

CALEB MARKS



Covering
CHRISTMAS

A Small Town MM Romance

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Chapter One

CLAY

My footsteps on the carpeted hallway as I walk to the morning meeting are the sound of confidence.

I have every reason to be confident. The assignment I've been dreaming of for years is finally visible and within reach, and I will stop at nothing to get it. Any day now, and it'll be mine.

I step into the meeting room, late as usual, and am greeted by all eyes on me. Perfect.

"*Clayton*," Hugh says at the front of the room. "Glad you could make it."

His eyes are narrowed, but I ignore it. "There was an accident in Midtown early this morning. I covered it on my way in. The notes are on your desk, and I've sent Sean to get B-roll in case it turns into something." That's stretching the truth a little. I happened to see it on my route to work, and I halfheartedly took notes on my phone in the cab. It won't be

anything more serious than a mention in the morning traffic report, but it makes me sound good.

I sit calmly next to the person glaring at me the hardest and let out a bored sigh, checking my phone. “Morning, Joclyn,” I whisper. “Sorry you didn’t get your beauty sleep last night. Try again tonight?”

She straightens her shoulders and turns to the front of the room, muttering under her breath. “There’s a special place in hell for you, Clay Miller.”

“Ah, would you look at that? We’d be neighbors.”

At the front, Hugh raises his eyebrows at us to get us to shut up. “Joclyn, there was a body found in a box by the river. You want the story?”

“Yes, sir.”

Hugh nods and turns back to the list of news stories overnight. “Clayton...there’s a sale on at the—”

“Nuh-uh,” I say, still looking at my phone. I drag my gaze up to his and deliberately lick my lips. A subtle reminder won’t hurt. “You can give me better than that.”

There’s nothing particularly attractive about Hugh. He’s your average middle-aged white man. But he’s in charge of handing out any assignments as they come through, and I *will* be getting the embezzlement story that I have my eye on. If Hugh wants to think we have a future so I get the story? So be it. Hugh shuffles on his feet and looks down at the paper in his hand. He barely noticeably winces before looking at Joclyn.

Joclyn's mouth drops open. "Oh, come on!"

I point to her. "I want the dead body. She can have the sale."

A producer sticks her head in the door. "Triple homici—"

I stand up immediately. "Mine. Keep your river body, Joclyn."

She scowls, and I go to leave the room before she can say anything, but Hugh calls out to me. "Wait, Clayton."

I look back in impatience. "Yes?"

"Can you come to my office this afternoon? I want to talk to you about—"

I catch Joclyn's eye and smirk before stepping closer to Hugh. "Why not now?"

He blushes. "Oh. Uh...not now, Clay. Stop by my office on the way to the scene, will you?"

I suppress a sigh. "Fine."

It only needs to be a simple sentence. "*Clay, you've got the Schneider embezzlement assignment.*" That's all. I don't know why it needs to be done in an office, but if he wants all the extra drama, so be it. Maybe it's for Joclyn's sake.

After gathering all the information I need for the triple homicide story—a half-decent story, finally—I poke my head into Hugh's office. "You wanted to see me? Something about giving me the embezzlement story?"

Hugh glances up and frowns. "I haven't decided yet."

I roll my eyes and shut the door, sitting lazily in the seat in front of his desk. “Well, then what did you want to talk to me about? It’s real simple. All you need to say is Clay, I’m giving you the embezzlement story and you’re a real handsome guy; keep it up. Easy.”

“Clay, I *haven’t decided* who is getting the embezzlement story and you’re a handsome guy.” He barely even glances away from his computer screen, and I frown. He manages to meet my gaze. “I want to chat to you about something, but uh, not here. You want to go out for dinner tonight? We’ll go to Morelli’s. It’s Pasta and Wine Night, apparently.”

“Two of my favorite things.” *And the knowledge that I’m not going to be alone for yet another Friday night.* “Did you really need to make me come in here to ask that? Are you going to finish it with ‘oh, by the way, you’re doing the Schneider embezzle—”

“*Out*, Clay. For God’s sake. I haven’t decided—”

“Yeah, yeah. Sure you haven’t.”

Hugh’s reluctance to name me for the assignment plagues my mind all day. I’d woken up this morning positive that today was going to finally go my way, and by the time I’m getting ready to go to dinner, the day has gone the same way it always does.

I’m good at my job. Even Joclyn knows it, as much as she would hate to admit it. I roll my head around on my neck as my computer shuts down for the night.

I *might* be sleeping with my boss in order to get the better assignments, but I'm *also* putting in the hard work, and that's something Hugh can't deny.

I amble towards the exit and happen to see the light at Joclyn's cubicle still on. I wander over and lean over the top.

"What are you doing?"

She jumps and looks at me, her hand pressed to her chest. "What are *you* doing? I'm doing my *job*, you jackass."

I frown and spin around the barrier to take a glance at her computer. "Are you still trying to get the Schneider embezzlement story?" I drop my head back and snort. "We *all* know that story is mine, Joclyn."

She turns her screen off and folds her arms, setting her shoulders stubbornly. "While I don't have a body he's particularly attracted to..." Her gaze drops over my frame before rising back to my face. She screws her nose up. "...*I* can get by on my ability to do my job *without* screwing the boss to get there."

I chuckle. "Keep telling yourself that, sweetheart. Why don't you find a story that you *will* get instead of focusing on one you won't?" I lean closer to her and smile. "*I* am getting the embezzlement story. There is no alternative."

She leans even closer and smirks. "We'll see, *sweetheart*. There's only so many things you can offer before he gets bored, isn't there?"

I chuckle and stand up straight to get out of her immediate presence. “Suit yourself, babe. You stay here and work on your useless little presentation, and *I* am going to have dinner with the man who will give it to *me*.”

Joclyn snorts as I walk towards the elevator. “The story or sex?”

“Both, my dear!” I look over my shoulder and wink at her. “Good luck!”

I check the various news sources in and around Atlanta in the cab on the way to the restaurant where I’m meeting Hugh, and I hate that there’s a spark of doubt in my mind, put there by Joclyn. While I am good at my job, so is Joclyn, and she’s right too... She can’t rely on something stupid like sex to give her the stories she wants. Not from Hugh, anyway.

I frown and tap my phone against my chin for a second before leaning forward and looking at the driver. “On second thought, can you take me to 2289 Davis Street, please?”

The driver grumbles for a second until I roll my eyes and offer him a fifty over the meter. Whatever. It’ll be worth it when I get this story. A thirty-million-dollar embezzlement scheme has been discovered right here in Atlanta, and I’m practically frothing at the mouth for the chance. It’s the story I’ve been *dreaming* of for years. Ever since I missed my chance at exposing my own dad for similar bad business practices, I’ve been on a mission to get revenge. And it’s *finally* within reach.

When he eventually drops me off at Hugh's address, Hugh opens the door with a look of surprise. "I thought we were meeting at the restaurant?"

"We were," I whisper before stepping closer and hooking my finger into the gap between buttons of his dress shirt. "*But* I thought maybe we could *skip* it and just eat here instead." I lean up and kiss him slowly, drawing out the sensation. When we pull away, even *I'm* dizzy, and I'm the one who started it.

He takes in a shaky breath and looks over my shoulder before tugging me inside. "I really did need to...talk to you, Clay."

"I know, babe. Sure. But why don't we do something else *first*? Then we'll get to the talking bit. We can even have wine and pasta here. Look at that! Not missing out on anything."

He's surprisingly hesitant tonight. Normally he's the one suggesting we skip talking to get to what we're both here for.

I watch his gaze drop over me before he sighs and steps forward, easing me against the door. "Okay," he whispers. "I've missed you."

His hands make quick work of the buttons on my shirt as he kisses my neck, and I make all the correct noises he wants me to make.

"Mmm... I've missed you too," I murmur. I gently push him back and grin. "Bedroom?"

He gives me a lusty smirk and nods in the direction of it. "I'll meet you there. I'll cancel the reservation I made."

“You’re a dream,” I call out as I make it to his bedroom.

I hate this house. It’s something out of a straight person’s hell. Hugh bought the house with his ex-wife, gave her full power over the decoration of it (her inspiration being a mix of 1950s housewife and 1880s British royalty, which doesn’t result in a pleasing color scheme), and then she gave it back to him when he discovered—well into his forties—that he actually preferred the look of their postman to her.

Maybe out of guilt, maybe he just likes it, but Hugh hasn’t changed a single item of the house since she walked out of it, leaving it a cold, oddly decorated house with a very straight ghost living in it.

Hugh appears in the doorway and grins, already unbuttoning his shirt and kicking off his shoes. “You’re right, this *is* better. We should stay in more often.”

I chuckle and reach for him, hoping to get to that sweet spot of these moments where I can forget what I’m doing and why I’m doing it. “Where else can you eat pasta in the nude?”

“I can eat pasta *and* you without that annoying gap in the middle.”

I wiggle my eyebrows and kiss him, drawing out the sensations the way I have to.

It’s not like I’m *too* far off the mark with Hugh. He has a quirk to his smile that I find endearing, and I’ve always been a sucker for someone older than me. Plus, I like being the hotter one in the pairing. Makes it easier to control my jealousy.

I kiss him slowly as he sits on the edge of the bed, pulling me on top of him. If I can make him believe I'm as into him as he thinks I am, maybe I can convince myself of it.

I push on his shoulder to get him to lie back, and I fold over him, the wiry hairs on his chest coarse under my fingertips. I shiver, and he wraps his arms around me. Okay, so maybe I *am* attracted to him.

He hums at the back of his throat and pushes me back so he can see my face. “*Wait. Wait, Clay.*”

I blink at him and the expression on his face. He looks like he's about to be sick. “Did...you want to change—”

“I'm giving the embezzlement story to Joclyn,” he whispers.

My whole body freezes, and I have no idea what is happening to my face.

He props himself up on his elbows, prompting me to sit farther back on his thighs. “I know you wanted it, but... God, Clay. People are starting to wonder why I keep giving you—”

“This isn't just *a* story, Hugh. This is *the* story. *My* story.” I climb off his lap slowly and stand to face him in this hideous bedroom. There's an enormous portrait of Queen Victoria smirking at me from the wall. “Don't give me any other good stories. Fine. I'll take, I don't know, those shitty animal heartwarming stories and rabid fans at Justin Bieber concerts. Fuck, make me do the weather, I don't care. Just *please* give me this story.”

Hugh sits up and closes his eyes briefly, but I already know that I've lost this battle.

I rush towards him and sink to my knees. "Whatever you want me to do, I'll do it. Do you want—"

"I'm sorry, Clay. I am. But apparently I'm not *supposed* to be sleeping with one of my senior reporters. I didn't think it would be an issue, but Joclyn's—"

"Fuck Joclyn. You need to send your best reporter..."

