet cupcakes, chips, dips, and veggie trays. The bar was set up with wine glasses with a full line of guests eager to partake and calm their nerves.

A sign read that there was a three beverage limit and tickets were provided as part of the package.

The foursome entered, removing their coats, cautiously looking around at the crowd.

“This reminds me of a middle school dance except for the boos, but I’m not hating on it,” Colin said, taking Laura’s coat.

“This isn’t Aspen, Colin. Valentine is more old school,” Laura replied.

Dean hung Charley’s coat, as she tugged at her dress. Wearing dresses was not something she did often, and this one required some work to keep it from giving away the farm when she stood after sitting.

“So, Mr. Suitcase Traveler; what are your thoughts?” Charley asked as Laura and Colin forged a path directly for the bar. “I think it’s charming, actually. What’s not to like? Cupcakes and wine? I mean, that sounds like a winning combination to me.”

“I know it’s not fancy,” Dean replied, “but tickets were only fifty bucks in addition to the guests’ reservation. I think

that included a few other things, too. I have managed to duck out for those other things, but this one was the main event I was not getting out of. Thank you, again, for coming with me.”

Charley pulled in a breath. She was enjoying this more than she thought already and they had only just began their night together.

“No problem,” Charley offered in reply. “I was stopping by anyway to perform for about fifteen minutes, while the deejay takes a break, and to be honest, I was a little curious about it. I wanted to watch, but not participate.”

Dean clenched his jaw. “Well, we both get what we want, I guess. I’m fulfilling my obligation to be here and you get to be an observer without being hit on, although I’d better stay close to you or you’ll have guys surrounding you the second I walk away.”

“I doubt that, but keep saying sweet things. A girl can always use an ego boost.”

“It’s only the truth,” Dean said with a smile, reaching for her hand. “Let’s go have some fun.”

“I don’t know if I can eat anything on those tables and still fit in this dress, but I’ll sip on a glass of Pinot Grigio.”

“The bar it is, then.”

Colin had been pulled into a game of heart to heart, in which he and another person would try to keep a heart-shaped balloon from popping as they slid it up between their waists toward their necks. Laura was busy in a chocolate eating contest to name the brand of candy while tasting a bite and wearing a blindfold.

Jim and Joan were nearing Dean and Charley, who were seated at a table, sipping wine, and playing Cupid and Arrow taking a Nerf gun and shooting plastic arrows at a plastic heart atop a stack of cups. Dean knocked the heart off, and they slapped hands, laughing.

“Yes! Take that, you plastic emblem of both love and loathing,” Dean declared.

“You finally knocked one down. I still won, though, “Charley bragged. “I not only knocked over the heart, but three cups to really kick that symbol of happiness and pain where it hurts.”

“Yeah, I don’t think knocking over the cups was the objective, but I like your commitment to the cause.”

Charley took a sip of wine, looking around at all the smiles, flirtation, and hope of finding love surrounding them. A lump formed in her throat, as she slid her top lip over her bottom, letting it linger for a moment.

Dean noticed the change in her expression. “Hey,” he nudged her elbow. “Where did ya go? You seem a hundred miles away from that laughing girl sixty seconds ago.”

Charley placed on a fake smile. “I’m fine. I guess I’ve become more cynical than I realized.”

Joan approached before Dean could respond.

“Hi, you two. You both look so handsome and beautiful tonight. We hope you’re enjoying yourself. Dean, is there anything Jim and I can do for you to improve your evening? Here at the Willow Lake Inn, we strive for excellence for our guests.”

“Mrs. Kli—I mean, Joan. We are having a great time. Again, no need to worry. My review is going to say nothing but good things about the hospitality here,” Dean reassured.

“Oh, wonderful! We will be looking forward to reading and watching on the app.”

“I did a few video clips yesterday and this morning, so I’ll piece together a short video of the town. I appreciate the

interviews with you and Mr. Kline, as well.”

Mr. Kline motioned for her to assist him with something.

“Mr. Kline always saves the day. Joan is so worried about my review,” Dean commented. “I hate going somewhere and having a bad experience, but it happens. Usually, if people are rude, I wouldn’t have a problem giving a bad review, but we’ve leaned away from those. There’s too much negativity in the world as it is. If I can’t give a good review, I just don’t give one. I try to find the good points in every place I visit and usually there are more of those than bad.”

