

What happens on Valentine's Day  
Stays on Valentine's Day.

# Conversation Hearts



A SWEETBRIAR HEARTS SHORT STORY

NORA EVERLY

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# Nora Everly

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*To my readers,  
Happy Valentine's Day!*

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Stays on Valentine's Day.

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# Chapter 1

# You mocha me crazy.

Holly

**M**y sister was obsessed with holidays.

Even if they were total bull crap and manufactured by greeting card companies to make money off the desperate and lonely, it didn't matter, my big sister Violet loved them all.

“Aww, turn that frown upside down, Holly. Don't worry, be frappe-y! It's Valentine's Day and love is in the air! Can't you feel it?” Her maniacal laughter floated across the coffee shop, and I smiled in spite of myself. Had I mentioned she was now officially together with the love of her life and expecting a baby? *No?* Well, there you go.

The mood around here was cheery AF, and the coffee puns were never ending. Vi had finally got her happy back and her mood—while not quite infectious—was a joy to see. Nothing bothered her anymore, not even the lack of caffeine due to her pregnancy. It was a sight to behold. Like, I was happy for her. But, *come on*. Give a girl a break. Being single on Valentine's Day sucked.

“Smiling is not my favorite today, Vi. I deserve to be grumpy. I know I work for you, but as the last single sister in our little group of four, can I just say it's cruel that I have to hang up all this pink and red bullshit. Party or not, it's just mean.” Not only had Vi found love, Lily and Rose, my identical twin older sisters, had too. “And that doesn't even get into how I feel about the cynical, corporate, manipulative way Valentine's Day is celebrated—”

“I agree, it can be a bit overwhelming, and corporate and whatever, but that is irrelevant. I just want to eat chocolate and dance at my party. Cheer up, for me? Pretty please? I’ll bring you a pound of See’s Candy tonight. I’ll be your Valentine, Holly. You don’t need a man, I promise.”

“I know I don’t need a man to be happy. I’m totally happy and content. I’m delighted as hell to be back in Sweetbriar, okay? It’s just *this day*. I’ll always be on edge on Valentine’s Day. And for the record, I’m not fragile. I know what all of you think of me—”

“*Ugh*, you’re right, I’m sorry. I was hoping my party would make you forget about *him* and *that* and, uh, you know, just for a little while...”

“I practically left him at the altar, Vi. One doesn’t forget such things, okay? The guilt alone is enough to make me want to hide under my covers. The entire month of February is basically cursed for all eternity for me. I don’t want to talk about this anymore. And I will be expecting the See’s.”

“It’s time to forgive yourself. You should just talk to him.” An emphatic hand slapped the shop counter. “You didn’t ‘*runaway bride*’ him, you left him a letter and then you left town for what? Ten years so he wouldn’t have to run into you in town? Plus, he’s married now and happy too, he has five kids, Holly. And don’t worry about the See’s. I have a few boxes at home, for emergency chocolate cravings.” A slow, secret smile traced over her lips. “Jake picked them up for me when he was working at his Portland office last week.”

I shook my head. “Girl, do not let him get away.” I stopped my petulant pacing and returned to placing rosebud filled vases on top of heart-shaped doilies on top of Violet’s pink tables.

“I don’t plan on it. We’re getting married ASAP—probably at his cabin. So, don’t make plans for any weekend in the next month.”

“Way to be specific, Vi. But you’re in luck. I have zero plans and zero possibilities of making any if it’s not with someone who would be at your wedding.”

Her mouth quirked up in a smile. “Perfect.” Maybe I should let her good mood lift my spirits.

Violet owned the best coffee shop in Sweetbriar, Oregon and tonight was her annual Valentine’s Day mixer—otherwise known as her night to shine as one of the town’s most notorious matchmakers. Because of her pregnancy, she was taking it easy at work and as her temporary manager, I had to be here tonight, like it or not—and I didn’t. I was also the lucky sucker to add the finishing touches to the party décor. This place was brimming with hearts and flowers, love, good cheer, and pastel balloons designed to look like those ubiquitous candy conversation hearts. *Blech*. It was almost closing time, and the shop was empty, so I was free to go full grouch.

“Is there a Valentine’s Day equivalent to mistletoe?” she asked while aiming a quizzical smile my way.

“I don’t think so. I guess we could tell people to kiss under the conversation heart balloons—” I let one go and it floated to the ceiling. “What do you think? The ribbons dangle down, just like mistletoe.”

“Love it! I’m going to write it on the chalkboard outside.”

“Wait. Are you sure about this? People are lonely on Valentine’s Day and horny too. Do you really want to encourage that kind of vibe tonight? Like, people might try to hook up in your bathroom, or sneak into the back room.”

“This is Sweetbriar! No one will do that. It’s just innocent fun. It’ll be fine.”

“Freakin’ awesome,” I muttered. On the bright side, I no longer had to arrange the balloons artfully, they were now free floating up against the ceiling with their ribbons hanging below, just waiting for some poor fool to wander beneath.

Her hands hit her hips. “Oh, come on. Do you want to fall in love again? Everyone wants to find love, right? It’s universal.” She huffed with her head tilted in mock annoyance. “I could help you with that if you like. I’m very good at what I

do, as you know. And if you doubt me, I can point out all the matches I've made when they arrive at my party tonight."

"I'm not ready for that yet. But you know what? I've never been in real love. I know it now. Maybe someday I'll be as giddy as you are. Never say never, right?"

"That's the spirit!" Her eyes drifted past me to the shop's front door. "Rethink the 'not being ready' thing for me. How about today? It's Valentine's Day, please?" She pressed her hands together, pleading with me like a kid.

*Ding.*

"No," I mouthed, shaking my head. "No way. Not today." We were in the rear of the shop, in the corner by the sofa and my back was to the door. Thankfully, he was out of earshot.

"*Gah!* You're such a big poop." Her teasing was affectionate. I knew she wouldn't push me into anything I wasn't ready for.

"Nice, Vi. It's him, isn't it?" I hissed as my breath caught and my pulse raced out of control in anticipation of a Liam dopamine hit. I fought the urge to run to the bathroom mirror to check myself before he could see me.

"When you get home, you need to meditate, recharge your crystals or burn some sage, whatever it is you do to adjust your aura into a better mood for the party. It's just a day. It doesn't mean anything. I'm only half making fun of you by the way—and yep, it's him."

I shivered with the knowledge that my favorite eye candy was in the doorway. "Very funny," I whispered. "But now that you mention it, Mercury *is* in retrograde, and my favorite rose quartz pendulum has gone missing—"

"Good afternoon, ladies. You're open, right?"

"Yep, and you're always welcome here even when we're closed, Liam. The usual?" Vi asked as she strode to the counter.