Hugh winces, and my heart sinks.

"You are," I whisper.

"You're constantly late to meetings, you do a halfhearted effort on the stories you don't care about, and you complain twenty-four-seven about people around you! Your work means nothing, Clay! You're charismatic and charming and you can do your job, yes. But I need *more* than that for the Schneider story. I need Joclyn."

He stands up and pulls his shirt together.

"Joclyn's dad is a key player at the network. For both of us to *not* get fired, I need to give her the story."

He reaches for me, but I take a step away. "Why would *I* get fired?" I whisper, too angry to speak any louder.

"For all the reasons I just mentioned? I'm the one keeping you in the job right now. People are noticing. People are *wondering*."

I gulp loudly and fold my arms across my chest, trying to shake off the overwhelming disappointment that is rushing through me. People weren't starting to wonder why Hugh was giving me the good stories. People were wondering why I was even still in a *job*.

Hugh pathetically pats me on the arm. "For a...*while*, I don't know how long, you will be getting the less exciting stories—"

"I'm thirty years old! I can't just sit back and—"

"You can if you still want to keep your job, Clay." Gone is the gentle empathy he had been showing, and it's been replaced with the stern Hugh I see at work every day.

I take a deep breath and try to center myself. "Fine," I say evenly. "I'll prove myself and I'll—"

"That's the spirit!" He steps towards me and lets his shirt fall open again, but I step away and pick up my shirt from the doorway.

"Suddenly not in the mood," I mumble. "See you at work, I guess."

My footsteps are filled with lead as I trudge down the hideous hallway and out into the chilly late November air.

How did everything fall apart so drastically?

The final blow comes the following morning when I get to work. I deliberately missed the morning meeting, as I didn't want to have to see Joclyn's face, knowing that she is going to get the story I wanted. Fucking Joclyn. *She* might not have

slept her way to the story, but she sure as hell got her dad to give her what she wanted. My parents couldn't care less about my career.

There's a folder sitting on my desk with a travel document and my next story. I scan the contents quickly before making my way to Hugh's office, my anger building on the short walk.

I slam open the door. "A *Christmas festival*? In *Redhaven, New Hampshire*?"

Hugh scowls at me when he recovers from the shock of my entrance. "I thought you'd like it."

"It's a *Christmas festival*. In *Redhaven, New Hampshire*. Where the fuck even *is* Redhaven, New Hampshire?"

Hugh purses his lips and turns back to his computer screen. "I don't know. I haven't been there. *You* are about to! You can tell me when you get there. Tell me the sights, the local delicacy, get me something from the gift shop. I don't care. Look, this is a good opportunity, Clay."

"It's a good opportunity to save your ass. Don't give me that."

"And yours. And...well, *ours*." He throws a look at the door that shut by itself after the force of my kick, and his shoulders drop. "I'll settle things here while you're gone, and when you get back..." He stands up and takes my hand awkwardly. "Everything will be okay again. I'll get you better assignments, and we can be together."

I take my hand out of his slowly. “You’re sending me to New Hampshire for two weeks so that I can get out of your hair. Oh honey, I’m going single.”

Hugh seems to wilt a little before he recovers quickly enough to sting. “Oh well. At least you’re going.”

I growl at him and head back to my desk before grimacing and typing *Redhaven, New Hampshire* into Google.

When the resulting images come up of the cute little cozy Christmas town, I lower my head onto my keyboard and whimper.

Chapter Two

DYLAN

“**A**iden!” I yell up the stairs in the direction of the kid’s bedroom. “Come on! Time to get ready for school!”

There’s no answer, but I didn’t expect there to be. It’s school. For an eight-year-old. And it snowed overnight for the first time this season.

“Aiden!” I yell again.

There’s a knock on the front door before it opens without me needing to respond. My dad pokes his head in, his cheeks rosy and his eyes bright. “Morning, kiddo.”

I frown at him and take the stairs two at a time to knock on Aiden’s door. “Buddy. Time to get up.”

“I don’t want to” comes the muffled sound of a child hiding under the covers of his bed. “I’m sick.”

I sigh and push open the door to see the mound of blankets that surrounds his small frame. I’m almost certain that he’s already been up to look at the situation outside the window and his desire to stay home has little to do with his health. I

perch on the bed next to him and pat his back gently. “If you’re sick, you won’t be able to have any leftovers of Grammy’s Thanksgiving dinner for your lunch at school today.”

The blanket mound shifts around for a few seconds before slowly, my nephew’s head appears at the top, his expression contemplating my dilemma. “I can stay home and eat it?”

“School only, I’m afraid.” I purse my lips. “And I’m helping out setting up the Redhaven Christmas Festival, so you’d have to stay with Grammy and Poppy at their house and—”

Dad pops his head around the corner. “And we’ve decided we’re going to start a knitting circle in our living room. You could join us, Aiden? All our friends would *love* to see you!”

Aiden’s eyes widen before he turns to look at me with a pout. “I don’t *like* school.”

“Neither did I, buddy. But unfortunately, you have to go. It’s winter break soon, and you can lie in as much as you’d like. All day if you want.”

Aiden doesn’t look convinced.

Dad steps in. “Come on! I’ll take you to school. Uncle Dylan has to go get some stuff done for the Christmas festival. *You* have to get snowballs thrown at you as I walk you to school.” He disappears, laughing gleefully.

I ruffle Aiden’s hair. “Hit him with a real big one. Get him good for me.”

Aiden grins and jumps out of bed, the prospect of beating his grandfather in a snowball fight greater than his hesitations at going to school.

When I get back downstairs again, yelling at Aiden to grab his lunchbox on the way past the kitchen, I see my mom there too, already peering at my coffee machine.

“I don’t know *how* you use this, Dylan,” she says with a frown. “There’s nothing wrong with—”

“Yeah, yeah, I know.” I reach behind her and push the button she needs. “Why don’t you bring your coffee over here when you come over in the mornings? I can *see* your house from here.” I look through the living room window to see the bed and breakfast that my parents own, standing tall and proud in its pale red exterior amongst the gray and white of the frosty weather.

“This one tastes better.”

I chuckle as Aiden careens down the staircase and towards the front door.

“Lunch!” both mom and I yell.

Aiden comes to a crashing stop by the front door and bolts back to the kitchen, where I’d placed the lunchbox.

“Bye, Grammy! Bye, Uncle Dylan!”

I shake my head as the front door slams. Soon, the sounds of whooping and excited shrieks come from the front yard; I can’t tell whether they are coming from grandfather or grandson.

“One of the sinks is leaking at the Maple,” Mom says over the lip of her coffee mug. “Will you—”

“I said I’d help Clem and Josie with their festival booth, and Debbie needs help with tying the mistletoe in place.”

“Already?” Mom rolls her eyes.

“Yep, apparently. Leave it alone this year, will you?” I get a text message, and I sigh as I read it. “And Collin needs me to help with the Facebook advertisement.”

Mom hides her smile with her coffee mug.

“But *yes*, I’ll add ‘fix the sink at the B&B’ somewhere into my day.”

“Before lunch? We’ve got a guest coming from out of town, and we need that room.”

I look over in interest as I get my own coffee to go. “Oh? Who? Who is coming to Redhaven?”

The Christmas season is always Redhaven’s busiest, but it was only just Thanksgiving weekend, and none of the Christmas events have started yet. This is the time of year everyone is running around looking terrified of the number of tourists that will descend on our town.

Mom shrugs. “A news reporter from... Oh, I can’t remember. He’s supposed to be covering the Christmas festival. His name’s Clayton Miller.” She gives me a knowing look. “I Googled him. He’s very nice-looking. You know, I think he might be—”

“If you say *gay*, mom, or any variation on the theme, I’m leaving.”

Mom purses her lips and falls silent.

I frown at her attempts at matchmaking. “So, why is he here now?”

“The woman on the phone said that he’s so excited to cover the festival, he’s coming early to get some footage of the setting up.” She wiggles her eyebrows. “This might get The Red Maple famous.”

I roll my eyes and start putting my coat and shoes on. “Well, if The Red Maple gets famous—hell, if Redhaven gets famous—I hope you’re hiring a new handyman.”

Mom laughs as I make it out into the newly blanketed yard.

Redhaven isn’t big by any means. We’ve got Main Street, which directs everyone to Redhaven Park at the end of it, where the Redhaven Christmas Festival is held every year. Everyone goes all out for the Christmas season, and it’s the whole reason we can stay afloat for the rest of the year. This year, there’s a carousel, a reindeer sleigh ride through town, and double the number of booths with people selling their homemade items. It means a lot more work to do.

“Morning, Dylan!”

I give a polite wave to Jenny, a friend of my mother’s, as she walks past, and I get started helping Clem and Josie set up their booth. I can see them working on the gazebo from atop

the ladder, turning it into an outdoor dance floor. I chuckle and continue working on the booth.

I finish tightening the last screw on the overhead wooden banner and climb down from the ladder, brushing my hands on my jeans. “That should be sturdy enough.”

Josie stands back to admire it. “Thank you so much, Dyl. It’s perfect.”

“Let me know if it needs fixing again.” I look at my checklist on my phone. “Next on my list... Debbie’s mistletoe.”

Josie groans. “Again? I thought we all agreed last year that having a mistletoe booth was kind of creepy.”

I shrug helplessly. “All I do is hang the mistletoe. She’s paid the fee to be there.”

Josie rolls her eyes, and I walk through the snowy park to get to where Debbie has her booth set up. “Looking good, guys,” I mutter to the men hanging up the lights in the gazebo. “Let me know if you need some help.”

“Thanks, Dylan.”

Before I can do anything, Robert, one of the members of council that help put Redhaven on the map each year during the Christmas season, comes over and grabs my attention. “Any chance I can get your help with setting up the lights at Gingerbread Lane?” He looks panicked. “Greg fell off his ladder last night, and now we’re down a man to help get the lights up in time. God, Dylan! It’s a nightmare!”

I chuckle and put a hand on his arm. “I’ll head over there as soon as I’ve helped Debbie put up the mistletoe.”

Robert rolls his eyes. “Never mind that. I don’t think she should even *have* a mistletoe booth this year. More important things, Dylan! The *lights!*”

I raise my eyebrows and point in the direction of Debbie. “Her first. Then you.”

He scowls, but it’s quickly replaced with a stressed smile as he catches up to me. “Oh. I’ve thought about how we can get some of the young people interested.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah. I’ve set up a *gaming center.*” He grins, rocking back on his heels and nodding in the direction of the YMCA. “What games do you think we should have? I’ve heard about *Just Dance*, and all the young people assure me it is *very* popular. But I think we need something more.”

I chuckle and pat him on the shoulder. “I bet it is. I would suggest talking to someone like Nolan. Or Brynn? They’re young enough to know *all* the most popular games to play.”

