



*Christmas*  
DEAL

CHRISTMAS COOKIE CHALLENGE

PIPPA BROOK

# CHRISTMAS DEAL

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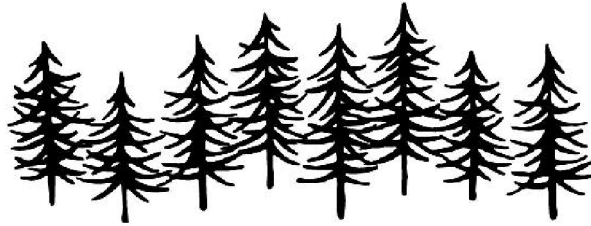
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# PROLOGUE



THE COUNTER OF KRINGLE’S Coffee and Sweets Shoppe is crowded with holiday shoppers needing pick-me-up shots of espresso, while the tables in the dining area are occupied by couples on first dates and friends exchanging Christmas gifts.

The bell over the door chimes, and a woman with long, blonde hair walks in. “I just love this place,” she says fondly, gazing in wonder at the beautiful decorations. A large, artificial Christmas tree takes up the corner, adorned with gorgeous ornaments, glittering tinsel, and strands of real popcorn. Life-size nutcrackers stand guard at the counter. An antique train set circles the store, and Christmas music plays over a speaker. “It’s like stepping into the North Pole.”

An employee that looks remarkably like an elf in a Christmas movie and wears a name tag that says HOLLY JOLLY in big, block letters, snorts in disgust. “The trees aren’t *fake* at the North Pole,” she says, shooting a nasty look at the Christmas tree in the corner of the shop. The look is so

incongruous with her short stature and rosy cheeks that several customers blink in confusion.

Another employee, this one looking like Mrs. Claus brought to life, steps out of the kitchen with a tray of chocolate chip cookies. She smiles kindly and the cheerful atmosphere returns immediately. “I’m Mrs. Kringle, and I’d love to welcome you to my shop with a complimentary cookie.”

An older gentleman steps forward to take one of the treats. “I collect trains, and I’ve never seen a set quite like yours. Where did you get it?”

“It’s one-of-a-kind,” Mrs. Kringle says. “My husband made it for me centuries ago.”

“Centuries...? Oh, I get it! It’s part of your Mrs. Claus act.” He grins, stepping aside so other customers can take a cookie.

A woman glances at Holly’s name tag and claps her hands. “Holly Jolly!” she exclaims. “Could that be any cuter?”

“It’s a very respectable name, thank you very much,” Holly snaps, folding her arms across her chest.

The woman licks her lips. “Um...okay?” She hurries away with her cookie.

Mrs. Kringle shakes her head. “Holly, could you at least *try* to be polite to the customers?”

“I *am* polite! Did I make fun of *her* name? No, I didn’t. Even though it’s *ridiculous*.”

“Actually,” the next customer in line says, hoisting his shopping bags onto his shoulder, “I overheard your conversation, and she never told you her name.”

Holly shrugs. “She didn’t have to. I already know. It’s an elf thing.”

The man winks. “Is that right? An elf thing? So, what’s my name?”

Holly raises an eyebrow. “Matthew. And right now, you’re wishing that the free cookie was macadamia nut or even peanut butter. Which is rather ungrateful, don’t you think?” The man’s mouth falls open, and Holly reaches out with a hand to snap it shut. “You’ll eat the cookie, and you’ll *like* it, Mattie, my boy.”

Matthew nods vigorously, grabbing a chocolate chip cookie and shoving the whole thing into his mouth before running away.

Mrs. Kringle sighs, and her breath smells like cinnamon and vanilla. “That’s not okay, Holly. You know better than... ohhh,” she breathes, spotting something over Holly’s shoulder. “A cookie exchange!”

Holly turns to look. Three women stand to the side, each holding a plate wrapped in cellophane, waiting for a table to open up. Within moments, Holly knows their names: Carly, Millie, and Lauren. Old friends since college, each forty years old and *single*.

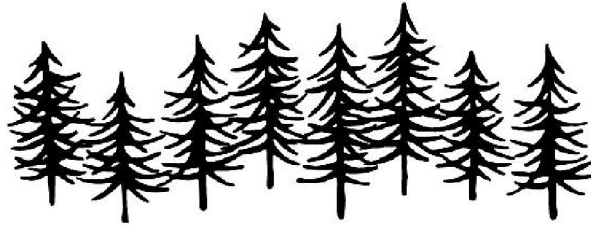
*Mrs. Kringle’s favorite.*



Holly's face stretches into a grin. "Are you thinking it's time to break out the fortune cookies?"

"Absolutely." Mrs. Kringle rubs her hands together gleefully. "After all, we can't let Kris have all the fun. Let's work some Christmas magic of our own."

# ONE



## CARLY

AS THE OWNER OF one of the most lucrative graphic design firms in California, responsible for the movie posters and advertising materials for all the major motion picture studios, I'm known for being a no-nonsense woman who always plays it smart.

The *smart* girl. Yep, that's me. Always has been.

And *smart* girls absolutely, never, ever get chased up trees by wild dogs after attempting to drop in, uninvited, to propose to a man they haven't seen in more than two decades.

No sirree. That would never happen. Not in a million years.

Yet here I am, tucked into the crook of a branch, staring down at two snarling beasts who clearly have a burning desire to eat my face.

*How did the woman survive in Cujo?*

I rack my brain, trying to remember the old movie. If memory serves, she was armed with a baseball bat. And she only had to fight *one* dog.

As if my predicament isn't bad enough, in the fifteen minutes I've been stuck in the tree, it's started to snow. Big, fat snowflakes the size of goose feathers.

The tree I'm using for refuge has already dropped its leaves for the winter, so it offers zero protection from the elements. My jacket, an expensive designer brand that's known for style, not *warmth*, is about as helpful as the naked tree.

At least I have a hat, scarf and gloves, right? *Ha!*

Adequate shoes? *Nope.*

Cell phone service? *In the middle of nowhere? Fat chance.*

"So much for being a smart girl," I grumble, blowing into my hands before rubbing them together.

Swallowing my last bit of dignity, I open my mouth to scream for help. I'm pretty sure no one is home, or they'd have come to investigate the commotion the dogs are making by now, but my options are limited here.

"Help!" I shout, over and over, until my voice is raw. Only the dogs answer my call, baying mournfully at their cornered prey.

*Why couldn't William Jones live in a nice, suburban area, surrounded by nosy neighbors?*

When I'd first pulled up to his little cabin in the woods, I'd thought, *Oh, how lovely and quaint!*

Within moments of stepping out of the car, the two dogs were on my heels, barking ferociously. Instead of running back to the safety of the car, I'd panicked, running the *opposite* direction. Fortunately, the tree-climbing skills of my youth returned in the nick of time.