"Yes, please. Hey, Holly."

“Hi.” I had to hold in my sigh as I turned around to greet him.

His eyes drifted around the shop. “It looks great in here. Can I do anything to help?”

My eyes longed to wander but I managed to hold them steady on his face, which was not easy because Liam was a sight to behold. He was six feet six inches of heavily muscled former Army Ranger hotness and I swear, he was so damn sexy he smoldered.

I had met him a few months ago when I came back to town—long story—and had been not-quite-crushing on him ever since. If I allowed myself to talk to him for more than five minutes at a time I’d definitely have it bad (okay, dang it, *worse*) for him. I’d been lusting after him for months, along with every other single woman in town. He was just too good-looking to be real.

“Did the balloons get away from you?” He reached up and snagged a ribbon. “Need help getting them down?”

Violet turned from the rear counter where she was preparing his latte. “Nope. Think of the balloons like mistletoe. If you end up under one with someone, then you have to kiss.”

“Ahh, I see.” He answered without looking at her, he only had eyes for me today, it seemed. “But not until tonight, right?” He handed me the balloon with a wink then turned to meet Vi at the counter.

“Right...” I breathed. *Hot damn.*

With a shake of my head, I let go of the ribbon and rushed to Violet’s office to hide and *not* create another elaborate Liam fantasy in my head. I needed to gather my wits if I was going to survive the party without giving him the wrong signals.

# Chapter 2

# Where have you been all my life?

Liam

**M**aybe one day I'd ask her out. But today was not that day. The thought that I shouldn't even try with her held me back. Nerve or lack thereof had never stopped me whenever I was interested in a woman in the past, but Holly was different. My best friend was married to her older sister. And while he wasn't related to her by blood, they'd grown up together and he'd always been a big brother to her. A guy was supposed to stay away from his best friend's little sister, or in this case, sister-in-law, but that wouldn't matter to Luke, he was protective no matter what. Plus, over the last few months, I'd grown close to her family, they'd taken me in like one of their own, and putting that at risk would be stupid.

But, damn, she was gorgeous and the brief glimpses I'd seen of her personality whenever I could get a word out of her had me intrigued. She was funny and cute. I couldn't help myself, I wanted to know her better.

Why did I have to meet who could quite possibly be the perfect woman for me now? I didn't have any business being with her.

Violet's voice startled me out of my morose thoughts about her sister and I flinched. "You're coming tonight, right?"

"Huh?" Holly's nearness had me flustered, like usual.

"To my party, silly. You'll be here tonight?"

I shot her a grin. "Wouldn't miss it, Vi." Yeah, only because I knew Holly would be there. Otherwise, hell no.



Being around a bunch of people on Valentine's Day as a single guy was not my idea of a good time, in fact, it sounded like a nightmare.

“Yay!”

The warm glow of Violet's good mood buoyed mine and I let out a chuckle. “I'm glad you're so happy. You deserve it.”

She turned serious. “You deserve it too. Happiness, that is.” Her eyes flicked briefly to Holly as she came through the swinging door that led to the back of the shop. “And I've made it my mission to see that you get it.”

An array of feelings skidded through my mind at her words, running from thankful to trepidation—*was she planning something?* I chose to settle on thankful. “Thank you. You're one of the people who have made me feel at home in Sweetbriar, it means a lot.”

“Good. I hope you know you're never leaving. You're one of us now.” She slid my takeout cup and bag across the counter. “I'll see you tonight. Wear something pretty,” she teased.

“I'll do my best. Bye, Vi.” Unable to help myself, I turned for one more look at Holly before I left. “See you later, Holly.” I almost winked but ended up hiding it behind an excessively long blink which probably made me look like an awkward freak.

I crossed the parking lot to my office, shaking my head along the way. *Not* flirting with her was getting more and more difficult, almost impossible.

“Hey,” Luke greeted me as I entered the building. The office for McCabe Construction was where I'd spent most of my days since arriving in Sweetbriar. Luke and I were Army buddies and both medically discharged after we had fallen under attack in Afghanistan. He hired me at his family's construction business, giving me a direction I'd desperately needed, and I'd been here ever since.

“If I'd known you were still around, I would have grabbed you a coffee too.”

“No worries. I have to head home and get ready for Vi’s party. Lily wants us to coordinate our clothes.”

I raised an eyebrow; he did not look even one bit annoyed at the prospect of wearing matching outfits with his wife. “You’re cool with that?”

He shrugged with a grin. “Don’t tell anyone, but I’ll do anything for that woman, and I don’t give a shit what it is either. If she says jump, I’ll ask her how high and if I can grab her a drink on the way down. So no, I don’t mind. Besides,” a slick grin spread across his face, “she likes me in a suit. She probably just picked up a tie to match her dress or something. No big deal.”

My brows drew together. “We have to dress up for this?” I had a suit, I hadn’t worn it in forever, not since my grandmother’s funeral, but at least I owned one.

“It’s a mixer, dude. Dancing, champagne, no kids will be there, shit like that, so yeah, definitely dress up. Oh, and warning—Lily said Violet uses it for recon. She likes to meddle.”

“Meddle?”

“She’s a matchmaker, just like her mom. One thing you have to know about this town is it’s small, people are nosy, and Violet and Dahlia are the worst out of all of them.”

“Great,” I muttered, sipping my coffee.

“I’m married and loyal. *I* have nothing to worry about. *You*, on the other hand? Single, former Army Ranger with an addiction to working out—” His mouth quirked with humor. “How tall are you again?”

“Six, six,” I grumbled.

“Oh yeah, you’re doomed,” he declared. “It’s only a matter of time before they start trying to fix you up.”

“Fucking great...” I repeated.

“It’ll be all right. I’ll have your back like always.”

“Thanks, man. I appreciate it but this is not quite like one of our missions back in the day.”

“It’s still no problem. You come find me and Lily tonight if they try to force you to dance with one of Vi’s hot friends and we’ll protect you.”

I flopped back onto the lobby’s sofa and tossed my takeaway bag on the coffee table. “You’re hilarious.”

His eyes were alight with sympathy when they met mine. “Seriously though, you’ve had a tough year. Come find me anytime you need me. I mean that.”

“I know you do, and I swear I’m almost past the doom and gloom. I’m feeling much better—”

“You know there’s no rush, right? We’re going to have plenty of good days but it’s okay to have bad ones too. I told you coming here would work out for us. Now, tell me I’m right, you know how much I like to hear it.”

“You were right,” I admitted with a chuckle. “About everything.”

“Stick with me. We’re going to be fine. I’ll see you later on.” He flicked out two fingers in a wave then left.