His brow furrows. “Do you know where we could get some old arcade games?”

I sigh, knowing what’s coming before he asks. “I’ll have a look and see what I can find.”

“Excellent! Thanks, Dylan! You’re a star.” He points at me and scurries away, probably finding another problem to stress over. Admittedly, Redhaven’s dedication to Christmas is

unmatched. There's always *something* to do and always someone stressed about it. I'm not entirely sure a gaming center is going to go down well, but if there's one thing that Redhaven Christmas Festival is usually reviewed as, it's being stuck in the past.

Debbie stubbornly tells me that she's going to have a mistletoe booth every year until she dies as I hang the mistletoe. I see Collin and fix his Facebook page on the way to my car to get over to Gingerbread Lane and see three other people who add things to my to-do list, all before noon. Perfect. I can get to Gingerbread Lane, get a bite to eat on the way back, and fix the sink at the Maple before the guest arrives.

It's as I'm driving to Gingerbread Lane that I see a car stuck in a pile of snow on the side of the road. The driver is leaning with his head back against the headrest, his eyes closed. In a moment of panic, I pull to a stop and make it to his door in record time, only to see him slowly turn to look at me with a frown. His vibrant green eyes bore into mine, and I'm bewildered at the level of heat that is radiating off him. He doesn't *look* hurt, but there's something pained in his expression that hits close to home.

He aggressively rolls down the window, not hard without automatic windows. The action seems to get him more agitated. "What?"

I'm a little taken aback by the angry tone. "Are you okay? Are you—"

“I’m stuck in a *snowbank*. In the middle of *nowhere*. What do you think?” He narrows his eyes. “Sorry, is this *not* the parking snowbank?” he says sarcastically.

I blink at him, and he gestures me back so he can climb out of the car. He’s wearing only a thin sweater and skinny jeans, and he looks like he wants to be anywhere other than where he is. He’s handsome in a way that no one else from our small town of Redhaven is though. Obviously keeps himself in shape, has a flawless complexion, and an ass I’m trying not to look at. If this is the news reporter, Mom was right. He’s *very* nice-looking.

“Sorry, this snowbank is reserved for locals only.”

He growls at the snow in front of his car. “What the *fuck* am I supposed to do now?”

I chuckle and walk back to my truck, pulling the snow shovel and my spare weatherproof jacket out of the trunk. “Let me help.” I throw him the jacket and start digging. I glance over, and he’s grumpily pulled the jacket over his shoulders. I repress a smirk. It’s way too big for him and makes him look like a child. “You’re not from around here, are you?”

“What gave you that idea?” he snaps.

I stand up and stick the shovel in the snow, walking back towards my truck. “Well, I’ll leave you to it—”

“No, no, no... Wait. I’m sorry.” The man leans against his car and groans. “Real shitty couple of days. Didn’t mean to

take it out on you, I guess. Can you just...get me out, and we will start again once I am on the road?"

I narrow my eyes but start digging again. "Where you headed?"

"Some dumpy little bed and breakfast called something like The Whimsical Daydream or some shit. I don't know."

I exhale a laugh. "You must be the news reporter. Well, The Red Maple is about twenty minutes down the road."

"That's the one," he mutters.

"It's—"

"I really don't care. I want to go to this dumpy-ass Christmas love fest and then go home with my sanity intact, okay? And next time, when my boss says 'hey, Clay, it's either lose your job or go to the middle of fucking nowhere...I'm going to *quit*.'" He stomps angrily in his entirely unsuitable footwear. They're boots at least, but he's going to break an ankle with that heel, and there's no way they are waterproof. "Is my car cleared yet?"

I hold my hands up and step back. "You're good to go. You're driving in *snow*, okay? The roads are icy." I point in the direction he's going. "Follow this road until you get to a sign pointing to Redhaven. Turn left and drive until you get to a red, two-story house. There's a sign. You can't miss it."

He sulks and gets in his car. I lean on his window and give him a calm smile.

“Another thing... Don’t know anything about you or where you’ve come from, but you’re going to have one hell of a time here if you’re rude to everyone.”

He scowls at me with those pretty eyes I’ll probably think about later when I’m alone, and then he drives quickly down the road. I watch him swerve on a patch of ice, but he controls it again as I lose sight of him.

I shake my head and roll my eyes. Getting a good story is going to be almost impossible with that attitude.

Chapter Three

CLAY

The room at The Red Maple is as depressingly kitschy as it sounds. There's a quilted bedspread, bright-yellow curtains, and an attached bathroom with tiles like something out of every *Cottage Living* magazine ever made. I throw my bag on the bed, the springs creaking under the weight, and groan loudly. The lobby, and the rest of Redhaven, have all the Christmas decorations up, and I expected to run into Santa Claus himself. The same four Christmas songs have been on repeat since I got here, and I'm already about to lose my mind.

All this because of *Hugh*? What the fuck have I done with my life? I study my reflection in the mirror of the bathroom and feel pathetically small. It's not helped by the stranger's oversized jacket now too warm on my torso. It's unflattering, but at least it meant I didn't freeze to death. If I hadn't been so angry at slipping on the icy roads and falling into the snowbank in the first place, I would have turned on the charm enough to give me some sort of fun while I'm here. He was *hot*. Tall and broad-chested, stubble that looks like he could

grow a full beard if he wanted to, and tendrils of hair that appeared out the bottom of his beanie.

I sigh as I remember his warning and turn the water on to wash my face. He's right. I need to get my act together. I'm going to get in, do this story, and get out. The angrier I am at the whole story in the first place will not make it go any faster. I *didn't* get the embezzlement story, I don't even have Hugh anymore (not if I can help it), this assignment is nothing more than a chance for me to get out of Atlanta, and I'm now stuck here with icy roads and fucking gorgeous strangers who vaguely threaten me to quit with the whining. I open my phone with the intent to call Hugh but throw it back on the bed in anger. I will *not* give in already. Hugh's not going to win this one.

I bend down to splash the water on my face, when the water stops for a second, splutters, and then starts spraying a deluge of water all over my face. I scramble to turn it off, squealing in horror, before looking at my angry, disappointed, frustrated, and now damp expression.

I take a deep breath and walk downstairs to where I'd seen the owner sitting in the main sitting room. The minute she sees me, her eyes widen and she stands up. "The sink! Oh my God! Someone was supposed to have fixed that already!" She rushes towards me. "I am so sorry, sweetheart. He was supposed to have fixed it before you got here. Let me give him a call, and I'll—"

“I’m about to leave. I hope it’ll be fixed by the time I get back.”

“It will. You have my word. We don’t currently have any other rooms available.” She smiles nervously. “So close to the Christmas season. You must understand with people such as yourself coming to work on the festival. It’s going to be our biggest year—”

“As long as it’s fixed,” I say tightly. “I just need it fixed.”

“Of course. Absolutely.”

I turn on my heel and make my way up to my room, feeling the urge to give up on this stupid idea to begin with. Maybe I’ll quit. Move out of Atlanta. New York might be fun. Find a new job, maybe even a boyfriend.

I flop on the bed and close my eyes. “Get some new friends,” I mutter to myself. “Or...*some* friends.”

I open my eyes and stare up at the popcorn ceiling. *A family.*

There’s a gentle knock on my door, and after a halfhearted come in, the same stranger who dug my car out of the snow pushes the door open to stand in the doorway, appraising me. I study him right back, hating the fact that he’s stupidly gorgeous.

He considers my sorry appearance, and a twitch of a smile appears at the corner of his lips.

I push my tongue against my teeth and glare at him as I get up from the bed. “So, it was *you* who was supposed to fix my sink? Did you plan this?”

His eyebrows rise up his forehead. “Was it *planned* that you were rude when I was helping you after you got stuck in a snowbank before I gave you directions to somewhere I was supposed to have fixed the sink to stop you from getting water all over you when I didn’t know what time you were supposed to be arriving or that you would have a desire to use the sink right away?” He checks his watch. “I was told before noon. It is still before noon.”

He gives me a calm grin before walking into the bathroom and getting to work on the plumbing underneath it.

I purse my lips. “The water came from the top—”

“Well, I’d assume so, otherwise I’d wonder why your face is wet and not your shoes.”

I put my hands on my hips and scowl at him as he works. I turn and start to unpack my suitcase, trying to find something that is warm enough for this stupid town. I knew it would be cold here, but I didn’t think it would be *this* cold.

“Are you this rude to everyone?” I ask with a frown as I riffle through my clothes.

He’s got a wrench in his hand, looking like one of my fantasies, and isn’t looking anywhere near me. “Just the hot ones,” he mutters. His response stops me in my tracks, and I glance over at him, all retorts gone from my lips. Interesting. “Are *you* this rude to everyone?”

I grin at him. “Just the hot ones.” He doesn’t look at me, but I see the exhaled laugh through his shoulders.

The handyman is still focused on the sink, so I strip my wet sweater and shirt off and replace it with a thin, form-fitting long-sleeved tee and the warmest sweater I have, which isn't that warm to begin with.

When I glance over at him, he catches my eye in the mirror. He blushes and looks away, and I find myself studying him that little bit closer.

He's got everything I would like, sure. He's a bit scruffy, which isn't my usual preference, and he's wearing *plaid*, as if he's out of a Hallmark Christmas movie. If his jacket wasn't proof enough, he's broad-shouldered and taller than I am, and I'm so distracted by my thoughts wondering what he looks like with his shirt off that I don't notice him turning around to get something out of his toolbox until his shirt rides up enough that I get a glimpse of the skin of his waist. My mouth practically salivates at the thought. His eyes are level with my heeled boots before rising up to my hips and back down again.

I smirk as he turns back to the sink.

He clears his throat and stands up to bend over the sink, I assume to take it apart, but it certainly looks like a temptation I should be adamantly stopping.

I turn and look out the window at the dreary, snow-covered little landscape.

"I thought you were excited about the Christmas festival," the handyman says with his back to me.

I snort. “Excited? *Why?* Who could possibly be excited about coming to a cold, tacky, cozy little town for a *Christmas* festival? I don’t even *like* Christmas.”

The handyman turns around in surprise. “The woman on the phone said you couldn’t wait.”

“Woma—” I narrow my eyes. “*Joclyn*. No. I didn’t *want* to come to this dumpy town for two weeks! Who would?”

The man looks uncomfortable, and all progress in anything happening between us is gone. “A lot of people do. Why are you even—”

“I was forced here. It was either lose my damn job or come to this dismal town to report on this stupid fucking festival until everything settles in Atlanta. I told you that earlier.”

He wipes his hands on his jeans. “Atlanta. To be fair, you were largely talking to yourself earlier.”

“I *wasn't*. You just weren’t apparently *listening*.”

He turns back to the sink. “What happened that needs to settle?”