*Thank goodness for small miracles...*

I should be checked into a luxury hotel in Miami right now, waiting to embark on a Caribbean cruise first thing in the morning.

Just me, a suitcase full of beachwear and paperbacks, and four weeks in paradise.

With no family to speak of, and my best friends, Millie and Lauren, out of town, it was the perfect plan for getting through the holidays unscathed.

But then my flight from LA to Miami had an emergency detour in Charlotte, North Carolina, after a fluke hailstorm caused minor damage to the plane.

*What were the odds of ending up at the closest airport to Mercury Ridge? Was it truly just a coincidence?*

As the plane landed, I swear I could feel the strip of paper in the pocket of my jeans grow hot. I'd been carrying it for days, ever since cracking open a fortune cookie at a Christmas-themed coffeeshop and finding it nestled inside.

When I read the fortune for the first time, I could feel the eyes of a woman dressed as Mrs. Claus watching me. Like all fortunes stuffed into cookies, it's vague enough to be read by anyone.

But it feels like it was written just for me. As if the person who typed the message truly knows me—my past, present, *and* future. Somehow, they seem to know my secret hopes and dreams—the ones I haven't shared with *anyone*, not even my two closest friends.

I know that sounds crazy. And I'm not sure why I've held onto it, or why I read it several times a day.

Reaching into my pocket, I pull it out to read once more.

**Your answer waits in the mountains. A deal's a deal.**

I know these words can't *really* be related to the marriage pact I made with William Jones when we were seventeen years old. No one could possibly know about our deal to marry each other if we were still single at forty.

It's funny how forty seemed so old at the time. *Ancient*, even. As if it was a *lifetime* away.

So, what on earth am I doing in a tree in his front yard?

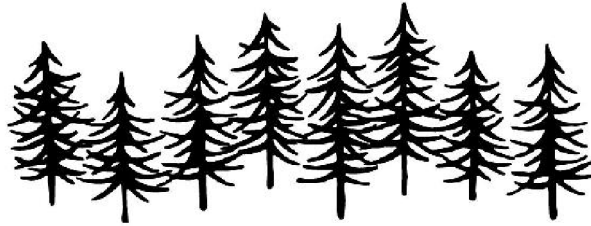
Maybe I just wanted to believe a Hallmark ending was possible for me.

Glancing down at the dogs again, I can't help but think I aimed much too high.

*Who needs a happily ever after?*

Right now, I'd settle for an ending that wasn't pulled straight from a Stephen King novel.

# TWO



## CARLY

WITH A SIGH, I bury my face in my arms, trying to protect my nose from frostbite. Call me vain, but I'd like to keep it where it belongs—right in the middle of my face—and it currently feels in danger of snapping off.

I think of Millie and Lauren, hoping that their holiday plans are going better than mine. After growing up in foster care, I hadn't thought I'd ever have a family. But then I met them in college, and we became as close as sisters.

For a long time, they were all the family I needed.

But lately, I've found myself yearning for a family of my own.

For a *baby* of my own.

If it's true that your biological clock starts to tick in your early thirties, by forty, it's a death knell. I can practically hear

the bells clanging in my head as my ovaries shrivel up and die.

I've considered fostering or adopting. I've even visited fancy sperm banks. Places where you can choose a donor based on everything from his IQ to his body type, hair and eye color, spirit animal, and which Hogwarts house he'd be sorted in. Some even offer handwriting samples.

Just punch in your selections and voilà! *One green-eyed Gryffindor with lovely penmanship and an Ivy League education coming right up!*

It's not for me. Call me old-fashioned, but I want the baby *and* the father. Unfortunately, I'm running out of time, and Mr. Right is nowhere to be found.

So, when I cracked open that stupid fortune cookie and read the words printed on the paper, I felt a sudden surge of...*hope*.

*A deal's a deal.*

And William Jones *did* promise to marry me if we were both single at forty.

It only took a few minutes of internet sleuthing, to discover that William still lives in Mercury Ridge. Neither he nor his brothers have social media profiles, and his sister's are locked down tighter than Fort Knox. But I struck gold with The Mercury Ridge Gazette, which has article after article dedicated to his work with Mercury Ridge Search and Rescue.

None of the articles mentioned a wife.

Finally, I found an article from last year, highlighting William as one of the town's most eligible bachelors. There



was a photo, a closeup of his beautiful, bearded face. His expression was serious—just as it had been when he made the vow to marry me at forty.

A local hero, beloved by the community, with CPR training and first-aid skills...how's *that* for husband—and *father*—material?

A few minutes later, I'd discovered his address and added it to my phone's contacts—just in case I ever had a reason to return to Mercury Ridge. It wouldn't hurt to pay an old friend a visit, right?

Then I pushed the thought aside, recognizing it as nothing short of lunacy. I couldn't just show up at his door out of the blue and propose marriage...could I?

No. Of course not. It was out of the question. Especially since I want *more* than marriage.

I want the baby in the baby carriage.

How do you explain *that* to a man?

But when my plane landed in Charlotte, just a few hours' drive from Mercury Ridge, visiting William suddenly didn't feel so preposterous. It seemed *inevitable*. Like it was meant to be.

Only now, I'm stuck in a tree, on the verge of dying of exposure, and he's nowhere to be seen. When my frozen corpse falls from the tree, will he be the one to find me? Or will the dogs drag my body into the woods? No one knows

I'm here. Maybe I'll just disappear forever, never to be seen again.

Finally, I hear the crunch of gravel under tires, the telltale sound of a car coming up the driveway. A minute later, a large pickup truck with an extended cab pulls up next to my rental car. Through the windshield, I can see that at least two people are inside.

*He's not alone...*

Dread settles in the pit of my stomach. I flatten myself against the tree branch, no longer in a hurry to be discovered.

The passenger door opens, and a woman with ivory skin, pink lips, and long, red hair slides out. Even with her body hidden beneath a large winter coat, it's clear that she has curves for days.

Unable to pry my eyes off of her, I watch as she opens the backdoor of the truck. She fumbles with something for a moment, and then there's a plump baby in her arms. A *girl*, if the baby's puffy, pink snowsuit is any indication.

The woman kisses the baby's face, and the baby giggles and coos in response.

And then William is there by their side, looking even better than he did in high school. The gangly teenager is gone, replaced by a tall, rugged man. The sleeves of his flannel shirt are rolled up to his elbows, exposing muscled forearms. His thick but well-groomed beard is new, too.