I should go home and get ready too. But I found myself mindlessly sipping coffee and staring out the window instead as I thought of tonight and how I should be around Holly. And wondering why I had to be so hopelessly interested in a woman I could never have.

It was safer to stay away from her entirely, I decided as I made my way outside to my car to leave.

# Chapter 3

# Relationship status: It's caffeinated.

Holly

“Yo, Holly is that you?”

“Yeah,” I shouted as I slammed through the front door of my twin little brothers’ townhouse. I felt like such a loser for couch surfing with them. They had it together far more than I did, sure they couldn’t cook worth a damn and were always mooching meals at our parent’s house, but they were gainfully employed as firefighters, and they had their own place which was more than I could say for myself at the moment. “Jude?”

“Nah, he’s at work.”

I followed the voice to find Levi in the kitchen—and okay, my brothers weren’t “little” anymore, just younger by a little over a year. Since age twelve, they had each towered over me by at least six inches. “Are you going to Vi’s tonight?”

“Hell no,” he muttered, popping his head out from behind the refrigerator door. “You should go to the store. I never know what to buy and we are out of everything.”

I shrugged. “Get whatever you like to eat, duh. Just because I’m a girl doesn’t mean I know how to cook. And, hello? Vi’s gonna be pissed if you miss her party.”

“Don’t care. And I like to eat home-cooked food, like, I don’t know, lasagna or a fucking meatloaf or something. I’m getting sick of sandwiches and frozen waffles. I don’t know shit about ingredients.”

“Well, I can’t help you. I made friends with the food carts when I got back into town and it’s getting pretty serious. I might actually be in a relationship with the fish and chips truck.”

“Oh yeah?” He smirked and I braced myself. That smirk had always meant he was about to drop an information bomb of some kind. “I heard you’d rather be in a relationship with Liam.”

My heart raced in alarm. “*Pfft*, no. Who said that?” I scoffed as I tried the casual approach. Levi had a strange ability to read people and I knew he’d figure out exactly how much I was interested in Liam if I gave him even half of a clue to go on.

“Little birdies named Lily, Rose, and Violet—our sisters. I think Mom may have mentioned it once or twice, Gram too and maybe Aunt Delphine and the cousins. In other words, watch your back tonight, you know they’ll be scheming to get you alone with him.”

“*Ugh*, frick. You’re lucky you can skip it. Violet gave me a job at the shop, I owe her. I can’t skip out on her; it wouldn’t be right. But, my god, Levi, she has the dangling balloon strings acting like mistletoe for eff’s sake. She’s in a love haze now that she’s with Jake. Since she’s happy again, no one is safe until the entire town is happy right along with her.”

“There will be no single person left to complain with after tonight if she has her way.”

“Right?” I looked at him expectantly.

He shook his head. “I’m still not going.”

“*Dammit!* Fine. I need a buffer, Levi. Come on, please? I’ll learn how to make Mom’s chicken pot pie, just for you...”

“Sorry, can’t do it. I have big plans, nothing but Netflix and probably pizza delivery is on deck for me tonight, maybe I’ll go to bed early, who knows?” His mouth spread into a snarky grin. “And we both know Marie Calendar makes Mom’s chicken pot pie. Even I can put frozen shit into the oven.”

“*Ugh*, Fine.” Fully regressing back to our childhood, I stomped my foot. “You’re so lucky.”

“Am I?” His eyes became unreadable before he turned away.

“Oh, Levi...”

“Have fun tonight, Holls.”

“Okay, but if you need to talk...”

“I don’t. I’m good.” His smile was not convincing, but I let him go into the living room without pushing him to spill his guts. I mean, I didn’t want to be pushed about my own feelings, why would I push someone else into speaking about theirs?

“I’m sorry,” I called over my shoulder as I headed into the bathroom to get ready for tonight.

“No worries,” he shouted back. “I’m fine.”

*Fine*. Yeah, right, If he was fine like I was fine, then we probably should just stay here and talk out our problems with each other tonight.

Alas, I did not have time for feelings and wise decisions. If I wanted to look hot tonight, I had to get started.

I stopped with my hand on the bathroom doorknob.

*Should I?*

*Would Liam like it if I wore a sexy dress and did myself up?*

*Did I really want to look hot and risk—?*

But was there really anything at risk? Or was I stuck in a one-sided crush?

Who was I kidding? Of course, I was going to show up looking hot. Life without risk was boring. Shoving the door open, I shrugged at my reflection in the mirror. I tried to wipe the cynical frown from my expression as I studied my face.

*Cat eye, bright pink lips, and beachy waves*. I decided as I turned on the taps to fill up the tub. *A tight dress, high heels,*

*and lots of cleavage, no wait, lots of leg instead...* I had the perfect minidress, hopefully, it wasn't wrinkled, I was living out of a suitcase here. I added bath oil to the water as I added to my running list of hot-girl essentials I needed for the evening. Maybe I should wear some lip gloss, if he kissed me under a balloon, I could turn his mouth pink and leave my mark on him.

With a sigh, I slid into the hot water, letting it wash away my trepidations. I should try to have fun tonight. I deserved a good time; I'd freaking earned it. And everyone knows, just like Vegas, what happens on a holiday, stays on that holiday. Maybe I'd cash in my holiday hall pass this year and get a kiss.

*Or more than a kiss?* I shivered, unable to deny the spark of excitement at the prospect. He was sexy with clothes on, so tall, so many muscles... I shut my eyes and allowed myself a moment to picture him without.

*Gah!*

Why do some decisions have to be so hard?

Or more to the point, why was the *right* decision so hard to stick to? I was not in a position to get involved with someone right now, not when my life was so unsettled. I was living with my brothers. Who in their right mind would want to come home in the morning after a hot date and be faced with their little brothers? No one, that's who. Not to mention the fact I could never bring anyone home with me, not until I could afford my own place. Which in Sweetbriar would be never. I'd need a roommate or a winning lottery ticket to afford even a studio apartment. Violet paid well, but let's face it, part-time at a coffee shop was not going to be enough and I was through with my travel blogging days. That money had run out months ago.

I pulled the plug in the tub and then grabbed my robe. "I'll be in Jude's room getting ready."

Of the two, Jude was less messy. He let me keep my suitcases in the corner of his closet. Stepping through the doorway to the small room, I considered moving back to my



parent's place but rejected the idea immediately. My mother was just too nosy to live with.

Blowing out a sigh, I dug through my clothes until I found what I needed. *Long-sleeved black body-con LBD, cut to mid-thigh*. It would be cold tonight, but who cared about that when I had Liam to impress? Losing myself in my fantasies, I let my imagination take over as I applied makeup and styled my hair. After slipping into a pair of four-inch black stilettos with little rhinestones near the toe, I grabbed my coat and bag and headed into the living room.