Picking up the foam darts from the table, Dean placed them into a bag for the next players.

“Are you having a good time?” I know this isn’t likely in your top five Valentine’s Day experiences, but I do want you to have fun.”

Charley placed her hand over Dean’s wrist, leaning in closer. “I’ve had some lousy Valentine’s Day dates and our pretend date is honestly going better than most of those ever have. I’m having a great time knocking over plastic hearts and sipping wine while listening to Michael Buble.”

Dean placed his other hand on top of hers, smiling in a way that creased at just the right places around his mouth, drawing Charley’s attention to his lips.

“As long as the deejay doesn’t pull out the Marvin Gaye, I think this mix and mingle thing is pretty fun. It beats the heck out of singles bars with everyone smashed out of their minds, and going home with strangers; not that that’s ever been my vibe.”

“We have that in common. Let’s drink to never waking up with a stranger whose name you can’t remember,” Charley chuckled, raising her wine glass.

“Cheers to that, and cheers to the most beautiful woman in the room,” Dean said meeting her glass with his.

Charley blushed. “If we were here alone and had met for the first time, I think I’d still want to be sitting here with you.”

Dean slid back his chair and stood, reaching for Charley's hand. "Better yet, instead of sitting, we should really solidify our commitment with a dance."

Charley grinned, biting her lip. "Let's do it. I see Laura and Colin have already found their way through the maze of available candidates back to each other. We can't have them outshine us."

"Never." Dean spun Charley into his arms, catching her against his chest. Their hearts both began to thump inside their chests so fast that they were sure the other could feel each beat.

Dean lifted Charley's chin as their eyes met. He lowered his chin so close that Charley could feel the warmth of his breath. She wanted that kiss. He wanted that kiss.

"Charley," Dean said softly. "I—"

Colin and Laura danced up beside them, interrupting.

"It's about time you two joined us. It was either dance or sit through a round of thirty second convos before deciding to switch or stay with the person you're chatting with," Laura said. "Been there. Done that. Never again."

"You too? It's the worst," Colin added. "Dean was supposed to go with me to one of those speed dating events my sister signed me up for last year as a joke. He found a last minute syrup farm to visit and do a story on in New Hampshire."

Dean tossed his head back in frustration. Charley placed her hands on his chest, offering a soft smile.

Laura's eyes searched them both. "Colin, let's go get some fresh air," she said with a wink.

"It's cold out there, though."

Laura pulled in her brows, nodding her head toward the couple who obviously wanted to be left alone. "You won't freeze," she said, dragging Colin by the arm.

"Finally," Dean groaned. "I love that guy like a brother, but he is the King of interruptions at the worst moments."

Charley tilted her head to one side, pursing her lips. “Oh yeah? Does he interrupt almost-kisses on the regular?”

Dean winced, patting over his heart with Charley’s hand still within his. “I can’t win here,” he chuckled.

Charley bumped up her shoulder. “Truthfully, I’m having a better time with you than I’ve had on most first dates that were for real.”

“Most, you say?” Dean released Charley’s hands, pulling her against him, their eyes searching each others. “Let’s see if I can make this THE best first date,” he said softly, finding her lips slowly.

Charley pressed her lips together, feeling them still tingling. “I think you officially secured the top spot for a first date.”

Dean slid one hand down from her waist to take her hand and raised it to his chest as Charley pressed her head against him.

Mrs. Kline rushed over behind Charley, tapping her shoulder, bringing reality back from the daydream.

“I’m sorry to interrupt, dear, but we need you on stage at the end of this song. It’s time for you to share that magical voice and guitar strumming with us. Maybe put out some of that romance pixie dust along with it to help these lovebirds along,” Joan pleaded bobbing her shoulders gleefully.

“The music I can handle. With everything you’ve done to make this weekend a romantic movie set, I think there’s already lots of pixie dust in the air.”

Charley released Dean’s hand, souring her expression.

Dean returned her disappointment, giving a puppy dog pout followed by a smile. “Go do your thing. I’ll be cheering for you.”

Dean motioned outside to Colin and Laura to return. Finding his seat, he whistled as Charley stepped up to the microphone in front of the deejay booth, sliding her guitar over her head by the strap.