*New within the last twenty years, anyway.* My fingers itch to comb through it.

*But he's already taken.* Not only that...he has a *family*.

William tickles the little girl's neck, and she bursts into a fit of giggles. The gorgeous woman laughs, a happy sound that causes a bubble of jealousy to form in my chest.

The flash of emotion sends a surge of heat through my body, and for the first time in what feels like hours, I no longer feel numb with the cold.

"Do you know who this car belongs to?" the woman asks William, pointing to my rental.

"No clue," he tells her. Then he raises his voice, "Hello? Is someone here?"

Now's the time to yell back, to announce my presence and be rescued from the wild dogs. Neither animal has left their position at the foot of the tree, though they've stopped barking and stare at William with their tails wagging. At his presence, they've morphed from vicious, barking beasts into seemingly docile pets.

"Get the baby inside," William tells the redhead. "I'll carry in some firewood for the woodstove."

He walks past my tree, trailing a hand over each dog's head to pet them as he passes by on his way to the woodpile.

Lifting the tarp that protects the chopped wood from the elements, he removes several pieces. Arms loaded with

firewood and snow gathering on his broad shoulders, he heads back to the cabin to provide for his perfect family.

It's like a scene from *Little House on the freaking Prairie*.

One of the dogs jumps against the tree trunk, renewing his barking efforts. William freezes in his tracks. "What is it, boy?"

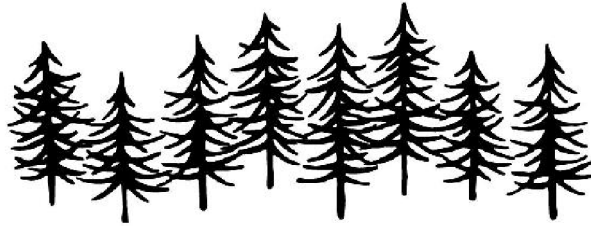
I watch in horror as he follows the dog's gaze up the length of the tree. He sees me, jumping back in shock. The wood falls from his arms, clattering onto the ground.

"Who's up there?" he calls, steel in his tone. "This is private property, and I'm armed." He holds a hand up to his eyes to shield them from the falling snow, peering up at me. His face, always so serious, even as a teenager, looks downright terrifying now.

I never should have come here.

*Stupid fortune cookie...*

# THREE



## WILLIAM

MY HEART SLAMS AGAINST my rib cage. It's not every day you find a trespasser lurking in a tree in your front yard.

In fact, this sort of thing never happens in Mercury Ridge.

*What does this guy want?* Is he staking out my house for a burglary? Or did he have more nefarious plans in mind?

I squint against the snow to try to get a better look at him, but the snow is falling thick and fast now. The sun has started to set behind the house, casting the front yard in shadow. Dressed in all black, the trespasser is difficult to see.

"Who's up there?" I bellow again.

I pause, waiting for an answer. There isn't one.

"William," Sierra calls from the porch, uncertainty and fear in her voice, "what's going on?"

All my training for the Mercury Ridge Search and Rescue Team erupts to the forefront of my brain. *Objective 1: make sure Sierra and the baby are safe.*

“Stay in the house,” I yell to her. “Lock the door. Call Sherriff Abrams. Tell him there’s an intruder.” I circle the tree, still trying to get a clear view of the man. “Did you hear that? The sheriff is on his way.”

“I heard you, and that’s really not necessary,” the trespasser says.

My mouth falls open, and you could knock me over with a feather right now, because the voice is *female*. I was *not* expecting that.

“Why are you in my tree?” I demand.

“To get away from the vicious dogs, obviously.”

I glance at my dogs, my eyebrows popping up in surprise. “*These* dogs?”

“You should keep them locked up. They’re very mean.”

I shake my head in disbelief. “They’re *corgis*.”

“Just take the dogs inside, and I’ll happily leave. We can forget this ever happened.”

The fear-fueled burst of adrenaline in my system starts to fade, replaced with amusement. I know better than to underestimate women—anyone who knows my sister, Macbeth, could never make that mistake—but *this* woman? She’s afraid of corgis. How tough could she be?

“I don’t think so. Not until you tell me what you’re doing here.”

“I told you already,” she says slowly, making it clear what she thinks of my IQ level, “those *monsters* chased me up the tree.”

“Monsters?” I scoff. “Corgis aren’t exactly the stuff of nightmares, tottering around on their stumpy, little legs.”

“Ever heard of the T-Rex? It had tiny arms, too.”

“Good point,” I say, feeling the corners of my lips twitch into an involuntary smile. “So, for the sake of argument, let’s say the dogs did chase you up the tree—”

“They did!”

Ignoring her, I continue, “—why are you on my property in the first place?”

“I came to visit an old friend,” she mutters. “I realize now that it was a mistake.”

“Wrong address?”

“Not exactly.”

I frown. “I built this house myself. So, unless you’re here to visit me...”

Again, the woman doesn’t answer. *Wait...is she here to see me?*

I step closer to the tree, shielding my eyes with my hands, trying to see her better. “Who are you?”

She raises her chin, her face clearly visible for the first time. Round cheeks, soft lips, and eyes the exact same shade of blue as Lake Mercury on a sunny summer's day. I can't actually see her eyes, since her face is cast in shadow, but there are some things a man never forgets.

Carly Ormsbee's face is etched into my long-term memory as permanently as a name scrawled in wet cement.

I gasp, my breath causing a small circle of fog in the chilly air. "It's you."

"It's me," she says. "Now, can you please call off the hounds so I can get out of this tree?"

Memories of Carly come flooding back. Hours of kissing beneath the old willow tree at my dad's house. The first time she let me touch her boobs. The day she took my virginity—and gave me hers.

*And oh, right. She's afraid of dogs.* I command my boys to sit, and they obey.

Carly eyes them warily. "Shouldn't you tie them up?"

I shake my head. "They're well-trained. They won't move until I give them permission. But you don't need to fear them. They won't hurt you."

"Yeah, right. They were plotting to maul me and drag me into the woods for a midnight snack."

I stifle a laugh. "You always did have an active imagination. Now, come on down. I won't let you fall."



Carly climbs down until she can reach my arms, allowing me to help her the rest of the way. When her feet are firmly on the ground, I stare down at her beautiful face.

*Carly Ormsbee is finally back in Mercury Ridge. Where she belongs. With me.*

“William...” Sierra shouts to me from an upstairs window, startling me. I’d forgotten she was here.

I pry my gaze away from Carly to look up at her. “Yeah?”