I wave my hand, even though he’s not looking at me to notice, and lean on the windowpane. “Long story and not your concern.” I sigh loudly. “So, what’s there to do in this shithole other than cry yourself to sleep in this dump of a room?”

The handyman laughs. “You’re really not having a good time, are you? I meant it earlier. People here don’t like outsiders. Especially ones with attitudes. You treat us like shit and we’ll give it right back.” He looks at me through the

mirror. “If you’re not happy, it’ll be ten times worse by the time you leave.”

I lie on the bed and rub a hand over my face. I’ve already got a headache, and I have barely been here an hour.

“The owners of this place don’t have a whole lot of money, but they will go to the ends of the earth to make sure you’re comfortable. Rosie owns the local bar, and sure, the beer is a little expensive, but the building is warm and the company friendly. And hey, Debbie will kiss you under the mistletoe at the festival if you want it.”

“I don’t ever want to kiss anyone named Debbie,” I mumble miserably. I want to go home, wherever that may be. “Does Rosie have whiskey I can drown in?”

“No.”

“So, there’s nothing here?” I drop my hand onto the bed and groan loudly. “This is just fucking perfect.” I twist my head to see the man’s fine ass as he leans over the sink. My thoughts are taking a dangerous turn. “The owners of this place want me comfortable, hey?”

“Mmhmm.”

“I bet they want to set me up with their daughter. It’s a small town. They want someone from the big city to be able to take care of any future grandchildren.”

The man chuckles. “They only have one kid, and most grandchildren are already accounted for. They might try to set

you up with their son though. Forgive me for generalizing, but I don't think a daughter would be your type."

I look over in surprise. "But, it's—"

"It's a small town, yes, but the gays have long since infiltrated our ranks."

I'm still trying to figure out if that's an insult or not when he grins at me, peering out from the bathroom.

"That was a joke. You'll be fine here."

I sit up and bite my lip. "Were you also joking about the son? I think my perspective about this town could change if someone could take my mind off it." The man is silent, and I look over at him. I've probably offended him. I *think* we're flirting. I'm so out of the game. My recent conquests have been trying to convince Hugh, and I didn't have to do all that much work. This guy probably has a rotation of men he cycles through. God, those *arms*. "What's his name? The son?"

"Uh...Dylan."

"Dylan. Hm." I lean back on my arms. "Single?"

"Yep."

"Age?"

The man shrugs and looks at me over his shoulder. "About my age? Early thirties." He catches my eye. "At a guess."

"Hot?"

He gives me a dim smile. "That's personal preference."

I move to lean against the doorway of the bathroom and watch him work. “Personal preference. My last partner was my fifty-five-year-old boss who had a stern portrait of Queen Victoria watching my every move in his bedroom. I don’t think I *have* a personal pref—”

“Done,” the man says triumphantly. “Your sink is working.”

I take in a deep breath to stop the rise of anger at being interrupted. “Thank you,” I say stiffly. “It should have been fixed *before* I got here.”

He smiles and raises his eyebrows quickly at me before leaving the room without so much as a goodbye.

I scowl at my closed door before spotting the man’s jacket still lying on the desk near the door. I purse my lips and pull it over my shoulders, walking down the stairs after waiting the minimum amount of time until the stranger would have left.

The owner of The Red Maple waves at me as I make it to the main room. “Did my son fix your sink?”

I sigh at the conversation with the stranger. “No, someone else did. I didn’t get his name.” *Damn*. I didn’t get his name. No wonder he was short with me.

The woman blinks at me and frowns at the stairs. “No, it was Dylan. I only sent Dylan to go fix it.” She gives a small laugh. “I’d be surprised if anyone else in this town knows how to fix a sink. Dyl is our resident handyman, and if he can’t fix it, we have to get someone from the town over.” She chuckles,

and her gaze lands on the jacket around my shoulders. “That’s his, isn’t it?”

She chuckles kindly as I stare at her, frozen in space. I start a few times before frowning. “The man who was just fixing my sink was Dylan? As in...your son?”

“Yes. Why? Is that a problem?” She looks bewildered why that might be a problem, and I let out a nervous laugh.

“No, no problem. I just...” I wave my hand and shake my head. “Never mind. I just... It means he spoke about himself in the third person, and *that’s* confusing.”

She rolls her eyes. “I will never understand what goes on in that man’s head. Sorry for that. If your sink is working, he’s doing his job at least. If there’s anything I can do for you while you’re here, Mr. Miller, let me know.”

I give her a weak smile and walk out into the freezing air. I have to go to the local TV station, where there’s apparently a man named Nolan who will be my cameraman for the festival report. Atlanta gave up on sending anyone with me, but I wish I had Sean with me. Sean actually knows what he’s doing. I don’t have high hopes for this Nolan guy.

My low expectations are warranted. Nolan is just barely in his twenties, has very little experience working behind a camera, and was hired as there was no one else who had any interest in it. He’s taken an “early break” from school, he says, but I don’t know why or what that means.

And he appears to be my biggest fan.

“Mr. Miller, I am so excited to work for you. This is going to be *great*, right?”

“Sure,” I mutter. “Whatever you say.”

“I’ve watched all your work in preparation for you coming to Redhaven.”

“That’s great,” I say vaguely, walking around the very small building that houses the news in all mediums. TV, radio, and newspapers are all produced in the same building; they all share the offices and the archiving room, nicknamed “The Vault.” It’ll do for a couple miserable weeks.

I look back at the kid. “Who are the owners of The Red Maple?”

“Uh...the Turners? Why?”

“What’s their son’s name?”

Nolan hesitates for a second before a hint of a blush creeps into his cheeks. “You mean Dylan? Tall, handsome, stubble...” The blush deepens. “He’s the one to call if you need anything fixed. Everyone knows him, so if you need help, ask anyone. It’ll get back to him. It always does.”

I hum before focusing back on Nolan. “Right. I’ll let you know when I need you, okay?”

He holds out a piece of paper with an unsteady hand. “Here’s my number. Call me. Anytime. For anything. I know my way around Redhaven, so give me a call if you need a guide.”

I slowly take the note and scan the contents before briefly nodding and putting in my pocket. “See you around.”

I pull Dylan’s jacket tighter around me and head back out into the snowy hellscape that is Redhaven, New Hampshire.

Chapter Four

DYLAN

I'm hanging Christmas lights on Main Street in front of the bar when I get a flash of navy blue and yellow from the top of my ladder. I chuckle as I see my jacket wrapped as tight around the news reporter's slim body as it can get.

He'd be the most handsome man I'd ever seen if he could get that damn frown off his face twenty-four-seven. He's got a gorgeous body, a sharp jaw, and a very neat appearance, none of which normally pass through Redhaven. He's not my usual type. I like my men to be a little more self-sufficient. Men who don't look like they need someone to take care of them. Clay Miller is exactly the type of man I normally stay away from. Despite that, he's the most handsome man I've ever seen, *regardless* of the frown. God, the things I want to do to that man... I haven't been this eager for someone in a very long time.

Clay spots me from across the street, and I see his eyes narrow from here. I chuckle to myself and slowly climb down the ladder as Clay waits to be able to cross the street.

“Hello, *Dylan Turner*.”

I laugh and brush the snow and ice off my boots. “How’s the sink?”

He growls and stands next to me, stamping his feet to keep warm. He’s wearing the same shiny-heeled boots and impossibly tight skinny jeans that he was wearing yesterday. They must be his warmest clothes.

“You lied to me yesterday.”

I stand up and look at him before heading towards my truck, hoping Clay follows. “I did no such thing. *You* didn’t ask for my name, did you?”

He folds his arms and shivers. “You wouldn’t have continued your little charade if I *had* asked for your name?”

I look at him and chuckle. “I knew you would never ask.” I place my tools back in the truck and pull out a beanie of Aiden’s that he never wears. I turn to Clay and gently place it over his head, tucking it around his ears. “You need some warmer clothes. You’re going to freeze out here.”

Surprisingly, he blushes. He appears more timid when he does, and I drop my arms away from him before turning in the direction of Redhaven Park. I try to remind myself that starting anything right now is a complication I can do without. *Although*, he *is* only here for the Christmas festival and then he’s gone... I turn to find him standing by my truck, looking uncertain.

“Come on.”

He trudges after me, pulling the beanie lower on his forehead. “Did you forget your own age yesterday?” he asks with a huff as he tries to keep pace with me.

“I know my age. It’s early thirties.” I shrug. “Everything I said was true.”

“Oh really?” He smirks. “Were you asking me out on a date yesterday?”

I stop and turn to look at him. “In what way was any of our conversation me asking you out on a date?”

“You said your parents were going to set us up, you said I was hot, and you were also checking me out.”

“I said they were *more likely* to set us up on a date. Not that they would. And none of that implied a date.” My mom has *already* tried to get us together, but I’m not about to tell Clay that.

Clay smirks but is interrupted from responding by Rosie gesturing at me from the window of her bar. I chuckle and take Clay’s arm, leading him inside. At least he’ll be warmer.

“Hello, Rosie,” I say, knowing that her reason for calling me in has little to do with a task she needs me to do and more her curiosity about the strange, handsome man at my elbow. “Need anything?”

“No thanks, Dylan! Thought you could use a drink, that’s all! I’ve seen you working hard all morning.” She turns her attention to Clay and bats her lashes. “I’m Rosie. I own the bar —”

“Clayton,” he says tightly. He’s back to the same Clay I met yesterday—attitude, irritation, and a look of wanting to be anywhere else.

“Clayton. It’s so nice to see new faces around here. Is Dylan playing tour guide? I can take over. Why don’t you come with —”

I smile widely and slide my hand around Clay’s shoulders. “I think I’ve got it, Rosie.”

Clay gives a brilliant grin, and both Rosie and I are momentarily winded. That is potent. He rocks back on his heels and puts his hands in his back pockets, jutting his knee out casually and leaning into me. “Thanks for the kind offer, but look at this guy... I think I might stick with him for a while longer.” He winks at Rosie and catches my gaze as he looks at me, slowly dragging his tongue through his teeth. My brain goes blank until I notice both Clay and Rosie looking at me.

“We’d love to,” Clay says to Rosie, and before I know what’s happening, I’m being led over to the booth by the window.

Clay flashes another one of his broadcaster smiles as Rosie reluctantly leaves us alone.

“What are we doing?” I whisper.

He pretends to look at the menu. “I’m doing what you suggested. I’m being *nice*.” He folds his hands and grins. “I am *not* sorry for spreading rumors that I’m here as your date

though. You might not have invited me, but here we are.” His smile falters a little. “Does everyone know that...?”

“Bold of you to assume I’m gay.”

Clay rolls his eyes. “Please. You called me hot and stared at my ass. It was either gay or you want to use my skin as a new jacket.” He barely smiles. “As it happens, almost everyone in this town is a fan of yours, and I figure that would be questioned if you regularly murdered guests.”