Jude had come home along with his friend Harper and her daughter Bella. "You look so pretty!" Bella got up and ran to me. She was about six years old and cute as a button. "You have princess shoes on! Can I wear them next time I come over?" She turned to Jude with an accusatory glare. "Your sister has diamonds on her shoes! Why didn't you tell me?"

It had been ages since I felt this good about myself. I couldn't help it; I beamed at her and twirled in a circle. There was something awesome about impressing a little kid. "Thank you! Of course, you can. And I have more than just these too. I'll dig them out of my storage unit and show you. You can play dress up if you want."

"Really? Do you have purple ones? Purple is my favorite color, just like my almost, great auntie Violet." Harper was Vi's fiancé Jake's niece, so she would become Bella's great aunt when they got married. Sweetbriar was just a small town after all.

"Yup, I'll bring them and some more dresses and put it all in Jude's closet."

He shook his head with a good-natured smile. "Great, I look forward to not being able to find my clothes."

"Don't be a poop, Jude," I scolded. "It's for Bella." *And for me*. I missed having a full wardrobe to choose from. "Your closet is half empty anyway. And why aren't you guys going to the party tonight?"

“We have Bella to take care of.” He shrugged. “And go ahead and hang your stuff up, I don’t mind.”

“Thanks. Well, I’m off. I guess.” Uncertainty washed over me, and I hesitated in place. I should go change into something more—well something different. This outfit was too much.

“Uh-uh, no. ma’am, you are not. Hold up. Wait.” Harper stood and led us to the front door. “Girl, do you have extra plans for tonight I need to know about?” She lowered her voice to a whisper. “Do you need to use my place?” I’d known Harper since we were little kids. She’d been best friends with Jude forever, we were also close.

“Gosh, no. But I appreciate the offer. I—I don’t know what got into me, I guess I just felt like looking nice for a change.” I shrugged. “I—”

Harper’s eyes lit up with sympathy. “I get it. Being lonely sucks, doesn’t it? And starting your life over is hard.”

“I mean, I’m not a tragedy or anything. I just needed a change. Drifting around for the blog wasn’t working for me anymore, you know? It’s time to put some roots down again.”

“Well, I for one, am so glad you’re back for keeps. I missed you. Sweetbriar wasn’t the same without you.”

“I missed you too.”

“Plus, let’s face it, that Liam is certainly a hot one. I can’t blame you for—”

“Hold on.” Caught off guard, I stiffened. “Wait a minute. Stop. What are you on about? Liam? I don’t—?”

“Ohhhhh.” Her lips pressed into a line as she fought laughter. “This is what we’re doing. Gotcha.” Her nod was sage as her lips quirked into a knowing grin. “The denial stage.”

I blew out a semi-annoyed, semi-exasperated breath and shook my head. “You’re a nut, Harper.”

“Have fun tonight, Holls. We’ll talk about this later.” She wagged her fingers at me as I slipped into my coat.

“Whatever, dude. Have fun with my brother tonight. Maybe we’ll talk about *that* later too.”

“Or maybe we can do the Sushi truck for lunch tomorrow and talk about everyone else instead?” She suggested with a light shrug.

“Add some Sake and make it dinner and we have a plan.”

“It’s a date.” Her mouth turned up with humor. “Bring your heels to my place to distract Bella and we’ll hang out.”

“You got it.” I hugged her and then headed to my car.

Minutes later I found myself sitting in my car in my spot behind Violet’s shop questioning every single decision I had made since I had gotten home. I couldn’t go in there like this. What had I been thinking? I was dressed for a night out at a fancy club, not a small-town coffee shop Valentine’s Day mixer. Jeez.

Fingernails tapping on the top of my car sent my heart racing. “Oh my god, you scared the heck out of me, Violet!” I cried as I opened the door and got out.

“Oh, girl! Look at you.” She flicked one side of my coat open. “It’s the infamous black dress, Harper told me you were wearing it. You’re freakin’ stunning, I’m so jealous of your legs. I love it! Come on, Jake is waiting inside, we’re just getting started.” She took my hand and tugged me toward the open back door. “I have a co-host for this party and I’m going to dance my ass off tonight! Woo hoo!”

“You are on another level of happiness, Vi. You’re transcendent and glowing and gorgeous. I have never seen anything like it.”

“I know, isn’t it great?”

“It really is. I’m so happy for you.”

“I’m happy for me too. Finn and Nick are even here!” Her twin sons had never attended this party before. They’d just turned seventeen, I guess she felt they were old enough.

“Oh good, I haven’t seen them since Mom’s Sunday dinner last week—”

“Violet, come out here and dance with me, gorgeous.” We heard the deep echo of her hubby-to-be call out from the front of the shop.

“It’s Jake!” She beamed at me. “You look brew-tiful, Hollyberry, have fun tonight.”

“I’ll try my best, words cannot espresso how happy I am to be here,” I deadpanned.

“Yay! You finally coffee punned and it’s a good one! I’m totally putting it on a shirt.” She dropped my hand like a hot potato and went flying through the double swing doors leading to the front of the shop to dive-bomb Jake.

“Catch you later,” I muttered. “Don’t worry about me, I’m totally fine...” Laughing to myself, I opened her office door to stow my bag and coat inside.

“Hey.”

“*Gah!*” I spun in the doorway to find my older, but tiny redheaded twin sisters, Lily and Rose standing on the other side. They creeped me out sometimes with their spooky mind-meld and affinity for acting like those weird twins from *The Shining* to freak our brothers out. “Quit looking at me like that.” I waved a hand in front of myself to ward off their heebie-jeebie vibes.

“Chill out, Holls. We’re not doing anything.” Rose laughed.

“Speak for yourself.” Lily side-eyed her. Then moved her unblinking dead-eyed gaze to mine. She didn’t look away until I flinched and took a step back. Her sense of humor took over and she laughed. “God, you’re too easy.”

“Whatever, Lil. You’re scary sometimes and you know it.”

She shrugged. “It’s a blessing and a curse. But seriously. Mom’s here and she’s up to no good. Remember Jarod Jamison? From back in high school.”

“Uh, yes. I remember him.” He had asked me to the homecoming dance all four years, and it hadn’t mattered to him that I had a boyfriend all through school either. He was

persistent but not in a rude way. He'd always struck me as cute and kind of innocent, a nice guy.

"Well, he's here and Mom wants to fix you up with him."

"Isn't his dad the mayor now?"

"Yep," Rose answered. "And she's besties with his mom too."

"*Blech*," I grumbled. "He's nice, but I'm not in the mood for this right now."

"That's why we snuck back here, to warn you." Rose lowered her voice, being purposefully mysterious.