She cocks an eyebrow. “I couldn’t reach the sheriff, but Romeo’s on the phone. He’s on his way. Should he call in the calvary? Or is everything good here?”

I look back at Carly with a smile on my face. “What do you think? Do we need the calv—” My voice trails off abruptly as I truly take in her appearance for the first time.

Her hair and clothes are soaked through, and her jacket looks *very* thin—ill-suited for fall, let alone winter. *She’s shivering.*

Just how long was she stuck in the tree?

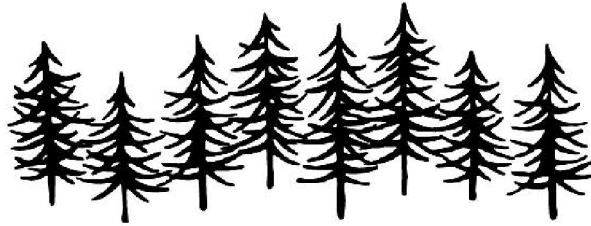
A second later, the shivering worsens. She’s shaking as hard as a fish trapped in a net.

“I’m c-c-cold,” she says, her teeth chattering.

Several emotions crash over me at once. I try to sort through them for the most helpful, but anger bursts to the surface like the goddamn Kool-Aid Man. “What in the hell are you wearing?” I roar.

Without waiting for an answer, I throw her over my shoulder like a sack of potatoes and run toward the house.

# FOUR



## CARLY

“WILLIAM, I’M FINE,” I insist, as he wraps me in yet another blanket.

After carrying me inside and dumping me on the rug in front of the fireplace, he’d made it his mission to bury me under a mountain of blankets. Once he was satisfied that I wouldn’t freeze to death, he’d moved on to building the fire. Now that the fireplace is flickering with flames, he’s obsessing over blankets again.

I must admit, the possessive and protective alpha-male vibe is *extremely* sexy. It’d be a lot more enjoyable if his wife and child weren’t staring at me from the sofa, though.

I force myself to meet the beautiful redhead’s eyes. “I’m so sorry, Mrs. Jones.”

“Call me Sierra,” she says kindly, bouncing the baby on her knees. “And you certainly don’t need to apologize to me.”

*Oh, but I do. I’m lusting after your husband...*

I gulp. “Thank you, Sierra. That’s very kind.”

William kneels in front of me, cradling my face in his hands. His touch is gentle, but his dark eyes still burn with fury. “Your skin is still cold,” he says, his tone an accusation.

“I’m fine.” And it’s the truth. Now that I’m inside, under the blankets, and next to the fire, I don’t feel as cold. *Or maybe it’s just my desire for William warming me from the inside out.*

He *really* shouldn’t be touching me like this in front of his wife. I should pull away. Any second now, I’ll find the strength...

“Do you have a suitcase in your car?” he asks.

I nod. “Yes, but...”

William doesn’t wait for me to finish the sentence before he storms out into the snow.

Sierra whistles. “I’ve never seen him so...what’s the word?”

“Angry?” I suggest.

“No. I was thinking...*manly*. You two have history.” It’s not a question.

“*Ancient* history,” I say quickly.

“It doesn’t seem like ancient history to William...”

*Oh no.* Have I messed up William's relationship with his pretty wife? One thing I'm not—and never will be—is a homewrecker. But she doesn't seem upset, or the least bit jealous. Just...curious. Her lips lift into a knowing smile.

Her reaction is *odd*. But I suppose I'd be secure in my relationship if I looked like her, too. She's shed her coat now, showcasing a tight sweater that shows off her curvy figure.

Suddenly, I'm very self-conscious of my own appearance, and make a feeble attempt to finger-comb my wet hair before giving up and staring at the fire.

*It doesn't matter what I look like. He's already married.*

William returns with my suitcase, tosses it onto the couch, and begins rifling through the contents.

"Hey!" I protest.

He ignores me, digging all the way to the bottom. "There's not a single sweater or sweatshirt in here!" Raising an eyebrow, he holds up a bikini top. "Were you planning to do a Polar Bear Plunge in Lake Mercury?"

"I was trying to tell you before...I'm packed for a two-week Caribbean cruise. My plane detoured through Charlotte, so I thought I'd pop by Mercury Ridge. A quick pitstop, you know?"

Sierra frowns. "A pitstop? The airport is over four hours away!"

William's eyes meet mine and so much electricity crackles between us that I'm surprised the lights on the Christmas tree

don't explode.

*Does he know why I'm here?*

Headlights flood the room through the window. Sierra pops up with the baby. "Romeo is here!"

A few moments later, Romeo bursts through the front door, seizing Sierra by the waist and pulling her in for a passionate kiss.

I'm stunned for a second before realizing what I'd missed until now: Sierra isn't married to William. She's married to his brother, *Romeo*. And the baby must be William's niece.

I laugh with relief, watching as Romeo turns his attention to his little girl, cooing at her softly. William turns his attention back to the fire.

Romeo notices me then, his eyes widening with recognition. They're the same shade of brown as William's, and my breath hitches in my throat. It can't be helped. The Jones brothers have always been too handsome for their own good, with dark hair, dark eyes, and lean bodies. Even as teens, they were well-developed for their age.

*Very well-developed*, I think, as memories of William's glorious body swim to the forefront of my mind. I feel a blush creeping up my neck as I watch him squat to stoke the fire. His flannel shirt stretches across his shoulders, highlighting the rippling muscles of his back.

*And he's single...? So, he could be mine...*

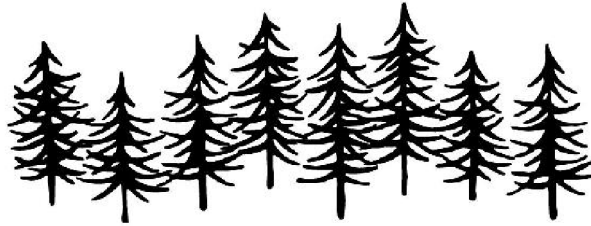
“I remember you,” Romeo says, his lips pinched into a straight line. “You and William dated when we were teens, right?”

*Dated.* It seems like such a small word for what William and I shared. Our feelings had been deeper than Lake Mercury once upon a time.

But as my eyes shift to William once again—I can’t seem to look away from him—I have to wonder: did those feelings ever go away?

Or were they just lying beneath the surface all along, waiting for an opportunity to flicker back to life?

# FIVE



## WILLIAM

SIERRA TRIES TO PUSH my brother out the door, with no success. Then she says, “You have better things to do than meddle in your brother’s life, Romeo Jones.”

“Like what?” he grumbles.

“Like pleasuring your wife.”