“Ah,” I say quietly. “Maybe I’ve bought the townspeople’s silence.”

Clay looks into my eyes before chuckling. “Well, joke’s on you. I’m in a small town when I don’t want to be. I must already be in hell, so do your worst.” He looks down at himself. “And I’d make for a *nice* jacket.”

I surprise myself by the genuine laugh that comes out of my throat. “I’d prefer you alive when I’m wearing you.”

Clay puts his menu down and folds his hands on it. “Jesus. That was...” He takes a deep breath. “Everyone *must* know you’re gay. Comments like that wouldn’t go unnoticed.”

I smile. “We’re a small town, Clay. Everyone knows everything about everyone. In high school, I kissed a boy in the locker rooms during a football game, and my parents asked me about it at halftime.” I study him for a moment. “There’s also no one in Redhaven I would say comments like that to.”

Clay chuckles and loses some of the rigidity in his shoulders. “Was it a good kiss at least?”

I look around the room before spotting a familiar blond head behind the bar. “Hey, Tyler?”

Tyler looks over distractedly. “Mm?”

“Was our kiss a good one?”

He looks back at what he was doing. “Not really. No offense.”

I look at Clay and shrug. “Ah well.”

He grimaces. “So, it’s a *small* town, then.”

“Oh yeah.”

We both chuckle as Rosie puts two glasses of beer in front of us before disappearing quickly. It’s Rosie’s regular test for new visitors to Redhaven, and the concoction in Clay’s glass is barely drinkable, but I don’t tell Clay that.

I lean back in my chair and wait as he takes a sip. It hits his tongue, and he puts the glass down instantly, covering his mouth with back of his hand. “What the *fuck*?” he breathes. “That’s—”

Rosie appears at our table again, her eyes wide with innocence. “Well? What do you think? It’s our local—”

“Give it a rest, Rosie,” I say with an exhaled laugh, sipping at my own drink. “He’s here to make us look good, remember that.”

“Yeah, don’t get on my bad side,” Clay warns, and I’m surprised at the playful tone in his voice. He can be charming when he wants to be.

She scoffs at me. “Ah, you give up too quickly.” She places a new drink on the table, collects the first one, and places a piece of paper on the table. “This is for Aiden. Something he had to do for school.” She gives me a kind smile and leaves, standing just out of sight, presumably to eavesdrop on my apparent date with Clay.

Clay peers into the new drink, probably terrified of what he’s about to drink.

“Don’t worry. That one is drinkable. Rosie likes to trick newcomers.” I raise my brows. “*That’s* what you could have been drinking if you kept up with your woe-is-me attitude.”

He leans back in his chair and scowls. “Woe *is* me.” He studies me momentarily before looking around the room, his gaze landing on a pool table in the corner. “Ooh. You play?”

“Not very well,” I say into my drink.

Clay narrows his eyes at me. “Liar.”

I splutter out a laugh. “What?”

“You’re lying to me. You *can* play, and you can play well. You were waiting for me to invite you to play, and then you were going to obliterate my ass.”

My thoughts take a giant dive into sexual territory, and unwilling images of Clay bent over the pool table spring to mind. I clear my throat and smile blankly at Clay. “You met me yesterday, and you think you know when I’m lying to you?”

Clay gets a wicked grin on his face. “No, but I *can* tell that the thoughts in your head just then were far from innocent.” He taps his long fingers on the table for a second before smirking. “Okay, why don’t you tell me something about yourself, and I have to guess whether you’re lying or telling me the truth. If I get them *right*, you have to give me whatever help I want with this Christmas festival report.”

I roll my eyes and wait for him to continue.

“And if I get them *wrong*...” He looks around us before leaning closer to me. “Whatever went through your mind just then when I mentioned the pool table...we’ll do it.”

I slowly lean back in my chair and deliberately study the pool table. The thought of Clay’s gorgeous body draped over it is making my stomach clench. My gaze drifts back to Clay’s suddenly hungry expression.

“I change my mind,” Clay says quickly. “Right or wrong. Pool table. Fucking hell.”

I chuckle and fold my arms across my chest. “Okay, your original bet. I’ll help with the Christmas festival report regardless, but...sure.” I think about it for a moment as Clay glances over at the pool table. He leans on his elbow and pouts. “I’ve been to forty-five of the fifty states. Truth or lie.”

Clay squares his shoulders and studies me closely. I can see gold specks in his brilliant green eyes. “Lie.”

I hum, and he grins. “Do you *want* to win?” I ask.

Clay taps impatiently at the table, and I think of another statement.

“Okay...I’ve had more girlfriends than boyfriends.”

“Hmm... Lie.”

I shake my head. “Nope. One wrong.”

“Huh.” Clay furrows his brow. “Are you bi? Or *actually* a murderer?”

“No,” I chuckle. “I went through a phase. Also, that was *kind of* a technicality in that I have had *one* girlfriend, and no one has ever been considered a boyfriend.”

He takes a sip of his drink. “Why not? You’re hot. You seem to be kind enough, you’re *not* a murderer, and you are already driving me wild with what you want to do on that pool table over there, so I don’t see the problem.”

“Yes, well, people don’t usually stay in Redhaven for too long.” I chuckle as a sign I want to change the subject. “Next sentence. I didn’t go to college.”

Clay opens and closes his mouth before chuckling softly. “True. You didn’t go to college.”

I hold my hands out wide. “Looks like you won, Clay. Help with the Christmas festival report it is.”

His eyes glitter with amusement, and he opens his mouth to speak before he suddenly sighs dramatically and closes his eyes. “Oh God. Quick, bend me over the pool table and save me the trouble of breaking this poor boy’s heart to his face.”

There's suddenly another person at our table, and I look up to see Nolan glancing quickly between Clay and me. Ah. Nolan would have jumped at the chance of a handsome young man in his reach. I smother my smirk. "Ah...hey, Nolan. Can I help you with something?"

He barely glances at me before sitting next to me, making me shuffle over. "I said you should call *me*, Mr. Miller," he says with a bright smile. Only, I can see the way his jaw is tight and how forced that smile is. I look over at Clay and grin.

Clay looks at Nolan, if maybe for the first time, and clears his throat. "I was...er, doing interviews for the festival? You said if I needed any help to go see Dylan, right?" Clay looks at me and lets his gaze linger. "Boy, do I need some help." He slowly gazes over at the pool table as I grin.

Nolan barely gives me a glance. "Should I go get my camera?"

"That won't be necessary. I have work to get done," I say, draining my beer and urging Nolan to get out so I can. "No press, please." I catch Clay's gaze and grin at him as I get out.

I'm walking back in the direction of my truck when I hear Clay following me. I don't know what excuse he gave to Nolan, but I can't imagine it'll stick.

"I really do have work to do, Clay. Not everyone who visits Redhaven has the same views on it as you do. Which means a Christmas festival to prepare for."

He whimpers as he hurries to catch up to me. He tugs on my arm and spins me to face him. “Can I just...hover around you for a while? I don’t want to have to figure out how the fuck I’m supposed to spend my time alone. And I sure as hell don’t want to spend it with Nolan in there—as nice a person as I’m sure he is.”

I purse my lips and glance over his outfit. “Fine. But we need to get you warmer clothes.” I frown at his boots. “And something more suitable to walk in. You’re going to break your ankle.”

“I think I’ll be fine.” He goes to take a confident step forward and slips on a frozen section of the sidewalk, landing in a fortunately placed snowbank, piled there off the roof from the diner we’re next to.

Clay seems to give up. He groans and lets his limbs droop into the snow. I walk casually over to him and peer down at him.

“Bury me and let me freeze to death,” he whimpers.

I hold my hand out, and he takes it limply. After hauling him to his feet, I brush off the ice that has stuck to his jacket and head, my fingers brushing lightly over his red-stained cheeks. “No giving up yet. We’re still—”

“Heads!” comes a yell from above us.

I automatically step under the eaves of the diner, but Clay doesn’t understand what’s about to happen, and before I can tug him under the eaves with me, a pile of snow drops off the

building and directly on top of the poor, unsuspecting news reporter from Atlanta.

Clay barely reacts. He stares at me, covered in snow, and slowly shakes his head. “I give up,” he says blandly. “This is *shit*.”

I chuckle and take his arm. “Lesson one, don’t stand on the edge of the sidewalk after a snowfall. Some of our buildings can’t handle the snow piled on it, and if the air stays cold enough that it doesn’t melt, we have to push it off.”

“I’m really glad I know that *now*,” he says dryly.

I tug him towards my truck, his hand tight in mine, the nearness of him tingling my palm. “I’ll get you some warmer clothes and—”

“A plane ticket back to Atlanta.”

I pull him harder. “Whatever you want. But Nolan just saw that happen, and he wants to come be your savior.”

Clay whimpers and gets in the truck as fast as he can.

The car ride is quiet as I pull up in the guest house’s drive of The Red Maple. Clay stares miserably out at the gray surroundings, and I don’t know what to say to him. I’ve spent so long trying to make sure that strangers stay *out* of Redhaven, not figuring out ways to keep someone *in*.

He gets out and starts trudging towards the main house, but I nod in the opposite direction. “This way.”

“Where are we going?”

“To get you something to wear. You’ll feel more comfortable. You might even start to like it here if you’re wearing the right things.”

“Doubt it,” he mumbles.

I chuckle and lead him into my house, still warm after having the heat on all night for Aiden.

Clay looks around him in surprise. “Wow. Is this yours?”

“Mmhmm. Well, it’s the guest house for the B&B. Mine for the foreseeable future, yes.”

He slowly gazes at everything. It’s not personalized at all. I’m still too hesitant to make it my own. I’m under the impression that it won’t be a permanent situation. “It’s so cozy. I’m impressed.” His gaze drifts over the very few console games that Aiden has. “*Just Dance*. Nice. I used to be pretty good at that.” He smiles at me. “I thought you’d be living in a bachelor’s haven with dirty underwear and old pizza boxes.”

“Ah, you’re thinking *Old* Dylan. This is *New* Dylan.”

He chuckles, and I run upstairs to retrieve some of the old clothes I’d unearthed while I was thinking about Clay’s clothing problems last night. Amongst other things. Finding my clothes for him had focused my thoughts into something that meant I didn’t try to rip his clothes off the second I saw him.

When I gather them up in my arms and head back downstairs, I find him shirtless and shaking the snow off the beanie and jacket in the laundry room. I step backwards in

surprise and accidentally put my foot into the edge of the staircase, making a loud enough noise to cause the both of us to jump.

He looks over in surprise. “Did you find anything for me to wear? I’m going to look even more like a child in your clothes.”

I avert my gaze to the floor and hold out the clothes. “Here. I found some from when I was younger that might fit you. They won’t be perfect, but they’ll do until we can get you something better. There’s a Walmart about an hour away that we can go to sometime.”