"Yeah, creeping you out in Violet's poorly lit back room was just a bonus," Lily nudged my side.

"Glad I could amuse you,"

"Rosalie!" The booming voice of Rose's hot-cop hubby rang through the air.

"It's fine," I teased. "Go on. Don't worry about me."

Lily laughed. "Aww, don't worry I'll keep you company. Luke and Liam are at a table in front, we'll go up and sit with them."

Trevor pushed through the door brandishing the ribbon of one of the conversation heart balloons in his fist. "Check this out."

Rose giggled. "Cute balloon, Trev."

"They're supposed to be like mistletoe. You kiss under them." He took two big steps and swept her into his arms. "Me, you, and this balloon, baby—the three of us are going to the sofa in the corner and staying there all night."

"God, I love you." She threw her arms around his neck as he shifted her higher on his chest like a bride.

His reply was muffled by her lips, but it sounded something like "*Gumph lumph yumph too*".

"Newlyweds." Lily sighed. "Too cute" Her mouth curved into a nostalgic smile as she gently shook her head.

I looked down at her to agree but stopped short. “Girl, just what in the heck are you wearing?”

She smoothed her hands down over the sides, then let them rest on her baby bump. “It’s a Valentine’s Day cardigan. Isn’t it the cutest thing ever?”

My nose wrinkled up despite my hopeless quest to find something nice to say. “Yeah, I mean, it’s something. I didn’t know ugly Valentine’s Day sweaters were a thing.”

Her gasp was outraged. “It’s not ugly! I’ll have you know I made this myself.”

“I’m sorry.” My shoulders shrugged up. “Okay...”

It was bright red. There was fringe. And appliqued conversation hearts. Pastel sequins glittered in the dim overhead light of the storage room. It was hideous but I was not about to argue with someone who may be legally blind or at the very least in severe need of an appointment with an optometrist and a new pair of glasses.

“Well?” Her foot tapped on the floor.

“I love it. You, uh, made the hell out of that cardigan!”

“*Hmph*,” she scoffed. “Let’s go out front, you can bring me a lemonade to make up for insulting my adorable sweater.”

“You got it.”

# Chapter 4

# This is how we brew it.

Liam

**A**s usual, I was too early. My anxiety would never allow me to be late, or even on time. I sat in my car for a few minutes waiting but decided to head in and offer my help. I could see Violet bustling around in there by herself.

She had me retrieve a few wayward balloons and hang a banner outside, then sent me to a table with a cup of coffee. “You’re the best. And I’m not humoring you, don’t leave this table. Lily wants the best seat in the place so she can people watch, it’s her thing. Don’t let anybody snag it.”

“Got it,” I grinned. “Guard this table and drink your delicious coffee.”

“Exactly. Thanks a latte, Liam. I appreciate you.”

“Yeah,” Jake chimed in as he strode through the swinging doors that led to the storage room. “You’re tea-riffic, thanks for helping out.” He looked to Violet, eyebrows up, for approval, but she shook her head.

“Nope.” They shared a smile as he got closer. “Good try, baby, but we don’t do tea here.”

He dropped a kiss on her forehead. “Then I guess I can’t tell you you’re a hot-tea.”

I sipped my coffee and tried not to listen, but it was impossible since they were standing at the edge of my table. It would have been awkward if it wasn’t hovering on the border



of hilarious. If you knew Violet even in passing, you knew coffee was her obsession and tea was her nemesis.

Her forehead crinkled as she thought it over. “I guess I’ll allow it.”

He winked at her. “I love you so matcha.”

“And I love you a whole freakin’ latte. But quit testing me.”

“You know you love it, my beau-*tea*-ful Violet.”

“Jake...” Her voice was breathy.

My eyes darted to my cup. “Well, obviously, you two were meant to bean.” I said with a laugh, breaking the sexual tension I had unwittingly found myself in the middle of.

“I know, right?” A bemused smile crossed her face.

Jake winked at her, and she blushed, while I vowed never to be early to a party ever again. “I picked up the extra ice, gorgeous,” he informed her. “I dumped it in the machine, okay?”

“Perfect. I guess it’s time to get the par-tea started.”

The door dinged with the first arrival, it was Luke. Thank god for the interruption. I was about to be scarred for life.

“What the hell are you wearing, man?” I swear I was almost blinded by the sheer number of sequins glaring at me from his sweater. I was in a simple black suit, and he was in some sort of Valentine’s Day monstrosity of a sweater. It looked like Cupid had pulled an all-nighter at a bar and then puked all over him.

“Lily made it for me. She has one too.” He ran his hands down his chest, pulling a worried face when a piece of fringe snagged on his hand and tore off. “Look, it has my name on it.” He pointed to a little yellow heart. “And this other one says, “*Luke and Lily 4-Eva*”. Isn’t it great?”

“Okay, yeah it’s nice.” Great was not the word I would use, but he seemed happy about it, so I was too.

“She’s been into crafts lately. Knitting, crocheting, sewing shit onto other shit, like this sweater.” He shrugged and stuffed the fringe into one of the sweater’s uneven pockets.

“I’m happy for you. I mean it.” I wished the joy in his eyes was infectious because I wanted some of it for myself.

“All I wanted was to come home, you know? Get my old life back. Be with her again. I don’t know if—” Emotion flashed across his face before he shook his head and looked away.

“What?” I was curious. For some reason, I had to know what he was thinking. I felt like he was a few steps ahead of me and I wanted to end up where he was someday.

“Sometimes I stop and wonder if this is real. Or just one of the old dreams I used to have.”

“Hey, it’s real,” I reassured him. “We should talk about this with Jed next week.” Luke’s grandfather was a Vietnam veteran who ran a support group on his ranch. Luke and I attended it every week. Along with my therapist, the group helped me immeasurably. “Sometimes I feel the same way. I’ll wake up and forget where I am.”

“I’ll bring it up. I don’t ever want to go back to how I was.”

“Same. I like it here.”

He shot me a grin. “Me too.”

“Hello, boys!” Dahlia, Holly’s mom was headed our way. “Liam, I’m so happy you’re here! I have someone for you to meet, she’s right over there—” her hand waved behind her, gesturing to a pretty brunette standing by Violet’s counter. Lucky for me she was facing the other way and didn’t see me.

“Can we hold off on that for a second? I, uh, have to head to the restroom real quick.” My chair squeaked as I stood, I threw out a hand to keep it from toppling over. “I’ll be right back.”

She sat at Luke’s table and waved as I walked off. “Okay, honey. I’ll be waiting for you right here.”

*And I'll be hiding in the back room for as long as humanly possible.*

I did not want to be fixed up. I didn't want to meet anyone and lead them on. Currently, I had eyes for only one woman and until that changed, I did not want to date anyone else, it wouldn't be right.