That does the trick. Romeo sprints to the pickup truck like he’s Usain Bolt, dragging Sierra by the hand behind him.

My heart swells with more affection for Sierra than I’ve ever felt before, which is saying a lot, since I already love her like a sister. Not only has she made my brother a very happy man, but she’s given me my first niece, too. Two wonderful things, of course, but they pale in comparison to the gift she’s just given me.

After twenty-three years, I’m alone with Carly Ormsbee.



*It's a goddamn Christmas miracle.*

Without thinking, I kneel in front of her again, pushing her hair out of her face. “We should get you out of those wet clothes,” I whisper, licking my lips. “I can loan you a sweatshirt and sweatpants.”

Suddenly, her dark blue eyes burn with passion. “If that’s what you want.”

*What I want?*

“Forget the clothes,” I growl.

I press my lips to hers, rough and intense, kissing her with the pent-up passion of more than twenty years. Just as I start to worry that I’m kissing her too roughly, she reciprocates in kind, tangling her hands in my hair and grinding her body against me.

A warning bell chimes in the back of my mind. As Romeo pointed out, we’ve been down this road before, and it ended in heartbreak.

*My heartbreak.*

Carly was only in my life for one summer, and then she left, and I never heard from her again...until today.

But Jesus, she’s French kissing me now, effectively shutting off any warning bells. There’s no room for rational thought with her tongue in my mouth. Nothing else matters. An asteroid could obliterate the planet right now, and I wouldn’t even notice. I’d die a happy man.

As if reading my mind, Carly kisses me even deeper, her tongue sliding over mine. I shove the blankets off her shoulders, making a nest of sorts on the ground, and push her into the middle of it. A soft bed, a roaring fire, a delicious woman...

My life has never been better.

My cock has never been harder.

She groans into my mouth, and I shove my hands beneath the hem of her damp shirt. I'm desperate to feel her up, but her flesh is so icy. I rest a palm on her abdomen. "These wet clothes have to go. *Now.*"

Carly kicks off her shoes and I start making work of removing her wet clothing. She helps, shrugging off her jacket moments before I yank her sweater over her head. As I tug off her jeans, she unsnaps her bra, releasing her magnificent tits.

I stare at her in awe, taking in all the exposed flesh. Only the tiniest strip of cotton panties separates me from the honeypot.

She's a goddess from a Botticelli masterpiece. Soft, curvy perfection, from her thick thighs to her fleshy hips to her soft stomach. *And let's not forget those unbelievable breasts...*

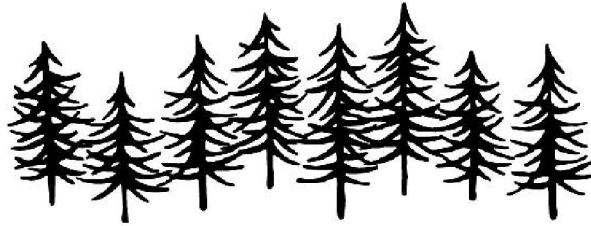
"You're so beautiful," I whisper.

She laughs softly. "Are you just going to look, Jones? Or are you going to make good on your promise to warm me up?"

I push her knees apart, spreading her wide for my viewing pleasure. "Oh, I'll warm you up soon enough. But first, I'm

absolutely going to admire the view.”

# SIX



## CARLY

DESPITE MY TAUNTING, I'M already hot enough to spontaneously combust. And if he doesn't press his flesh against mine soon, I'm in real danger of bursting into flame.

After a minute of just looking at me—and driving me wild with desire—he slides a single finger underneath my panties. Slowly, he traces the length of my slit, making my whole body tremble.

“Beautiful,” he murmurs. “So fucking beautiful.”

I melt on the spot, a limp puddle of neediness. Desperate for release, I beg him to touch me again. “Please, William, *more...* pretty, pretty please.”

He chuckles. “Let me look for just another minute.”

“You're driving me insane,” I whine.

He sits up so I can see his rock-hard erection. *And oh, my...I want that. I want that NOW.* I reach out a hand to touch him, but he moves away, the corners of his eyes crinkling with laugh lines.

“Not yet, sweetheart,” he murmurs. “I just wanted you to see that you’re driving me insane, too.”

Unable to bear another second of this agony, I slide my own hand between my legs, pressing down on my clit with a forefinger.

William laughs. “I’m not sure whether to complain that you’re blocking the view or to beg you to let me watch you pleasure yourself. But first...” He hooks his thumbs around the waistband of my underwear and slides them down. “Mmmmm,” he moans. “That’s better. *Now* touch yourself.”

So, I do. Because there’s not a thing in this world that I’d deny William Jones.

And it’s fucking *amazing*, having his eyes glued to my pussy while I dip my fingers inside, knowing that I’m driving him out of his mind while enjoying my own pleasure. I’ve never felt more powerful. Like a fucking sex goddess.

I’ve never experienced anything like this. William was the best lover of my life, but we never did this as teenagers, always too whipped into a frenzy for much foreplay.

“Keep doing that,” William commands, lowering his head to join forces with my fingers.

The sensation of his tongue lapping at my fingers and folds takes things to a whole other level. I gasp, so close to the edge that I can barely stand it. I move my hands to his hair, bucking against his face. He nuzzles against me, and his beard scratches against my thighs, adding another layer of sensation to my overwhelmed nervous system.

He sucks my clit between his teeth and my breath comes in raspy gasps. The pressure builds, and I climb higher, and higher still, until I punch through the edge of the most powerful orgasm of my life. Like Willy Wonka's glass elevator shattering through the ceiling, I'm gone, so far above the clouds that I may never come back down.

William Jones is a drug, and I've overdosed.

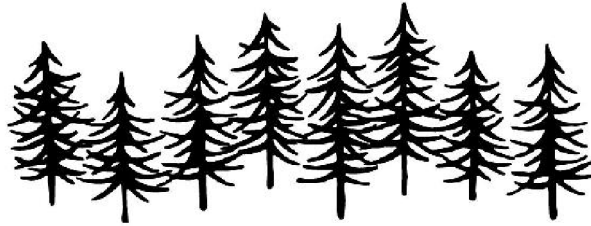
Just as I accept that I'm lost to reality forever, and will never return to earth, I do.

And William is there, waiting for me, the sweetest expression of satisfaction and pride etched on his face.

"Fuck me," I whisper. "Please."

And without a moment's hesitation, William Jones, generous man that he is, buries his cock inside me.

# SEVEN



## CARLY

SUNLIGHT STREAMS THROUGH THE bedroom window, and I roll over, turning my back to the light. Just a few more minutes of sleep would be fantastic.