“*A Walmart?* Absolutely not. Do you *know* how expensive these clothes are?”

“Just take the clothes, will you? It’s either Walmart or freeze, Clay.”

He slowly takes the clothes with a growl, and when I brave a look at him, he’s studying me curiously. “You’ve had sex before, haven’t you?”

I blink at him. “Yes, of course I have.” I narrow my eyes. “Why?”

He shrugs. “You seemed awkward with my shirt off. I didn’t know if it was *such* a small town that you’ve never found anyone you’d wanted to sleep with.”

I chuckle and shake my head. “No.” I fold my arms and lean against the doorway as Clay inspects the clothes I’ve given him and I inspect him. He’s taken his boots off too, and the

bare feet—look is surprisingly sexy. I’m not usually a feet kind of guy, but he looks so casual. “Um, but...the people that I have slept with never looked like...*you*. It, um, threw me for a second.”

Clay looks down at himself before looking over at me, his smile widening. “Are you saying I’m hot?”

“Personal preference,” I whisper.

He takes a slow step towards me. “Mm... Part of the reason I hate being here is that I’m a little bit starved of compliments, and my ego got a giant hit right before I got here. So, if you think I’m hot, can you tell me?”

“I’ve already told you you’re hot.”

“Mm...say the words,” he whispers.

He stands close to me, and I grin down at him. He’s a lot shorter than me without the heeled shoes on. “I think you’re fucking hot, Clay.” I cup his cheek and tilt his face up to mine. “Whoever made you starved for compliments is an asshole, because *God*, you should have an ego.”

Clay stands on his tiptoes and delicately presses his lips to mine. My spare hand runs around his bare waist, and I go to deepen the kiss, running my tongue into his parted lips and making him moan into my mouth. His fingers press into my hair, his whole body fighting to get as close to mine as it can get. I get the sensation that we’re moving, and he presses me against the washing machine behind me. It’s so nice to have someone in my arms again, the warmth of his skin radiating

through my palms, and I do all I can to stop from gripping tight to him and having everything end right here.

Before I can do anything more with the half-naked, panting man at my fingertips, the sound of my front door opening and slamming on its frame makes the both of us jolt.

“Hello? I’m home!”

Aiden.

I draw away from Clay and check my watch. “Fuck. *Fuck*. It’s...” I clear my throat. “Uh, I’ll leave you with those clothes. I’ll be...right back. Um...just stay here?”

Clay looks confused as I walk quickly out of the laundry and take a second to readjust the growing erection in my jeans before heading towards where Aiden has dumped his bag on the living room floor and is sitting at the bench in the kitchen. My truck was in the drive; Aiden comes straight here if my truck is there. I hate my luck.

“How was school, buddy?” It’s an effort to keep my voice even.

“Boring,” he says with a pout. “Can I stay home tomorrow? Or with Grammy and—”

“Nope. Sorry.” I open the fridge to find him an after-school snack like I usually do, but my brain can’t focus on what’s in it. It’s very firmly focused on the half-naked man in my laundry, my lips still burning from his kiss. I want *more*. “Uh...why don’t you go see if Grammy has something to eat? I’ll join you there for dinner. I just have to...uh...”

He groans. “Fine.” He trudges out of the room, collecting his bag on the way.

“Get her to look at your homework with you too!” I call out, already walking back towards the laundry room.

When I open the door, Clay is standing there, dressed again, his brows raised and his arms folded.

“You have a *son*?”

Chapter Five

CLAY

Dylan scratches at his head and sighs. “Uh, nephew. Technically. But, um...I’m his guardian, so I guess technicality doesn’t matter.”

I push past him. “Thanks for the clothes,” I mutter.

“Clay...”

I turn back to face him. “You said yesterday that you were an only child.”

He nods slowly. “I am. Now.” He folds his arms across his chest and doesn’t look at me. “My sister died of cancer two years ago. Aiden’s biological dad is nonexistent, and I was the most logical choice to take care of Aiden when Rach died.”

I stare at him, feeling the weight of his heartbreak in those few sentences. “Oh,” I whisper. “I’m sorry.”

He gives me a weak smile. “Yeah,” he breathes. “Um. I should have told you? I guess?”

We both stop and stare at each other until I clear my throat. “I...” I purse my lips and decide not to answer him. “I’m going to go. Thanks for the clothes.”

“You don’t have to go.” He scratches the back of his neck. “Uh...Aiden will be with my mom for the rest of the...”

“I’m sorry, I...”

I head towards the front door, and Dylan sighs. “Hey, uh, there’s a snowstorm brewing tonight. Be careful. You got attacked by snow when you weren’t even doing anything, so I would highly recommend you stay *indoors*.”

I smirk and give him a small salute. “Yes, boss.”

“And if you need anything...I’m right here.”

I open the door and get blasted with cold air. The sky definitely looks grayer than it did before.

“Oh, Clay?”

I turn back expectantly, and Dylan grins.

“You look really cute wearing my clothes.”

A slow smile spreads across my face, and I can feel my cheeks getting warm. “Thank you,” I whisper. He gives me a small salute, and I walk out into the cold air, grinning wildly.

I spot the nephew with Dylan’s mom in the living room of the B&B, and I smile kindly at them as she looks up to spot me watching.

“Is everything okay, Mr. Miller?” she asks, making the motions to stand.

I wave my hand to get her to stay with her grandson. “Yeah, sorry. I was...” I chuckle and point to the stairs, realizing I have no end to my sentence. What do I say? *Sorry. I found out about your daughter’s death while I was trying to fuck your son?* “I’m okay.”

Her gaze drops over my outfit and the clothes in my hand before she covers her smile with a mug of tea, turning back to Dylan’s nephew.

I wince and disappear upstairs.

When I’m alone in my room again, I rub my hands over my face and suppress a groan.

Starting anything with anyone while I’m here has got to be the world’s biggest mistake. I’m going to head back to Atlanta after the Christmas festival, and everything will go back to normal, leaving behind any small-town men, guardian of their nephew men, hot as *fuck* men. Men who have the body out of one of my dreams and gives me compliments. I grimace and sit heavily on the bed.

I’m in trouble. There’s no way I’m going to be able to distance myself from Dylan over the remaining two weeks I have here, and I don’t particularly want to. Dylan’s my only hope at surviving this stupid town, and we both know it.

I groan and get Dylan’s jacket, hoping to get to the station and do a bit of research of the Christmas festival. Maybe if I can get most of the job done now, I’ll get that cameraman to send me footage of the actual event and I can go home sooner, back to *my* world again.

I'm lost in my own thoughts when I walk downstairs until I hear Dylan's mom's voice angrily around the corner. I stop in surprise and step back so I'm hidden by the stairwell wall.

"I've told you we're not interested in selling," she says firmly.

There's a pause before a calm male voice says, "Listen, Carole, you're running out of—"

"This is *my* property! I'm not running out of anything!"

The man chuckles. "You're running out of *funds*. We both know that this place is falling down and your best bet is to let *us* take it over." Carole tries to interject, but the man speaks over her. "Things have been tough after your daughter's hospital bills. We all know it. You can't afford to *not* take us up on this offer. We've offered a price for you to relocate, and I suggest you take us up on it before it is withdrawn."

"You didn't offer a price to relocate," she hisses. "You gave us directions to a *retirement home*."

I frown as Carole continues.

"*Leave* my property before I force you to."

The man exhales in frustration. "Fine, Carole. Have it your way. You have until Christmas Day to get the remaining money though."

"Christmas Day? My grandson is here. You can't take his *home* away from him on Christmas Day! We've got bookings until Jan—"

“I don’t care. Christmas Day.”

I peer around the corner to see Dylan’s mom stand up to an impressive towering figure and get right in the man’s face. The man is younger than I expected him to be, probably late thirties, and there’s something I don’t like about him.

“Or *what?*” Carole says menacingly in his face.

He chuckles arrogantly before picking up a thick jacket and walking to pick up a bag from the front desk. I notice a small notebook in his jacket. I narrow my eyes as he starts to walk past my hiding spot.

I deliberately go flying out of the stairwell, smacking straight into him and making him drop all the items in his hand. “Oh my God, I’m so sorry,” I say as we both collect ourselves from the floor. I pick up his jacket first and pull that notebook out of his pocket before he can see me. “I was in such a rush to leave before the storm hits that I didn’t look where I was going. Forgive me.”

The man glares at me for a second before brushing himself off and storming his way out of the building.

I watch until he’s gone and hum under my breath as I turn to face Carole.

She has a small smile on her face, but her expression is serious. “Mr. Miller. Sorry if we disturbed you. Is there anything I can do for you?”

I give her a polite smile. “No, uh... I’m sorry for eavesdropping.”

She nods civilly and walks away. I purse my lips and look around the living room. The building *is* falling apart.

I'm so lost in my thoughts that I don't notice my name being called when I trudge through the snow to the doorway of the station.

“*Mr. Miller!*”

I turn at the last second, my thoughts easing for a second, enough for me to register my name. Nolan—red-faced and grinning—appears at my side.

“You didn't tell me you were going to be here!”

I inwardly groan and shove my hands in my pockets, Dylan's clothes doing their hardest to keep the chill out of my bones. “Spur of the moment. You can call me Clay, Nolan. This town calls people by their last names far too often.”

Nolan dangles a key in between us. “You might need this, *Clay.*”

I look dumbfounded at the closed door and back at the key. “There's not anyone in there?” I don't think the office in Atlanta is ever truly empty.

“The radio guys might still be there, but I don't think they'd let you in even if they *did* happen to hear you.” He shrugs happily. “They're on the other side of the building.”

“Ah.” I reach for the key, but Nolan takes it out of my reach and shoulders his way past me to the door. “If you'd ju—”

“It’s no problem!” Nolan says, shutting the door behind us and walking quickly down the hallway that I’ve already been shown—in great depth—that leads to the TV newsroom.

I clear my throat. “Actually, I was hoping to go to the archive. I should look up some previous year’s articles about the festival.”

Nolan blinks in surprise before switching course. “Of course. I didn’t think about that.”

I study the young man as we walk through the quiet building. He doesn’t look at me, but I can tell he’s well aware of my eyes on him. There’s a blush creeping up his neck, and his shoulders are unusually straight. He’s not an unattractive person, but he’s certainly not something I would consider. *Dylan*, on the other hand, has been on my mind since I first saw him. And that was *before* the making out in his laundry room.

“What made you want to get into journalism, Nolan?” I ask. Anything to ease the awkward tension in the air and bring my thoughts back to neutral territory.

He shrugs. “I was a writer at the school paper. Seemed pretty good at it.”

I exhale a laugh. “Any news in Redhaven?”

“Nothing like what you’re used to, I bet. Not now that Rachel Turner isn’t here anymore.”