I burst through the swinging doors. Maybe I could find a chair back here to wait it out on. Or maybe I'd go out the back door and ditch the party entirely.

"Liam!" Lily rushed over to me, followed by Holly. "Is everything okay? What are you doing back here?"

"Uh—"

"Is my mother out there?" Her hands hit her hips in outrage. "Is she trying to introduce you to someone—"

"Yeah," I stopped her. "I didn't let it get to the part where I found out her name. I told your mom I had to go to the restroom."

"Oh snap!" Lily patted my arm. Since she'd gotten back together with Luke, she had acted like a protective big sister toward me. It didn't seem to matter to her that I was actually a few years older. "That's good. Go hide out with Holly in Vi's office. Mom has got Jared Jamison all lined up for her."

"Okay—"

"Do not worry, both of you." She tapped her fist on her chest. "I got this. I'll just tell her you have diarrhea." Her head tilted in thought. "Maybe food poisoning would be better. What did you have for lunch? Whatever, it doesn't matter. Stomach issues will scare off whoever she wants you to meet. No one wants to dance with someone who has diarrhea or who could potentially barf at any moment. I'll think of something..." she muttered as she walked away.

"Wait—" Too late, she'd gone through the doors. I turned to Holly. "Would she really tell everyone I have diarrhea?"

Her hand went to her mouth to stifle a giggle. "Oh yeah, she absolutely would."

“You think this is funny, do you?” My lips twitched in involuntary amusement.

“Hilarious,” she confirmed with a guffaw. “But hey, it’s better than the alternative, isn’t it?”

“How so?”

“My mother is relentless, and you’ve successfully managed to dodge her first attempt at a setup. Way to go.” She held up her hand for a high five.

Gamely, I gave it a light smack. “I guess there is a silver lining.”

“For sure. And I have another one.”

“Yeah?”

“Yep. Come with me.” I followed her through Violet’s office door. “Shut that,” her whisper was equal parts adorable and conspiratorial. “We are not here.”

“Ahh, got it.” Softly, I closed the door behind myself. “Stealth mode.”

“Exactly. I hid party snacks in the fridge when I was decorating earlier. Somehow, I knew I’d end up hiding out back here.”

“You’re a genius. Is there enough for two?”

“Of course.” She laughed. “If there wasn’t I’d make you go hide by yourself in the bathroom. Sit down, get comfy and I’ll go get it.”

I sat, settling into the cozy, flat surface that would be a perfect place to kiss her, lay her down, maybe peel that dress up over her sweet little body and get a taste of her, feel those sexy high heels dig into my back...

*Damn it, stop.*

“How long do you think we can get away with hiding back here?” I semi-shouted through the doorway while trying to get my rapidly spiraling thoughts back under control. I could hear the party starting out front. No one would hear me.

“That depends on Lily.” Arms full, she re-entered the room with a wink. “And how bad your diarrhea is, of course.” She set a couple of paper bags, a bottle of wine and two glasses on the coffee table in front of us then went to Violet’s desk.

“Oh god.” Mortified, I shook my head. “This is unreal.” I liked this woman. A lot. I didn’t have diarrhea but, like a curse, the word hovered in the air between us like the ultimate mood killer.

I had wanted to flirt with her, see if she was as interested in me as I was in her, but now I couldn’t and maybe it was for the best because I shouldn’t have these feelings for her in the first place—best friend’s little sister-in-law and all that. It was easy to tell myself to stay away from her when I was alone, but every single time I got near her, my good decisions and best intentions went straight out the window and all I wanted to do was explore every possibility that came to me.

“Yes! Found it!” She turned to me, victoriously holding up a corkscrew. “Let’s get comfortable. Take off your jacket. There’s no way I’m dancing with Jared Jamison tonight—that’s not gonna happen. I’m here in this office for the duration. Feel free to stay as long as you like, my mother can get real pushy and I am not in the mood.” I slipped out of my suit jacket and tossed it to the chair in the corner where she had just placed her coat.

I had to stifle a groan when I saw what she was wearing. Tight and short were my two favorite things when it came to a dress and Holly’s was both. She was stunning and suddenly I could think of nothing but what it would feel like to have those long, gorgeous legs of hers wrapped around my waist. And damn it, we were about to be alone in this office sitting on a plush, comfortable sofa. I was in so much trouble right now.

*Think of the diarrhea...*

I loosened my tie with a frustrated grimace. But I lost my frown when I noticed how avidly she watched as I undid the top two buttons of my dress shirt and began rolling the sleeves up. She bit her full, pink lower lip and I knew right then I had

to be responsible and save us both before things got out of hand.

We had an undeniable chemistry between us, I felt it every time I was near her. But I had the sense she wasn't ready for it. And honestly, I wasn't either.

“What’s in the bag, Holly?” I asked to break the spell she seemed to be under. Because if I joined her in that spell, we would absolutely end up naked.

“Huh?” she whispered with her hand at her throat. “Oh, right. The bags.” Her head shook and she blinked rapidly. “Food. Snacks. Um, brie? Yeah, there’s cheese and crackers. Uh, grapes?” As if it took great effort she focused on the bags and started unpacking them. “Tiny sandwiches cut into hearts. Cute, right?”

I nodded. Forget about the sandwiches, she was cute. I took in the sight of her pink cheeks and flustered demeanor, she was just as messed up over me as I was over her and I loved it even though it scared the shit out of me.

I grabbed the bottle of wine and corkscrew from the table. Why not add alcohol to the mix? That was always a smart choice.

My phone went off with a text notification. Then another one. And another one. This is how I knew it was Lily. She never texted once; it was always a series of messages.

Holly’s laugh rang through the room. “Oh my god, that’s Lily. She does that to you too? What did she say? Is it safe to go out front?”

LILY Stay back there.

LILY Mom has Liz McNaughten picked out for you.

LILY She’s pretty and sweet but not right for you.

LILY Maybe she'd be good for Levi if he doesn't get his head out of his butt about Becca. What do you think?

LILY Never mind. Don't answer that. I can only focus on one thing at a time.

Holly's phone went off next. She laughed then flipped it around so I could read it.

CREEPY TWIN Jared Jamison left. He looked all sad.

CREEPY TWIN But that is not for you to worry about. YOU ARE NOT RESPONSIBLE FOR HIS CRUSH. Okay?

CREEPY TWIN Don't come out. Mom's still here and who knows who she'll try to get you to dance with now that he's gone.

CREEPY TWIN You're the last single sister and she has grandbaby fever. Like, what? The twins I'm carrying aren't enough for her?

CREEPY TWIN Oh Shit.