William and I haven't been getting a lot of sleep this week. Stretching my fingers and toes, I marvel at my newfound awareness of every last inch of my body.

And it's all because of William—and his desire to work over my entire body with his tongue, his fingers, and his glorious cock.

For the past week, we've made love at least twice a day, and usually three or four times. Neither of us can get enough of the other.

It's like we're making up for twenty years of lost time.

I stare at his muscled chest, and down to the patch of hair that leads straight down to his...

“Did you just lick your lips?” he asks.

My eyes dart up to his face, which is currently stretched into a grin. “I thought you were still asleep.”

“Tell me what you were thinking, dirty girl.”

“Why don’t I show you, instead?”

I shift the sheets, exposing his long, hard cock. This time when I lick my lips, I make sure it’s an exaggerated gesture since I know he’s watching.

I slide down in the bed and take him into my mouth. He’s so big that I nearly gag, but I know he loves it when I take him deep into my throat—and, truth be told, I love it, too.

After he comes, I lay my head on his chest, listening to the beat of his heart. William strokes my hair, and I feel like this is exactly where I’m meant to be. Where I *belong*.

“How long will you stay with me?” he whispers into my hair. His voice is so quiet that I feel the question more than I hear it.

My heart thunders in my chest. I’ve been in Mercury Ridge for just over a week and the topic of our marriage pact hasn’t come up yet.

Nor has the topic of kids.

We haven’t been using protection, and I can’t help but worry that William thinks I’m on the pill. I never said I was,



and he never asked. But maybe it's just assumed that forty-year-old child-free women have mastered the ability to prevent pregnancy?

Then again, he may just think I'm too old to get knocked up. The odds of a natural pregnancy at my age are very low, indeed. At my last physical, my doctor told me there was less than a five percent chance. And even if I do get pregnant, the chance of a miscarriage is extremely high.

If William agrees to try to have children with me, we need to get started on fertility treatments right away. It's something I need to bring up, and soon; I just haven't had the guts. After all, I'm not even sure he remembers our marriage pact.

"How long do you want me to stay?" I ask.

"Forever." He says it so absolutely, without hesitation, that my breath hitches.

"Forever is a long time."

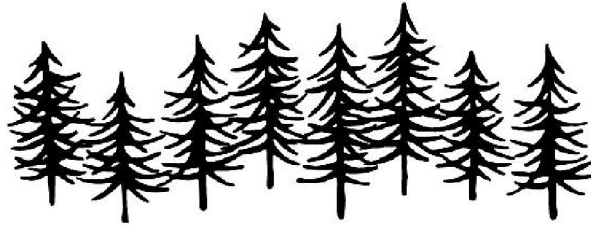
"And it still wouldn't be long enough with you, beautiful."

*I love you.* I want to say the words, but I can't. Not yet. Not when there's so much on the line.

"Let's give it one more week together," I whisper. "We can reassess then."

"Deal," William says. "Now get over here and ride me like a Harley."

# EIGHT



## WILLIAM

I WAIT FOR ROMEO at the trailhead to our favorite stretch of the Appalachian Trail. It's almost five-thirty in the morning, and the wintry air is crisp and cold on my skin. Once we're hiking, we'll warm up quickly, but right now, the air is bone-chilling.

All I have to do to warm up is think of Carly. I woke up before my alarm this morning to find her hand wrapped around my cock. After she finished me off, she said, "I just wanted to start your day right."

The woman is a goddess.

And this time, I'm not going to let her go without a fight.

When we were teens, we fell hard and fast, but we weren't stupid. We knew that teenagers shouldn't make life-changing commitments at such a young age. And we both had big plans

for the future. She wanted to make a career in art, and to live in a city. Her home life wasn't great, bouncing from foster home to foster home, and she hated having to depend on others. So, she vowed to someday be able to take care of herself.

I had the opposite problem—too many people depended on *me*. I couldn't love my siblings more, but it wasn't easy being the oldest Jones kid after my mom's death. Dad was wrecked, and I had to step up to help care for all of them—including Macbeth, who was just a baby at the time.

I didn't have as clear a vision for my life as Carly did, but I knew I needed to leave Mercury Ridge for a while. To spread my wings and go to college. Odds were, I'd end up back in town, working at the marina with my dad, and I was fine with that. But I felt I owed it to myself to try something different first.

But there was one thing we both agreed on. We didn't want to end up like her foster mom or my dad: old and alone. They both seemed so lonely. Dad still hadn't gotten over Mom's death. And Carly's foster mom had never married at all.

So, we made a pact that when we were really old, we'd marry each other. Then we'd have someone to spend our final years with. We chose forty as the age because it seemed so far into the future. In our minds, forty meant death's door.

I've never forgotten our deal. I won't go as far as to say I've been waiting on Carly to come back. But I have compared every woman to her for my entire life. And after my fortieth

birthday, I started to fantasize that she'd remember our pact, and show up on my doorstep.

But it was just a fantasy. I never thought she'd really come back to Mercury Ridge.

I thought she'd forgotten about me long ago. But here we are at forty, both single, and both in Mercury Ridge, at least for the time being.

And thank you, Lord, the sex is ah-mazing.

What more could a guy want?

"You look like a man lost in thought," Romeo says, arriving at the trailhead for our morning hike.

"Or a man in love?" I ask.

Romeo sighs. "In love, eh? Is she going to stick around this time? Because I remember how devastated you were when she left."

"I'm going to try my best to make her stay. I'm planning to give her Mom's ring at the block party tonight." As the eldest, I inherited Mom's engagement ring when she died.

"I can't pretend like you haven't been happier this week than I've ever seen you," Romeo says. "And after waiting for years for Sierra to come back to me, I know how it feels to suddenly have the woman of your dreams back in your life."

I stare at my brother's profile. Romeo is closest to my age, but the reason I told him about my proposal plans before anyone else is because I knew he'd get it. Like Carly, Sierra

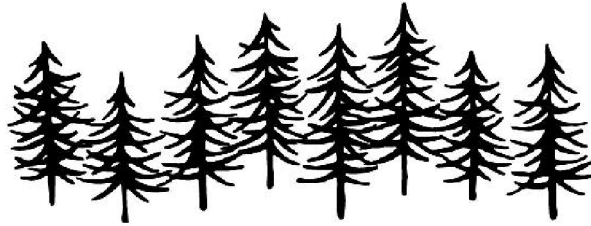
left Mercury Ridge without a backward glance—or so we'd thought.

Theo and Hamlet have both fallen head over heels for wonderful women, too, but they didn't reunite with long-lost loves like Romeo and me.

“Will you be my best man?” I ask.

“You know you don't even have to ask, brother.”