A few songs later, the crowd of happy romantics clapped and called out cheers, asking for one more song as an encore.

Charley looked over toward their table to see Dean stepping into the next room on his cell. Clearing her throat, she pulled in a deep breath. The fairytale was ending. She felt it was a cosmic joke that the encore song she'd saved and hoped to play for Dean was Taylor Swift's Today Was a Fairytale. Forcing a smile, she searched the crowd at all of the happy faces, knowing most would likely not work out, but perhaps a few were actually finding the start of their fairytale, even if she would be saying goodbye soon to the man she was falling for.

Dean entered the room midway through the song, mesmerized by her beauty and talent. He started toward her as she made her way through the crowd complimenting her.

“Hi,” he said. “You were amazing.”

“Thanks,” Charley replied less enthusiastically than Dean had hoped. “I really should get to the coffeehouse. I promised to help lock up. Tonight has been fun, though.” Charley swallowed hard. She would stop these feelings dead in their tracks.

She started toward the coat racks. Dean caught her arm. “Wait. What’s wrong? You’re running cold all of a sudden when I thought things were definitely going in the opposite direction before we were interrupted, as we’ve been all night.” He pulled in his brows and clenched his jaw.

“Please look at me,” he said placing a finger below her chin.

Charley held back emotions she wasn't expecting and unsure how to deal with. Tears were close to falling and that couldn't happen. “I'm fine. Really. I just think we've played pretend long enough for one weekend.”

“Pretend? Do you honestly think we're still pretending to be together? I know I'm not. Wow. You aren't just a great singer. You deserve an Oscar for that performance. I'll take you to the coffee shop. Thanks for playing pretend with me.”

Laura and Colin approached. “Are we leaving?” They both asked in unison.

“I thought the party was just getting started,” Colin said, waving his hands in the air.

Laura nudged him, noticing the awkwardness and solemn expressions. Dean was still fixed on Charley, while she reached for her coat.

“Let me help you with that.”

“I’ve got it; thanks.”

Dean shrugged at Laura, confused.

“Hey, you guys go ahead and remote start the truck so it can warm up. We’ll meet you back here in a sec,” Laura encouraged, hoping to find out what was happening and reset to five minutes earlier.

“Sounds good,” Colin assured.

“What is going on with you?” Laura demanded an answer, leading Charley into an empty room. “One minute you look like you’re expecting a blue dress and crystal slippers to replace your current hot dress, and the next it’s like the stroke of midnight is here before 10 and you have to make a mad dash to go clean the floor for the wicked Queen.”

“You’re always so dramatic,” Charley replied with a light chuckle. “Never change.”

“I won’t. You’re welcome. Now, stop dodging the subject.”

“I don’t know. I was about to perform my last song and when I looked over to Dean, he was taking a call and walked out. It just made it real again. You know? It pulled me out of the bubble I’ve been in tonight. I guess I wanted him to ignore a call and stay in the moment with me.”

“I get that. I’m kind of surprised he took a call at that moment. Did you ask him about it?”

Charley shrugged.

“No, you didn’t.”

“It’s not my place to ask him why he’s taking a call during my performance? I’m not his girlfriend, and I’m not that person.”

“So, this was your ‘out’.

“What do you mean?”

“Your excuse to stop yourself from being hurt.”

“It was all pretend anyway. There’s no reason for me to be hurt. Let’s go. Will is going to be ready to close. That part isn’t untrue.”

“Fine. Promise me one thing.”

“What’s that?”

Laura held up her pinky. “Give me your pinky. You know the drill.”

Charley rolled her eyes and raised her pinky to link around Laura’s.

“Now, pinky swear that you’ll tell Dean you have feelings for him. I know that you do. You know that you do. Promise me you’ll tell him.”

“He’s leaving.”

“The way that man was looking at you when I walked up; the lost puppy eyes; the way he’s looked at you whenever I’ve seen you in the same space this weekend...that is not a man who wants to leave and not see you again. Now, give me a hug and go tell that gorgeous soap opera looking guy how you feel and ask him about that phone call.”

“Okay. You win.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Colin and Laura agreed to stay in the car and keep the heat running, both literally, and figuratively, while Dean insisted to walk into The Bold Brew with Charley.