CREEPY TWIN She just read my text over my shoulder. DO NOT COME OUT HERE.

CREEPY TWIN I told her you're helping Liam with—you know...(the imaginary tummy troubles)

CREEPY TWIN Get him a snack from the fridge. I know you hid stuff in there. I AM ONTO YOU.

CREEPY TWIN Save me a cupcake. They're gone already.

CREEPY TWIN It's like, put pink sprinkles on something and people descend like vultures.

CREEPY TWIN I wanted a cupcake too, damn it.

Her eyes sparkled with humor. “She is a total nut and completely addicted to poop emojis and cupcakes.”

“Agree. I have witnessed all of those things firsthand.” I poured two glasses of wine and passed one to her.

“Thanks. Cheers to being single on Valentine’s Day.” Her voice was a velvet murmur, sexy and low.

*Was she flirting with me or was she just a natural sex bomb?* I couldn’t tell yet.

“Here’s to good company,” I added benignly and clinked my glass to hers.

“That’s sweet. Let’s dig in, I’m starving. I haven’t eaten all day and this cheese is calling my name.”

“Cheese is my favorite food,” I confessed. “Any kind. All of it.”

“Oh my god, me too. I want to live in a house made of cheese, just like a little mouse.” She sliced into the wheel of brie and offered me a piece.

“It’s good to set clear goals. Or so I’ve heard.” I joked before popping the brie into my mouth.

“Ahh, taking the piss. Love that. How do you like living in Luke’s old house? I’m crashing with Jude and Levi, and I’d kill for my own space.”

“I like it. It’s just enough privacy without being lonely.” Luke inherited his family’s property, about thirty acres or so after his father passed. His old family home was at the back, and I rented it, while he, Lily, and their son lived in the new house at the front of the property.

“That sounds perfect. I was staying with my parents when I first got back to town, but my mother was driving me crazy. I love her, so much, but she can be overwhelming sometimes. We get along better when I’m not underfoot.”

“I could see the need to be on your own. I get it.”



“Yeah...” She let out a sigh and sipped her wine. “I think I need to figure out what I want to be when I grow up.”

“No more blogging? I followed you for years.”

“You did?” She sat straight and turned to face me, clearly surprised.

“Yeah, I did.” No one knew I had followed her on social media, not even Luke. It came as a huge shock when I first saw her here in Sweetbriar. But for some reason, that I didn’t yet understand, I had kept it to myself—until now.

Her travel blog and Instagram posts kept me going back when I was in Afghanistan. It wasn’t anything other than her art that had drawn me to her back then, nothing like how I felt for her now. Her photos made me think of the home I had left behind. She had an eye for beauty and a true talent for photography. Plus, she was somewhat of an expert when it came to herbs and natural remedies, which had come in handy so many times over the years. I admired her expertise and the way she expressed herself through her words and images. Now I admired her for so much more than that.

“I missed home,” she murmured. “I had a huge sense of wanderlust back when I blogged, but I don’t anymore. I guess I got it out of my system because now I feel the opposite. I want to plant roots and grow them deep. I want my own place to make beautiful instead of finding the beauty in other places. Is that weird? I mean that I changed so much. It’s practically opposite of what I was.”

“I don’t think it’s weird at all. I want that too. I joined the Army so I could do more with my life, so I could help people, see new places, have new experiences and it was good—” a sardonic laugh escaped me. “Until it wasn’t.”

“Oh, Liam.”

I didn’t want my past to drag down this evening, so I shifted the subject back to her. “You could still blog. Just hiking up the mountain would provide tons of content. Locals know all the best spots.”

“Yeah, but I’d be hated in town if I gave them all away, right?”

I chuckled. “Good point.”

“Blogging isn’t what it used to be anymore anyway. And that money has all run out. I need something steady. I’m not worried yet. It’ll come to me.” She held up a cracker with some kind of brown and black goop on it. “Here, taste this.”

“I don’t know, what is it?”

“It looks gross but trust me. Open.”

I opened my mouth, and she placed the cracker gently on my tongue. I hesitated before committing and she let out a cute giggle. Finally, I chewed and swallowed. “What was that?”

“Olive tapenade with herbs I picked from my mom’s garden. Good, right?”

“You made that?”

“Yeah, don’t get me wrong. I can’t cook worth a damn, but I’m good at little things like this. My gram always said to have a few specialties up your sleeve to impress your party guests with.”

“Well, I’m impressed. It looked like dog food, but I loved it.”

My phone pinged again from the coffee table. Then again.

“Lily,” we said in unison.

LILY ALL IS CLEAR ON THE WESTERN FRONT. That’s a movie, right?

LILY Anyway. Liz went home, and my mother just left. Come out now. BRING ME CUPCAKES.

I flipped it around to show Holly. “I guess we should get back out there.” I would much rather spend the rest of the night in this office getting to know her better.

“Back? Oh god, I never even went in at all. Violet’s gonna be so mad.”

“Nah, I wouldn’t worry too much about that. She and Jake are on another level tonight. I think you’ll be okay.”

“That makes me feel a little bit better. Okay, I’ll go out first. If they spot us together rumors will fly. You know how this town can be.”

“Good thinking. I’ll wait in here and clean up, then go.”

“To the party. Not out the back door, right? We can be each other’s buffer. I need a buffer, Liam. Please?”

“I won’t leave.” The thought of anyone hitting on her made me irrationally angry.

She reached out and touched my hand. “Thank you. I’ll see you out there.”

I watched her walk through the door with a sense of sadness. It felt like we had been in a bubble right here in this office and it had just popped.

# Chapter 5

# I have coffee-lings for you.

Holly

**O**h, damn, damn, damn. I was in for it.

There were too many things about him to like now. The obvious basics, like his looks, and what had to be an ingrained hot guy ability to roll up his dress sleeves and make it sexy—arm porn! *Gah!* His hair had grown out since moving to town. No more military buzzcut, now he had thick, dark brown waves that sometimes flopped onto his forehead. It had been so hard to keep myself from reaching out to push it back. It was so gorgeous, just like the entire tall, muscled, and sexy rest of him.

But what pushed it over the top was just *him*. He had hidden depths that I wanted to explore. He had a still, soft aura that felt warm and comforting and I didn't want to leave the office. But I had to.

I wasn't ready for anything deeper than a Valentine's Day conversation. I had come here wanting to kiss him, to have fun. But he would be more than fun if I let him in any more than I already had.

I hesitated at the swinging doors to the front of the store. I heard the laughter and fun of the party and it felt like another world existed in there and I wanted to go back to the one I had discovered in Vi's office with Liam.

"Oh well," I muttered. I was used to letting good things pass me by. This was just one more.