# NINE



## CARLY

WALKING HAND-IN-HAND WITH WILLIAM down Main Street, I've never felt happier. It feels almost too good to be true.

The small town of Mercury Ridge sure knows how to dress up for the holidays. There's a massive Christmas tree set up in the middle of the town square, lit with thousands of twinkle lights, and hundreds of shiny ornaments. The light posts and street signs have all been twined with garland. And every store front is adorned with a big, red bow or a Christmas wreath.

Street vendors have set up, selling local crafts, hand-painted Christmas ornaments, and yummy foods. And a band plays on a stage next to the big Christmas tree.

It's like a scene from a Hallmark movie.

*I could live here. I want to live here.*

The fortune in my cookie had been right: *Your answer waits in the mountains.*

I thought William had been the answer, but it was more than that.

He'll be the perfect husband, and goodness knows I couldn't ask for a better man to father a child for me.

But I've fallen back in love with Mercury Ridge, too. The town is lovely, and so are the people. It's the perfect place to raise a child.

Even William's dogs are growing on me. I've never been a fan of dogs, but I've been forcing myself to spend at least an hour a day with them on the porch. I've even petted their tummies with my feet—but that's as far as it goes, for now.

But I believe William when he says they're harmless, and I know it's probably good for kids to grow up with dogs. If I'd had one—or any pet at all—maybe I wouldn't be so afraid of them. It's ridiculous that I can run a multi-million dollar company but scramble up a tree at the sight of a couple of dogs.

William pulls me over to a hot chocolate station. Pouring me a mug, he waits patiently while I roll up a coat sleeve to free a hand. Since I hadn't packed warm clothes, I had to borrow a wool peacoat from William. It fits well—except for the sleeves, which are several inches too long.

Yesterday, William brought home a gift for me: a knitted hat with matching gloves and scarf from a local knitter. They're so

warm and cozy. And the gift felt so...*loving*. William's never said the words, not even when we were teens, but they hang in the air, unsaid.

I'll bring up the marriage pact eventually. For now, it's enough to be out in public with this wonderful man by my side. I'm the luckiest girl in the world.

"Oh!" he exclaims, "there's my brother, Theo. Let's go say, 'hello.'"

Theo was still a kid when William and I were last together. Now, he's tall, strong, and kissing a very pregnant blonde on the cheek.

The woman has walked away before we approach. "Where's Holly off to?" William asks after the brothers embrace.

"She's manning the Sweet Mercury tent tonight."

"Holly's a baker," William informs me.

"A very talented one," Theo amends with pride in his voice. "She sells her cupcakes in grocery stores and bakeries throughout the state. And she has plans to expand her business to include other dessert items. She just needs to get some of the business stuff figured out, like logos and marketing materials."

"That's what I do!" I say cheerfully. "I'm a graphic designer."

"She owns one of the largest firms in the world," William says, and this time it's *his* voice that's bursting with pride.



“I do,” I admit, “but I’d like to delegate more tasks to my staff and focus on grassroots campaigns again. I miss the design process.”

Theo smiles warmly. “I know Holly would appreciate your help. Let me introduce you...I’m sure we can hook you up with a free cupcake, too. Mind if I steal your lovely date for a minute?” Theo asks William.

“Not at all,” William says. “I’ll wait here. I know how crowded that cupcake tent gets.”

After introducing me to his beautiful wife, Theo excuses himself to return to William’s side. “We’ll be talking about you,” he tells us with a wink.

Holly and I roll our eyes, chatting easily together. The Jones clan seems to have no problem welcoming me into their fold. After a lifetime without a family, it’s...nice. *Really* nice.

When I leave the cupcake tent, I’m not holding a free cupcake. Nope. Holly’s given me a box of six of the most exquisite cupcakes I’ve ever seen, each one a masterpiece that looks too good to be eaten.

I return to William and Theo, excited to share the cupcakes. But I stop short when I see Theo pat William on the back.

“You’re going to propose? That’s great!” he exclaims.

William nods, and says, “She’s beautiful. She’s smart. She’s talented. I’d be lucky to have her.”

I nearly drop the cupcakes in shock. *William is going to propose?!*

I hadn't pictured anything as romantic as a *proposal*. I thought one of us would just mention our pact, and that'd be that.

"What about kids? Are they on the agenda, too?"

"No kids," William says firmly.

*No kids...?* The words sink in. William doesn't want kids. An overwhelming sense of loss washes over me. I'd had my heart set on having at least one child.

Theo looks at his brother with his head tilted. "I always assumed you wanted kids, eventually."

"In case you haven't noticed, I'm *forty*."

Theo shrugs. "Forty isn't so old."

William laughs. "Tell that to my tired eyes. I have to carry reading glasses in my pocket now. I'm an old man, kid."

"You really don't want kids?"

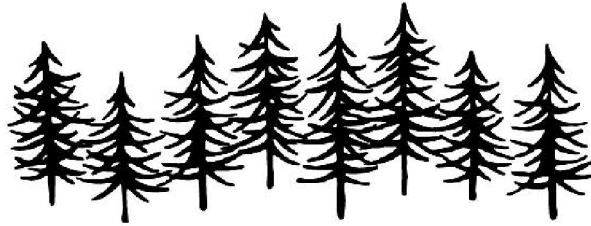
"Not with Carly."

*Not. With. Carly.* The words hit me square in the chest like a punch from a heavyweight boxer.

Theo says something else, but my heart is pounding hard enough now to drown out their conversation.

*William might want kids...but not with me.*

# TEN



## WILLIAM

AFTER CARLY FAILS TO return from the cupcake stand, I go looking for her.

“Have you seen Carly?” I ask Holly.

“We talked about an hour ago,” Holly responds as she hands a cupcake to a little boy. “She’s lovely, William. And not just because she volunteered to help me grow my business,” she says, grinning at me.

“An hour ago?” I ask, not returning her smile.

A woman in line overhears our conversation. “Is Carly the pretty woman you were walking with earlier?”

I look at the woman. She looks vaguely familiar, with gray hair and kind eyes, but I can’t place her. “Yes, ma’am.”

“I saw her leave with a man a little while ago. He had dark hair, like yours, so I assumed it was you. My eyes aren’t as young as they once were.”

“You and me both,” I say, recalling the conversation I just had with Theo. “Thank you, ma’am.”

Trying to tamp down the panic rising in my chest, I sprint out of the cupcake tent.

*She left with a man? Who? Why? Was she abducted?*

I know there’s no reason to jump to that conclusion. The woman hadn’t mentioned any signs of a struggle. Nevertheless, the thought is there, taking space in my brain, and leaving little room for rational thought.