“You’re a little early, but my last customer left about twenty minutes ago, so I’ve already cleaned up and am ready to bolt. I need to set up the apartment for Leah when she gets home. Tonight’s the night,” Will said.

“You’re proposing? Oh, Will. I’m so happy for you,” Charley replied going in for a hug.

“No, no. Slow down. It’s the night I agree to get a cat. Moving in together after Christmas was fast enough for now. One thing at a time. Trust me, this is big, though. I’ve never had a cat, and she has been wanting to get another since losing her feline friend of half her life span shortly before we met. I’m setting up the apartment with all the stuff I’ve bought and hid in the closet. I can’t believe she hasn’t found the stash.”

“Well, congrats anyway. That’s a big deal for the two of you.”

“Thanks. I hope you two had fun tonight.”

“I thought we were having a great time,” Dean replied with perplexity across his face.

“We did have fun,” Charley added. “Go on home, Will. I’ve got this.”

Charley reached for the key in her coat pocket. “I just need to lower the lights and we can go.”

“Dean stepped in front of her. “Is it the phone call?”

“What? I don’t have any say over your phone calls.”

“I’ve been replaying tonight and things changed after I stepped in the hall for part of your final song. I didn’t want to, but I had to.”

“Okay. Why did you *have to*?”

“I had submitted my blog article and photos for the review of Willow Lake Inn. I asked my boss to call me because I wanted to stay an extra two days here and I wanted to surprise you with that news. I’ve never felt this way about someone and especially not someone I’ve known for less than a weekend. I thought you were feeling the same way and I wanted more time with you. I answered only so that I could tell him that I was staying because he doesn’t like texts and emails for things like this. I didn’t think you were going to start your final song before I got back in, but I heard all of it, and I hated missing part of it within view of you. I told him I’d call him back in the morning. I was going to explain myself to you, but you were so distant that I didn’t know how to respond. I wasn’t sure if you were mad at me about taking the call or if you realized this wasn’t what you wanted and you were trying to push me away.”

“I was upset because I wanted to look at you during that whole song,” Charley said. “I was going to tell you after my set that I wanted more than just tonight with you. I didn’t know how to take you walking out. I thought maybe I was reading more into tonight than there was.”

“I stopped faking this weekend *love-at-first-sight* scenario when I saw you tonight. Before, actually. I think I wanted to be with you when you and I talked about my pom stocking hat from my niece. I just didn’t know it then. Something drew me in, though. That pixie dust, I guess.”

“Maybe I do have some sixth sense magic for bringing people together. I never thought I’d be the one to have the Valentine magic for myself. I mean, I knew one day, I would find the right person for me, but I didn’t expect it to happen on the mushiest holiday of the year.”

“Well, you do live in a town called Valentine, so it’s only fitting some people find their soulmate on Valentine’s Day or one of the sweet holidays.”

“True. It’s not me who carries the magic. It’s the town. My aunt’s house; the one that’s now mine; has an old tree that couples would go to and tie pink or red ropes around into love knots when they got married by Willow Lake a long time ago, and I think that tree and the lake formed some kind of magic that still fills the town today. My aunt was a lot like my mom. She had a gypsy soul and she would chant and dance and I think she may have created a few mystical elements of her own that linger there today.”

“So, Miss Rhodes. Is it okay if I hang around a little longer?”

“That would truly make today my fairytale. Mr. Corbett.”

“I’m no prince, and I won’t be corny and say I’ll treat you like a princess, but I will say that you have my heart, Charley Rhodes, and I’m going to be spending a lot more time in this little beautiful town, and whenever you can, I want you to be my travel partner.”

“I love that idea. I do plan to buy this coffeehouse, though, as soon as Carol agrees to sell, so I’ll need a review to help grow the business.”

“I can certainly help with that and when we’re here together, I’ll learn to be a barista.”

“Oh, yeah? I can see you in an apron. I think you’d be sexy in an apron.”

“I think you’d be sexy in my arms. Now, can I please kiss you and ask you one question?”

“What’s the question?”

“Will you be mine in Valentine, and everywhere else?”

Charley reached for a candy box on the counter and opened it. “We have to seal the deal. Make this pact official.”