I jumped as the door hit my arm. It was Violet. “Holly. Oh my god, take these balloons.” She shoved the strings from the conversation heart balloons in my hands. “I made a mistake. Valentine’s Day is nothing like Christmas. People are horny and lonely on Valentine’s Day; you were so right. These balloons have unleashed a horndog apocalypse into my shop. It’s like one of those basement parties back in high school. And Trevor and Rose are the worst! They haven’t come up for air, not even once!”

I hid a laugh. “I’m so sorry your party is ruined.”

Someone called her name with a question I could barely hear and she turned. “No, you may not use my office for a quickie. Show some decorum, Mrs. Robinson. You are a mother and a teacher!” She turned back to me again. “Oh my god! Will you please stay back here? Guard the back room, don’t let anyone get in here. Thank god Liam is still in the bathroom. How is his tummy trouble anyway? Tell him I have Tums on my desk—” She turned back to the party. “Lily!” she shrieked. “Erase the chalkboard out front.” She grabbed my shoulders. “No more balloons, pop them all! People are hooking up in their cars, Holly. The parking lot is no longer safe for children. What have I done? I have to get back out there.”

“Uh, good luck.”

The door swung shut and I felt him approach. I knew he was there. Behind me, beneath the balloons.

I turned around and our eyes locked before he lifted his to the balloons held tight in my grip. He knew what they were supposed to mean, and I did too. They felt like permission. A dozen or so balloons telling me that yes, it was indeed a great idea to make out with Liam in the back room.

He reached out and touched my wrist, one tiny touch, before letting his hand drop to his side.

My heartbeat immediately rushed to the spot. It was only my wrist, but it burned, imprinting the memory of how it felt to have his hand on me, even in such an innocent place as my wrist.

A shiver passed through me when he smiled, soft and sweet. It was a smile just for me, I could tell by the way his eyes locked to mine and his body bowed forward.

He studied my face with those gorgeous intense brown eyes of his and my body turned liquid under his perusal. If he were looking for a sign of objection, he wasn't going to find it. I watched in anticipation as his tongue darted out to wet his lower lip.

I knew he wanted to kiss me, and I was going to let him.

I nodded, almost imperceptibly, because I didn't want to admit, especially to myself, how much I wanted to know how it would feel to have his mouth on mine.

His smile faded and he bit his lip, face lowering inch by inch as I leaned into his warmth to place a hand on his broad wall of a chest—*for balance*, I lied to myself.

My heart took a perilous leap in my chest, then rushed out of control when he threaded his fingers through my hair and tugged me gently within his reach. This caress was a command, gentle but demanding and I was here for it.

“Yes,” I whispered without sound, and he nodded.

Slowly, seductively, his gaze drifted to my parted lips, they tingled like he was already kissing me.

I burned. My god, I could feel him everywhere.

I let my eyes drift closed. I'd given my permission and now it was up to him to decide.

“This is it.” His voice was a deep growl, I felt it like a touch.

“Do it,” I whispered. “Kiss me.”

After a sharp inhale, his thumb went to my jaw to keep my face steady with his huge warm palm. “My god, you're so fucking beautiful.”

I couldn't answer, I had no words in my head other than a soft breathy moan that sounded kind of like “yes” as he backed me into the wall by the swinging door. Balloons flew to the

ceiling; their ribbons tickled the sides of my face as I let them go to clutch his shirt tight with both of my fists. There was no way I would let him stop now. I had never experienced anything like this, I had to find out where it would lead.

His stubbled chin grazed my cheek as he slid his nose along mine, breathing me in before his mouth hungrily covered my lips. Urgent, exploratory, and reckless, we got to know each other better.

It was almost too much. It felt too good, like nothing I'd felt before, ever. It was everything I didn't know I needed, and it went straight to my head, turning me into a trembling mess of sensation in his arms.

He pulled away with a gasp. "Holly, are you sure about this?"

"No, but don't stop, I want more," I demanded.

He kissed me again like a whisper and I returned it with crazed abandon, thrusting my tongue between his parted lips with a groan as he crushed me to him, his insistent hands at my waist sliding lower until his fingertips dug into the top of my ass and his leg slid between mine.

"Holly, what are we doing?" He whispered, his breath hot against my ear.

"I have no idea, but I'm not ready for it to end yet." I tucked my face into his throat, kissing the steady pulse at the base as he held me tight.

We couldn't seem to stop, instinct kept drawing us closer each time we managed to break apart.

He pulled away again, but still held me gently as his hands loosened their grip on my waist and he moved them up to brush my hair over my shoulders. I ached to be closer, I didn't want to let him go. Something tangible existed between us now, small threads of feelings had knit themselves into something strong, something I could no longer shove out of my mind and deny. My heart lurched in my chest, wanting to be close to his again.



He looked at me lazily, through half-closed lids before blinking as if in shock. I watched as his emotions played over his face and I knew he felt it too.

I was left speechless, breathless, and completely lost in the solid strength of his arms. I didn't want this feeling to end. I didn't want to let go.

I was in trouble.

I wasn't ready to feel this way. But there was nothing I could do to stop the waves of tenderness from washing over me. I couldn't fight the desire in my heart to pull him close and not let go.

This was pure chemistry. The kind that exploded and sent people reeling. Made them make rash choices and foolish declarations. The kind that could break hearts if one wasn't careful. We were like a damn nuclear bomb about to explode.

"I knew it," he whispered.

"Knew what?" I breathed.

"That you would change everything."

"Liam..." I whispered. He was right. Nothing would be the same for us. Not after this.

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# Heart to Heart

I used to think I had it all.

Rising through the ranks as an Army Ranger, I was  
unstoppable.

I was invincible.

Until I wasn't.

Medically discharged from the Army and shaken to my core, I  
followed my best friend back to his small hometown to start  
over.

Then I saw her. My secret lifeline.

Holly Barrett was off limits.

I couldn't pursue her, not when I was still a mess from my  
past.

For years her travel blog was the only thing that kept me  
tethered to the world I'd left behind.

In person, she was more amazing and inspiring than I could  
have ever imagined.

And I imagined plenty.

I had to stay away. The ghosts of my past should be my burden  
to bear.

But I wasn't the only one with ghosts.

And when hers come back to haunt her, mine might be the  
only thing that can save us both.

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# About the Author

Nora Everly is a lifelong bookworm. She started reading the good stuff once she grew tall enough to sneak the romance novels off the top of her mother's bookshelf and it has been non-stop ever since.

Once upon a time she was a substitute teacher and an educational assistant. Now she's a writer and stay at home mom to two small humans and one fat cat.

Nora lives in the Pacific Northwest with her family and her overactive imagination.

Find her at [noraeverly.com](http://noraeverly.com)

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