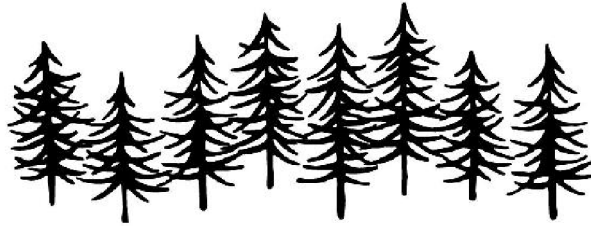
I spot a familiar redheaded woman with a baby in the crowd. “Sierra!” Running over to join her, I quickly tickle my niece under the chin the way she likes and ask Sierra if she’s seen Carly.

Sierra frowns in confusion. “Yes. She said she had a headache and asked if Romeo could take her back to your place. I thought you knew...?”

“A headache?” She’d seemed fine before. And I hadn’t moved from my spot with Theo. Why hadn’t she just asked me for a ride home?

Something is wrong. Very, very wrong.

# ELEVEN



## WILLIAM

I SLAM ON THE gas pedal, winding up the mountain faster than I should. But I know in my gut that Carly's leaving me.

Again.

And I have to at least try to stop her.

*What went wrong?*

Everything was going so well. Holding hands with her on Main Street, waiting for the perfect moment to kneel on one knee and ask her to marry me.

Had she sensed the proposal coming? Is that why she left?

*Maybe she doesn't want to get married. Not to me, anyway.*

I meet Romeo, driving from the opposite direction. He slows to a stop, rolling down his window, but I blow right by him. I'll talk to him later. Right now, I need to talk to Carly.

When I pull into the driveway, she's sliding into the driver's seat of her rental car. Her eyes grow wide, and she cranks the key in the ignition, causing the engine to roar to life.

Quickly, I throw the truck into reverse to block her from leaving. I leap out of the truck, vaguely aware of the sound of tires on gravel. Someone else is coming up the drive now.

But it doesn't matter. Nothing matters. Nothing except Carly.

I stomp over to her, rapping my knuckles on her window. She stares straight ahead, ignoring me.

"Carly, roll down the window. We need to talk."

She shakes her head, still staring straight ahead.

Romeo parks his truck behind mine and swings the door open. "What's going on?"

Ignoring him, I yell at Carly, "I'll bust the window if I have to."

"Whoa," Romeo says, grabbing my arm. "Calm down, brother."

I shake free of him. "Go away, Romeo. This is between me and my fiancée."

That gets Carly's attention. She turns her face to look at me for the first time, cracking her window an inch. "What did you just call me?"

"My fiancée," I say through clenched teeth.

"That's funny," Carly says, "I don't recall getting engaged."

I pull the ring out of my pocket. “That’s because you took off before I could propose.”

She eyes the box, biting her lip. “I’m going home, William.”

“Home is right there,” I growl, pointing at the cabin.

Her eyes meet mine. “I’m going back to California.”

“Going to renege on our deal then? Because you made a promise to marry me, remember?”

“That’s why I came back to Mercury Ridge,” she admits.

“Then why are you leaving?”

“I heard you talking to Theo. You said you didn’t want to have a child with me.” Tears fill her eyes, and I feel my anger melt away. “I want children.”

I blink in confusion. “You do?”

“I want to at least try,” she says. “I know it’s a long shot at my age, even with fertility treatments. And if it doesn’t happen, well, it doesn’t happen. I could have been happy with just the two of us in that case. But I can’t be with you knowing what you think of me.”

“What are you talking about? I think the world of you!”

“You said you might have wanted kids...but not with me.” Her voice cracks with anguish.

“Open the door, Carly, please...we need to talk about this, face to face.” When she doesn’t open the door, I sag against it, leaning as close as I can to the tiny gap in the window. “*You*

said you didn't want kids, sweetheart. Back when we made the pact. Don't you remember?"

"What?" she says, sniffing. "No, I didn't."

"Yes, you did. I asked if you thought you'd ever want kids, and you said, 'No way. I want to be a brilliant, career-minded businesswoman. I won't have time for kids.' And you've done everything you said you would, babe. You *are* a brilliant businesswoman."

"Oh," she says, her voice barely a whisper. "Well...I've changed my mind."

"A woman's prerogative," Romeo mutters behind me.

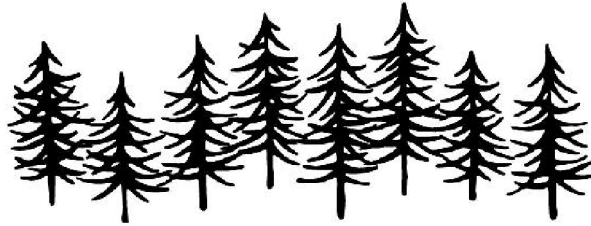
I stare straight into Carly's eyes but address my brother. "Romeo. Go home. My fiancée and I need privacy. We're going to make a baby."

Carly swings open the door and flings herself into my arms. "Do you mean it?"

"I love you, Carly Ormsbee. There's nothing I wouldn't give you."



# EPILOGUE



## CARLY

### ONE YEAR LATER

I struggle with the zipper of my coat, but it's no use. "It won't zip," I complain with a sigh. "*None* of my clothes fit anymore."

William grins. "That's what happens when you're carrying twins."

At the mention of the babies growing inside me, I can't help but smile. Despite our best efforts, we didn't end up making a baby the night William proposed. It took lots of fertility treatments and, ultimately, invitro fertilization. The price was high—both financially and emotionally—but it was worth it.

Standing on my tiptoes, I wrap my arms around my husband's neck. "Mr. Jones?"

"Yes, Mrs. Jones?"

“I think I’ll need to borrow a coat from you again this year.”

Chuckling, he plants a row of kisses along my jaw. “Okay... if we can find one that fits.”

I lean back, smacking him playfully. “Jerk.”

So, once again, I attend the Mercury Ridge Christmas festival snuggled inside one of William’s coats, feeling like the luckiest woman in the world.

And I owe it all to a fortune cookie.



**BE SURE TO READ the other books in the Christmas Cookie Challenge series:**

[\*Christmas Secret\*](#) by Hazel J. North, and

[\*Christmas Bet\*](#) by Emma Lynn Everly



**WANT MORE OF THE Heroes of Mercury Ridge?**

Read Romeo and Sierra’s story in [\*Mountain Man’s Regret\*](#)

Read Theo and Holly’s story in [\*Mountain Man’s Prize\*](#)

Read Hamlet and Annie’s story in [\*Mountain Man’s Desire\*](#).