Dean parted his lips as Charley slid a candy heart between his teeth. “I accept your offer. No more pretending. I’ve found a place that I finally want to spend more time in.”

“I know what my mom meant when she told me she’d found *home* with her husband, because I finally feel like I can have that with you.”

“Let’s seal this deal to be open, intentional, and committed to seeing where this journey takes us. The candy heart was a start, but it’s only a relationship pact with a kiss.”

Dean pulled Charley into his arms, cupping her face, as Colin and Laura high-fived from the doorway.

“Well, I guess we’ll be seeing more of each other, too, if you want,” Colin asked hopefully.

“I’m in between places right now, and work remotely, so that can be arranged,” Laura replied locking her arm underneath Colin’s.

THE END

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See Sample—>

SAMPLE OF CHRISTMAS AT MISTLETOE RIDGE

C HRISTMAS
AT
MISTLETOE RIDGE

ANGIE ELLINGTON

CHAPTER ONE

Holland Jenkins hummed while leaning over a table carved from an old oak tree. When it had to come down earlier in the year after a lightning strike, she'd hired a neighbor to re-purpose part of it into a work bench for her art, and a coffee table for the cabin she now shared with her mother. Memories of simpler days had flooded her mind when she'd discovered the top half toppled on the ground. She'd spent her childhood skipping around that tree, blowing bubbles from a wand, and swinging from an old roped tire swing. Recollections of her father pushing her gently and telling her to bend and kick as she gained momentum had swarmed her mind like bees around the sweetest flower in spring. Although those days were far from reach now, having a part of that old oak tree near her fused sadness to solace during the darker times when her family missed her dad more than they could bear.

With precision, she placed a glass ornament along the corner of the table. It was the fifth one she'd painted that day. Waltzing behind the rental desk of Mistletoe Ridge Cabins, she nabbed her cell phone to take a picture of her works in progress. She'd add it to her portfolio; the one she kept on the coffee table. Once her pride and joy to show off her budding art career, it now lie encased by a thin later of dust and unseen by anyone other than her and her mother in some time. She

stepped closer toward the door to capture the messy, yet inspiring aesthetic of brushes and paints, with white glass ornaments and ceramic angels. She snapped a photo of her designs for the upcoming Peppermint in the Park Festival. It was now one of the few occasions when she'd share her talents with others. Turning on her heel, she stepped backward, arching back to frame another shot. As she did, a door creaked open behind her, ushering in blustering winds. A misstep left her floundering. Both she and the ornament were propelled into a downward dive with the velocity of an Olympic swimmer. However, there would be no gold medal, unless awards were given for clumsiness, and which shattered more, Holland, her phone, or the ornament.

Crashing into a stranger's grasp, Holland reached for the arms that suspended her body from the hardened floor, as her phone tumbled through the air, landing on a bear-patterned rug. She and the guest surveyed each other for a moment. Storm blue eyes and thick brows stole her breath, as a buttoned shirt of matching blue highlighted his olive skin. She remained in a horizontal swoop, as a warm smile emerged from the stranger's lips. The rolling ornament came to a stop at their feet, breaking their unintended embrace.

"Oh, no!" Holland gasped. Disappointment clouded her jade eyes. "My ornament!" She rushed to pick it up, kneeling onto the floor.

Cole Stevens followed suit, offering assistance. "I'm so sorry. Let me pay you for it," he offered.

Holland shot him a frosty look. Cradling the ornament inside of her palms, she marched behind the counter. Inspecting the symmetrical crack once more, she whisked a clean paintbrush over the area to free tiny chips of glass into a trash can. Wrapping the piece of cloth around it, she secured the ornament in a gold decorative box. It would be easy to fix with some epoxy and her trusted glue gun. This wasn't her first rodeo. She relaxed over the registration book, giving him a once-over.

Cole approached the counter slowly. He lifted his chin, grimacing. His mind scrambled for words. "I'm assuming you

made those ornaments.” He rolled his shoulders back, as if pressing the start button to an engine after a failed first attempt.

Holland glared at him. “Yes, I was waiting for the paint to dry.” Her expression softened. “It’s cracked, but not broken.” She glanced up to meet his apologetic eyes, setting her at ease. “I’ll touch it up with my glue gun in a minute. It’s not your fault. I usually don’t do my side work in the front entrance.”