“Rachel Turner? That’s...”

Nolan nods and turns to look at me, pushing his ass against the door to the research room to open it. “Dylan’s sister. She was—” he scoffs “—*wild*. Gave people stories to write about at least.”

I sit down at a computer as Nolan continues to chatter above me about something to do with the research room and how little he has use for it. Dylan, his family, his nephew... They don’t seem like *wild* people.

With Nolan on the other side of the room, riffling through old newspapers, I load up the computer and start off safe.

Christmas festival Redhaven

A hundred articles come up of previous years, some about the holiday season in Redhaven, some about a Christmas light display that happens in one specific neighborhood, and one of things to do in Redhaven in the off months. I skim that article, and it amounts to almost nothing. I find one written by someone outside of Redhaven that says that the town lies in wait for the majority of the year while they wait for Christmas to arrive, and another one says that the summer is popular for weddings.

I jot down a few notes before checking to see where Nolan is. He’s watching me closely, and I startle. “Everything okay?”

He smiles nervously. “Um...are you and Dylan...”

My first instinct is to laugh, but I manage to suppress it in time to avoid hurting the boy’s feelings too much. “I’ve only

been here a couple of days. It takes me a little longer than that.”

He relaxes. “Oh, okay. I thought Rosie said you were—”

“Interested.”

Nolan’s face falls, and I hate how guilty that makes me. I’d never want to be with someone as young as Nolan. If there’s an age gap, I’m always going to be the younger one. That’s just how I work.

I clear my throat. “I, uh, don’t date people younger than me. Or...at *all*, usually. I’m leaving as soon as this Christmas festival is over, and I doubt I’ll see you again.”

Nolan’s gaze meets mine, hope returned. “That’s okay! It can be a lit—”

“Not happening. Sorry.”

He scowls momentarily, and I return to the computer screen, mindlessly scrolling through articles until Nolan gets off my back.

“Why do you like *Dylan* anyway?” Nolan grumbles under his breath. “It’s always *Dylan*. You know, they’re losing the B&B. The Turners’ might not be here for much longer either. And Dylan doesn’t technically even have a job! I don’t know why you think—”

“Nolan,” I say with a frown. “Is it any of your business? This town loves to gossip, but...” I trail off and squint at him. “Wait. Do you know why someone else wants to buy the property? It can’t be to keep it running.”

Nolan shakes his head. “I’m not sure. I haven’t heard anything. I imagine the council wants the land. It’s the biggest privately owned land in Redhaven. *And* surrounding areas, I would think.”

I furrow my brow and turn back to the computer, tapping at the keys with my thumb distractedly.

Nolan looks at his phone for a second. “How long are you going to be? I have to be home by—”

“You can leave,” I say vaguely, still thinking about the conversation I overheard at The Red Maple. “I’ve got more work to do.”

Nolan seems hesitant, but he leaves the key with me, explains how to lock the building, and then drags his feet as he leaves the room.

It’s as the door shuts behind him that I remember I have the small notebook in my pocket. I pull it out and flick through the pages. It’s mostly appointment times and dates, mostly for some of the local residents of Redhaven, including the Turners, Rosie’s bar, and the owner of the diner that had dumped snow on me earlier.

The only other name that makes a repeat appearance is someone named Tom Bradley.

I turn to the computer.

Tom Bradley Redhaven

Apparently Tom Bradley is the mayor of Redhaven and has been for close to six years. I hum, something not looking right

about the man's smirk in the photos, as I start scrolling through the articles.

I flip to a new page in my notebook and start taking notes.

Chapter Six

DYLAN

I shiver as I bundle both Aiden and myself up and make the sprint for the Maple. We'll sleep there until the storm passes over. There's bound to be something I need to do overnight, and I don't want to have to leave Aiden all alone in the guest house. It seems too cold for this early in the season. None of Redhaven's structures are equipped to handle this much snow.

“Do you think it'll be a snow day tomorrow?” Aiden asks, his eyes shining bright. “Maybe I won't have to go to school anyway!”

I chuckle and shake the snow off my jacket in the mud room at the main house. There are so many jackets and snow gear here, and I scan them all to try to find the one of mine that Clay has been using.

I frown as I don't see it but assume he must have it upstairs.

Aiden runs out of the mud room towards the fireplace where Dad and some of the other guests have set up to have a warm

cup of coffee. I bite my lip as I make it to the staircase and hesitate before taking them two at a time and squeezing my eyes shut as I come to a stop in front of Clay's door.

I tap lightly to no answer and scratch at my chin. Good, probably. I don't know what I was going to say if I saw him. He made it clear that me having guardianship of a child is an automatic no for him. It wouldn't be the first time it has happened in the two years since Rachel died.

Mom appears from another room, and I jump in surprise.

"Uh, I was just coming to find you," I say, taking a step away from Clay's door.

"I'm sure you were, my dear," she says with a calm grin. "*I* left my room several hours ago and haven't been seen since. So, if you were looking for *me*, I imagine *I'll* be back soon, so you can wait until then. Although, I thought you already saw *me* earlier after sending Aiden here."

My lips twitch. "What are you implying?"

She chuckles and pats me on the chest as she walks past. "Careful with that one."

"Mm... It doesn't matter. He freaked when he found out about Aiden. Like usual." I suddenly frown and spin to face her as she starts to head down the stairs. "Wait, did you say he was *out*? It's a blizzard outside. Where has he possibly gone?"

Mom shrugs. "I don't track my guests, Dylan, and he didn't tell me."

“Oh, *fuck*. He’s *absolutely* not climatized to this much snow. Can you look—”

Mom sighs. “We’ll look after Aiden. Make sure you stay safe too. He’s probably—”

I’m already at the bottom of the stairs, and I race back to the mud room to get my warm gear back on. “Thanks, Mom!”

I check the diner and the bar first.

“Hey, Rosie... You haven’t seen Clay, have you? The news reporter? Looks entirely unimpressed at being here?” *Has a body I want so desperately against mine*. I should have kept an eye on the time earlier, but would that have made things worse? I frown at myself.

She barely glances at me. “Sorry, love. Haven’t seen him.” She frowns at the snow out the window. “Hey, while you’re here—”

“Sorry! I really have to make sure Clay’s not stuck somewhere in the snow. I’d like to think he’s sensible, but... Look, I don’t think he is all that much.”

Rosie chuckles, and I spin to the door to head back to my truck. It’s getting close to not being able to drive, even with my snow tires on.

I nearly smack into Nolan coming in the other way.

“Dylan,” he says shortly before continuing on in the way he was going.

Rosie and I exchange a surprised glance. “Is everything okay, kid?” Rosie asks in amusement. It’s unusual for Nolan to be short with anyone. I’ve only ever heard him be *nice*.

“Fine,” he mumbles. He throws me an unimpressed look, and it dawns on me.

I chuckle and turn to face him properly. “Is this about Clay?” I say quietly.

Nolan sits at a table and scowls. “No.”

“No? Then what?”

He sits in silence for a minute. “Okay, yes, it’s about Clay. He said he isn’t interested in people younger than him.”

I exhale a laugh and sit across from him. “Sorry.”

He shrugs weakly. “Yeah, well, he said he’s interested in you, so I don’t know why you care. Anytime a hot guy comes to Redhaven, somehow they always find *you* first. It’s not fair.”

I laugh and pat him on the shoulder. “You’ll find your guy, Nolan. I promise. You’re heading back to school in the spring, right? There will be someone, I’m sure.”

He scoffs and doesn’t look at me.

“Besides, Clay is leaving in a couple of weeks, and you don’t want that at *this* point of your life. Wait until you’re old and bitter like me, and *then* you can settle for meaningless two-week flings, okay?”

Nolan scowls at me. “I can do what I want with my life, Dylan. Meaningless two-week flings are way better than what I’m currently doing, which is *nothing*. You think someone is going to come to *Redhaven* ready for a relationship? No. They’re not.”

I wince at Rosie, who shrugs helplessly. The wind howls even harder outside, and I study it in concern before looking back at Nolan. “You haven’t seen him, have you? Within the last hour?”

“He’s at the station. I left him there working *after* he told me that nothing would ever happen between us.”

Rosie steps in, much to my relief. “What would you like, Nolan, my dear? Anything you desire. On the house.”

I mouth a thank-you at Rosie and quickly make my way to the news station. Two of the radio guys are leaving just as I arrive, the door to the building catching on a pile of snow. I use the shovel from my truck to get them out.

“Hey, you wouldn’t happen to know if there’s still someone here, would you?” I ask over the storm when they are both freed.

Timmy shrugs. “There was a light on in the vault.”

His twin, Robbie, yells over the wind. “It was that new guy. From...somewhere down south. Somewhere *warmer* probably.”

“Thanks. Get home safe,” I shout, hurrying into the building.

Timmy gives me a small salute. “Thanks for the help, bro.”

I’m not really a “bro” sort of person, but I give them a small smile and walk into the quiet building, guessing on the direction of how to get where I’m supposed to be going. Everywhere is dark and quiet, the howling wind outside the only indicator of the real world.

I finally spot a lit-up room and see Clay hunched over, taking notes and frowning at a computer screen.

I gently tap on the door, and he goes flying, a terrified scream coming out of his throat as he spins to face me.

“Holy *fuck*,” he yells, bending over at the waist and bracing his hands on his knees. “Jesus *Christ*, Dylan!”

I screw my nose up and grimace as I walk in the door. “Sorry. I thought you would have heard me, but apparently not.”

“No, I did *not* hear you.” He puts a hand on his heart and leans his ass against the computer desk. “What are you doing here? You’re either here to stalk me or you’re here to fix something.”

I chuckle. “I...actually wanted to make sure you were safe and okay.”

“Safe and...” He frowns. “What?”

I blink at him before pointing to the small window on the other side of the room. “Clay, it’s one of the worst storms we’ve seen for this early in December. When I told you to stay indoors, I meant at the *Maple*, where there were *other people*.”

He studies the flurry of snow through the window in alarm, as if he hadn't noticed the weather at all.

I nod towards the exit. "Let's go. It's nearly at the point that my truck can't handle this snow, so we need to get out of here before we're stuck here all night."

"I drove—"

"I know you did. We'll dig the car out in the morning. The only way we're both getting home safe is that I know these roads like the back of my hand." I nod again, more deliberately this time, and Clay nods distractedly, turning back to his computer and shutting everything down.

I put my hands in my jacket pockets and study him. "I think you might have broken Nolan a little."

He exhales a laugh. "Well, I didn't laugh in his face in shock. I thought I was pretty nice about the whole thing, actually." He turns to look at me and grins as he pulls my jacket tighter around himself. "I'm sure he's a great kid who is very polite to his Sunday School teacher, but I can't deal with that, you know? I don't want to be *the* guy for him forever."