Cole fiddled with an ink pen with a rubber bird rocking back and forth on the top. He hadn’t expected to stay in a cabin, but he was fine with that. Keeping the real reason he was in town was awkward, but nothing he hadn’t dealt with before. Having a woman with eyes the shade of an emerald and peachy skin tumble into his arms was not something he’d had a plan for. He let out a breath he hadn’t realized had stalled in his lungs. “What was the design you had painted? It looked like a dog from my brief glance.”

“A Golden Retriever’s face to match my grandparents’ dog, Sassy.” Holland straightened her shoulders and forced a smile. “My favorite ornament of the batch, but it was for personal use anyway.”

Cole bowed his head. “I really couldn’t feel worse. How can I make it up to you? By the way, I’m Cole. Cole Stevens,” he said, his eyes rapt on her face.

“Holland,” she replied, tracking his gaze over her. She relaxed her posture. “I’m the leasing agent for Mistletoe Ridge Cabins. My grandparents, Walter and Lila Jenkins, own the property. Are you looking for a cabin to rent?” She reached for the pen, brushing against his fingers.

“I am,” he said, prickles running up his arm from her touch. He released the pen. “The hotel I was planning to stay at is all booked up for the week, and I’d heard someone speak of your property at a gas station a few miles back.” He raked his fingers through his brown hair. He was used to thinking on his feet and going incognito when he checked out properties being considered by the investment firm he worked for. “I’m meeting a colleague in the one street greeting card I just drove

through and thought I'd check you out." His muscles tightened. "The cabins, that is," he stammered. "Check out the cabins... to see if any are available." Cole drummed his fingers on the counter;

Is this a speed round of Jeopardy? I'm sinking fast into this pit of quicksand.

Holland's green eyes brightened. "Is that so?" She cracked a grin. She had doubts that a man of Cole's athletic build outlined by the beginnings of a stubbly beard and dark hair thick enough to envy had any trouble speaking to women. Her cheeks plumped up with a wide smile. Seeing him fumble over his words almost made up for the ornament. Not entirely, but it did help. Considering they'd had a cancellation and two other cabins that weren't scheduled to be occupied for another two days, she needed this booking for her grandparents. Truth be told, reservations had been on the decline since the first of October when they'd held the Pumpkin Palooza harvest festival on their property. With the upcoming festival in Birch Falls on Christmas Eve, she'd hoped they'd be booked solid all week.

The new hotel a short drive away was plunked down in the middle of a town no bigger than Birch Falls, and yet boasted the accommodations of a luxury resort. She'd been told a man with looks and charm of a Hollywood star had cozied up to the land owners in Poplar Creek when they'd had last minute concerns and schmoozed them into selling. Rumor had it that the realtor handling the sale was inexperienced and some firm's heavy hitting henchman had sealed the deal. The town's proximity to a popular vineyard and a few more enticing tourist attractions had made Poplar Creek into a resort destination, and although Birch Falls had managed to ride on their coattails for some additional tourism, Mistletoe Ridge was slowly losing out to modern conveniences that they weren't set up to, and didn't want to compete with.

It was hard to promote cabins with coffee rather than a mini bar over suites with hot tubs, a steakhouse in the ground level, and a day spa. This time of year, the Jenkins' simply couldn't compete. Winter activities weren't as prevalent in

Birch Falls, and at Mistletoe Ridge, most guests had preferred going rustic. Finding those who still preferred simplicity over luxury had become increasingly challenging.

“We do happen to have one cabin available. Last minute cancellation. This weekend is the Peppermint in the Park Festival here in Birch Falls. It’s the fifth annual event, and each year draws a larger crowd than the last.” She hoped that would be true this year, but lack of rentals weren’t as reassuring. “The ornaments are for the festival. I will have a booth for my pottery and ceramic designs. It’s a hobby of mine.” Her words felt hollow. She loved her work. “One that takes more time than a hobby really should, but I do enjoy making them.” Holland pulled out the rental book and pushed the tip of the pen. “I’ll just need your information. Rental is seventy-five dollars per night, but reduces to sixty-five for a minimum stay of three nights.”

Holland’s grandmother, Lila, entered from the next room. “Hello, there. I do hope you’re planning on staying through the weekend. You don’t want to miss our delightful festival.”

Holland looked from her grandmother back to find Cole’s angular jaw held open by a smile. The kind of smile somewhere between confident and cocky; the type of smile you can’t force yourself to turn away from. The kind that’s capable of stopping traffic. And those eyes. It was as if they were purposely absorbing the light from the metallic snowflakes floating inside the snow globe on the counter.

“She has the hearing of a cat,” Holland said softly.

Lila picked up the chipped ornament, cradling it in her hand. “I heard that, also,” she quipped.

Cole’s smile widened to reveal a pearly gleam. He surveyed the room, and the Christmas tree in the corner. “This is one of those towns with a charming Main Street and a bakery with sugar cookies and the whole shebang isn’t it? A peppermint festival? I saw the tree in the center of the town with more lights strung over it than the the one in Union Square where I live in San Fran. I’m not sure if I can handle that much Christmas. I’m not much into holidays anymore.

I'm on the road too much to stop and smell the...cocoa—or what have you.”

“We can change that. You don't spend Christmas with your family?” Lila asked with a crackle in her soft voice as she approached the counter.

“Nana. That's personal,” Holland said with a sharp nod of her chin.

“It's fine. My parents now live in Tulsa, and I rarely make it home for Christmas. When I do, it's usually for about two days. I spend more time in hotels during the holidays than my condo in California.”

“What brings you to Birch Falls? We're not exactly a bustling city,” Lila inquired.

“Excuse my grandmother. She doesn't believe in boundaries.” Holland touched her grandmother's frail shoulder gently and gave her a little squeeze.

“I'm-,” Cole hesitated. “I'm here to assist a colleague on a project. I won't bore you with the boring intricacies of numbers and flow charts.”

“Well, whatever brought you to our little piece of Heaven, we're glad you're here,” Lila said, with a grin.

“I appreciate that,” Cole replied. Although time had hollowed her cheeks, the sparkle in her ice blue eyes was jubilant and youthful.

“Enjoy your stay with us, young man. A handsome fella like you shouldn't be spending Christmas alone.” Lila darted her eyes over to Holland as a smile poured over her face. “My granddaughter's single, you know.”

“Nana!” Holland's eyes went wide. “Don't you need to go check on the boxes for the ornaments?”

“Yes, I do,” Lila replied, with a tickled expression. “When do you meet with your colleague?”

“Umm, I'm hoping to meet with him tomorrow. I was planning to stay two nights, but if there's a discount, and perhaps a decent cup of coffee nearby, I'll go ahead and make

it three.” His eyes shifted toward Holland. “I’m not sure I can stay long enough for the Peppermint in the *Square* festival. I have to get my work done and catch a plane to Louisiana. I’ve got complimentary tickets to an NFL bowl game the day after Christmas.”

Holland shrugged. “Peppermint in the *Park*,” she corrected with a chuckle. “You don’t know what you’re missing Mr. Stevens.” Holland felt her heartbeat fasten. “Three nights it is. Here is your key. It’s the cabin two doors down that says ‘Bluegrass Bungalow’ on the sign mounted next to the door.” She jangled the key attached to a hummingbird key chain.

Cole took the key, and as he touched her hand, his insides warmed. “It’s Cole. Not Mr. Stevens.” He noticed there wasn’t a wedding ring on her finger. His muscles began to relax and he pulled his shoulders back. “I’ll figure out a way to make up my entrance to you, Miss Jenkins. I can’t replace the ornament, but I’ll figure out something if you won’t let me pay you for it.” His eyes implored her.

Holland bumped against a chair, losing her footing. She rubbed her hands over her thighs, finding comfort in the softness of her red plaid leggings. “It’s Okay,” she managed to say. “Just promise that when you come back in, you’ll use the doorbell next time, so I can move away from the door.” She slid a hand onto one hip.

Lila rubbed her granddaughter’s back. “Holland makes a wonderful tour guide if you find some free time while you’re here.” She waved her hand, exiting the room.

Cole pointed toward the table of ornaments. “I really am sorry about your ornament, Holland.”

He picked up a ceramic ornament of an angel and rubbed his fingers over it, observing the intricate details of the rounded edges and curved lines. He placed it down gently, eyes shifting over the painted glass designs, and he turned to Holland. “These are beautiful, and you’re very talented. Wrap me up one of your designs before I check out. I’ll pay you double for it.”

Holland moved from behind the counter, inching closer to Cole. “You don’t have to do that. I’ll move my work bench to the back corner away from the door and the wind. I should’ve known better.” She tugged at her black sweater.

Cole’s eyes followed her features. He’d dreaded this trip, but saying no to his boss was something he rarely did. Acquisitions didn’t allow for personal connections. Perhaps this unexpected stay could be kind of fun if he spent more time around Holland. She was definitely not the usual type of woman he encountered with her blonde hair pulled up into a ponytail, neutral makeup, and a little sparkle to her skin courtesy of glitter she’d been using. He couldn’t forget why he was here, but steering clear of Holland Jenkins wouldn’t be easy. Even in casual mode, her beauty was hypnotic.

Holland’s hand fell from her hip, as she placed one foot behind the other, leaning back on one heel. She forced a slowed breath. “Do you need me to walk you to your cabin or call for a bellman?” She gave him a coy smile. The sooner he would leave, the sooner she could forget their less than graceful meeting.

Cole slowly toyed with the key in his hand, as he waited for her eyes to follow his fingers, confident that they would. His lips parted. A wry smile filled in across his lips. “I think I can manage.”

Cole reached for the silver doorknob, taking in the view of the room and the Christmas tree decorated in the corner. “Nice tree. This place has a cool rugged appeal. I’m kind of digging it.” He chuckled and turned the knob. “Nice to meet you, Holland. It’s not every day that a woman falls into my arms, and catching you was the highlight of this otherwise lousy day.”

“Glad it’s turning around for you. I guess we’re both having bad luck today.”

“I hate the ornament cracked, but I guess it’s a matter of perspective in the rest. The ornament can be repaired. You didn’t have a collision on the floor, but landing in my arms? I can think of worse things. I’ll be sure to leave a review of our

introduction on Yelp,” he chuckled and held up the keys. He dragged his hawkish gaze away, tugging the door open, and breezily ambled away.

Holland shrugged as her cheeks pinked up like the sugariest part of cotton candy. She raced over to the large window, craning her neck for one last glimpse of the handsome newcomer. The gray curtains Lila had sewn years before held by sashes provided for her view. She whipped her body in a semi-circle against the pewter colored wall, narrowly avoiding being seen when he took a sharp turn in the driveway as if expecting her stare. She closed her eyes and let out her breath. She pushed away from the wall, opening her eyes. She rolled her shoulders back and adjusted her hair tie. She picked up a paintbrush, as her eyes drifted over to the guest book sitting on the counter. She twitched her jaw and scanned the room before walking over to the guest book to read Cole’s information. “Nice handwriting,” she said aloud. “What am I doing?” She let out her breath and walked away from the counter toward her work bench. She began humming to a Christmas song playing from the radio in her adjacent mini studio.

Lila peered around the doorway from the studio, and watched her granddaughter as she hummed and painted. After she set an ornament down, Lila approached. “Cole seems like a nice young man. I think you should show him around Birch Falls while he’s in town. Give him a little taste of our holiday spirit.”

“He’s a guest, Nana,” Holland replied. “I don’t get involved with guests.”

“I said nothing of getting involved. A little hospitality in the form of a tour around town would be a nice gesture, is all. It is Christmas.”

“Sure, Nana. I’ll think about it.”

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About the Author

Angie Ellington's sweet romances are filled with summer breezes, lemonade, hot cocoa, & snowy settings. If you're looking for a book that gives you the feels of gentle rocking in a hammock or snuggled under a blanket by a cozy fire, Angie's books can transport you there.

A wife & fur mama of cats & a dog who sometimes thinks she's a cat, Angie loves her family, chocolate, coffee, & an occasional glass of red wine. She also includes inspirational messages of hope & confidence, includes fun side characters to adore, & sets her books in small towns where family & friendship are at the core of finding one's happily ever after. Most of her books are shorter in length; perfect for those who can find a few hours to drift away & find a little laughter & love.

Angie is a graduate of The University of NC at Wilmington & resides in NC.