I grin and follow him closely as we walk towards the door. "Mm... *The* guy for me was a man who breezed into Redhaven one summer when his father was getting re-married, and then I never heard from him again."

"The way all the best stories end," Clay says with a wicked grin. "Mine was the son of one of my mom's friends. From the *first* marriage, not the second, which meant her son was much

older than I was.” He gets a dreamy look in his eyes. “Still remember him now. Such a pretty face.” He purses his lips before humming. “I think he’s in Chicago now. Shame.”

I chuckle. “Well, remember it’s a small town. You’ll be immortalized as Nolan’s heartbreaker for the next decade at least.” I screw my nose up. “And I’ll forever be the one who got in first.”

Clay’s eyes sparkle as I get to the front door first, pushing it hard and expecting it to move under the pressure.

It doesn’t.

At all.

I sigh and put all my weight into it, as Clay frowns in confusion. “Is it locked?”

“No, it’s the...*snow*,” I say through gritted teeth as I try to put enough force behind the door to shift the banked-up snow on the other side of the door. “This is why I hate doors that open out. It happens every fucking winter. Someone is always stuck somewhere, and I have to go get them out.” I’m not usually the one stuck though, but a whole night alone with Clay and no responsibilities sounds fantastic.

I give up and turn to look at Clay. “Is there a back exit?”

He puts his hands on his hips. “I’ve been here three days. You think I’d know if there’s a back exit?”

I sigh and go searching, feeling Clay at my heels. “Luckily the power is still on. We’re not going to freeze if we have to stay here all night.”

I send Clay to one side of the building, while I pretend to search mine. There's bound to be another exit somewhere, but I'm content at leaving it undiscovered.

"That seems safe," Clay says with a frown as we convene in the break area in the TV news area. There's a sofa here and a selection of vending machines that will keep us going. Clay eyes me nervously. "You should be getting back to your nephew. We could both try the front door again?"

I wave my hand and sit on the sofa with a sigh. "He's with my parents." I get my phone out and send them a message so they're not concerned and then lean back into the sofa. "Ah well. I've spent the night in worse places." I look over at him and grin as he sits next to me. "And with worse people."

He smiles at me, and I'm reminded that the last time I saw him, we made out in my laundry before we were interrupted by Aiden.

"Hey," I whisper. "I'm...sorry about earlier."

He exhales a laugh and twists to face me, curling his feet up underneath himself. "Trust me, *I'm* sorry. I shouldn't have left."

I scratch at the hair on my chin and sigh. "I never know if I'm supposed to tell people, you know? Or *what*. I've never been good with dating, but especially after getting Aiden." I take a deep breath and look at him, being absurdly honest. "I love him, but I don't think I'm the best option to be his guardian."

“Hey, I’m sure that’s not true,” Clay says in alarm, putting a hand on my knee.

I smile weakly. “Rach never gave me an option,” I whisper. “It was *I’m dying. Here’s a six-year-old*. She named *me* without telling me first.”

“Wow.” Clay thinks hard about something for a minute. “If he’s not with you, where could he be?”

I stare at him, preparing to say the words out loud for the first time. I gulp hard. “My cousin has offered,” I breathe. “She’s got two kids of her own. She lives three and a half hours away though.” I’m surprised by the tremor in my voice. “I’ve been...thinking about it. I have to tell her after Christmas.”

“Fuck, Dylan, that’s...*hard*.”

“I know.” I close my eyes. “Mom and Dad don’t know. They’ve got enough on their plate. They don’t need this too.” I clear my throat and listen to the faint sound of the wind outside our warm little hideaway. It’s so peaceful. “Didn’t you dream of getting stuck in a place like this when you were a kid? I did. The peace. The quiet.”

Clay sighs and looks at his nails. “I was left alone too much to want to be anywhere by myself.” He leans his head on the back of the sofa and closes his eyes. I can feel the pain in his sigh.

“What do your parents do?” I whisper.

He chuckles, but it sounds sad. “Dad’s a businessman, so wink, don’t look too closely there, son, wink and, yes, you *did* see the housekeeper and my receptionist and your mom’s best friend bent over the fucking desk in my office, but, uh, let’s not tell your mother.” He turns a bored look at me. “And my mom is editor of *City Style*, which sounds gay as hell but is actually really boring. She’s also a fucking professional at forgetting she had a kid in the first place, and that training started...hmm...about two minutes after I was born.”

“I’m sure that’s not—”

“I saw her at a charity function last summer, and she asked me where I’m living these days. That’s fine, apart from the fact that I’ve been living in the same apartment my entire adult life and she honestly confused me with her *gardener’s son*.” He gives me one of his potent newsreader smiles. “And, this just in, Jennifer Lawson-Miller does *not* think that anything that came out of her might actually be successful in life and has relegated the son so far down the food chain that she can forget he exists.” He drops back and rolls his eyes.

I reach out and put my hand on his shoulder. “I’m sorry.”

“Yeah.” He gets up, looking for a change of subject, and looks at the vending machine. “Five dollars for a chocolate bar? Are you kidding?”

I laugh as he surveys it, trying to find a way in without paying for the snacks. “I’m glad you’re here, you know.”

He glances at me. “Yeah, because I’m going to be the one to get you some snacks without losing both of our life savings.”

“No, I meant...” I look at the faded sofa and pick at the pile.
“Here. In Redhaven. Alive.”

He instantly stops trying to break into the vending machine, and his expression floods with yearning as he studies me.
“What?”

I get up and find the key I have to the vending machines. I’m the one who always has to come fix it when it breaks anyway. “I’m just saying. Your mother forgetting she gave birth to you doesn’t make you a bad son. It makes her a bad mother.” I grin and unlatch the machine door, giving Clay free rein on the snack options. “I’m glad you exist, Clay Miller.”

Chapter Seven

CLAY

I abandon the snacks almost instantly and reach out to get Dylan's hand before he can walk too far away. I stare at our joined hands and gulp. "I'm really lonely at the moment and a bit depressed, and I don't want you to have to be my savior, you know? And, like I told Nolan earlier, I'm not good at dating. Or...anything other than one-night stands or short flings."

"I'm not asking for anything more than a short fling. You're going to leave in two weeks, and we'll be on our merry way."

I stare at our hands, knowing I'm blushing.

"Clay, I can tell you're lying, but do *you* know you're lying?"

I groan in frustration and drop his hand. "*This* is what I was hoping to avoid, Dylan."

"Unless I'm your boss," Dylan whispers softly.

I look up at him in alarm. "I slept with my boss so I could get the good assignments." I drop his hand, and he looks

around us.

“That worked in your favor, did it?”

I fold my arms and move to sit on the sofa. I probably shouldn't start an argument with someone I'm stuck with for the night, but he's making it difficult. Especially as he lounges next to me on the couch and chuckles lazily.

“He said nice things to you, did he?”

I don't meet his eye. “Not really, actually.”

“Married?”

“Divorced.”

“Straight?”

“Openly gay.”

“Must be a *wonderful* fuck.”

“Average. Like all the others always are.”

He leans his elbow on the back of the sofa and waits for me to look at him. Of course he has to be looking at me like I'm being idiotic. To be fair, I *am*. We both know we want each other, and we're literally locked in a completely empty building to do it in. I've never been so hesitant to have sex with someone before, but I know he's right. I'm lying to myself.

When I eventually look at him, I sigh. “Maybe it was someone who looked at me like I was alive.”

“But he did nothing to prove it,” he whispers.

I close my eyes at how much my heart sinks when I hear his words. Hugh had sent me here the first chance he got. He didn't actually care about anything I had to say, do, or wanted. I straighten my shoulders. "You think you can? *Please.*"

He grins and shifts closer to me, running his nose down my cheek until his lips find the soft skin below my jaw. "I know I can," he breathes into my ear.

All hesitation leaves my body before the words have even left his lips, and I spin to fold myself into his embrace. His mouth, his *tongue*, finds mine in a searing kiss, the likes of which I've never had before.

My hands grapple for the hem of his shirt, drawing it over his head, and his lips leave my skin for the shortest possible time.

My fingers travel down his chest, exploring all this new territory, and his breath catches in his throat as I brush against his nipples.

He tugs me hard, catching me before I crash into him, but it gives him the space he needs to shift so I'm lying down on the sofa, his lips planted firmly back on mine.

Oh God. His weight on me feels heavenly. Without all the layers of clothing the people of Redhaven need to make it through the day, he's surprisingly trim. He lets me explore for a minute, the scent of his skin—warm and masculine—filling my nostrils as I plant my lips on every bit of him I can reach.

“Oh fuck,” he groans as I shift lower underneath him to flick my tongue over his nipple.

At the way he was almost nonchalant with his desire for me, I expected this was going to be quick and passionate, but Dylan seems to be taking his time. It’s gentle, his fingers sliding over my body as he pulls me close.

I push him backwards as he closes his eyes against my touch, and he shifts without a hint of hesitation until he’s lying on the couch, me pressed against him. I start to show attention to his other nipple, but he tugs on my hair to get me back up to his lips, kissing me like his life depends on it. Kissing is not usually my favorite activity—it’s a start to something, not an event—but Dylan is making me crave his lips on mine, his tongue in my mouth. His closeness is making my head spin, like I’m addicted to his touch.

I unzip his worn jeans and slip my hand in until I reach the firming flesh I’m aching for. His hand dips into the back of the sweatpants I’ve borrowed from him, and he makes a small exclamation at the fact that I’m not wearing anything underneath them. His fingers grip my ass, and my hips automatically thrust forward for friction against his leg.

“No wonder you’re always cold,” he murmurs against my lips.

I grin. “Believe me, baby. I ain’t cold right now.”

“No?” he whispers. I can’t hold in the groan as he slides his finger down the cleft of my ass to explore. “You *are* warm. God, you’re so fucking sexy, Clay.”

I whimper and practically throw myself down his body, helping him shimmy his jeans down his hips. His hand rests on the back of my head as he groans loudly when my mouth connects with the heat in my hand.

When I look up at him, his eyes are closed and his mouth relaxed. “Yes,” he hisses through his teeth. “But finger me too.”

I glance at him in surprise. “You want that?”

“Yes. Please.”

I hold my finger up to his face. “Get me wet enough.”

He immediately draws my finger into his mouth and sucks on it expertly enough that my cock jumps in my sweats. I let out a strangled moan and take my finger out of his mouth.

“Jesus. You’ll make me come.”

He pants. “Yeah, well, you’re doing a pretty good of that... *yourself*.” He drops his head back and groans loudly as I slowly insert my finger. “Fuck, Clay, you’re a dream. Where have you been all my life?”

I grin to myself, and before I can make him come, he pushes on my shoulder to get me off him. He sits up and pulls my shirt off quickly, and I lose my sweats just as easily. He stops me from sitting and squares me in front of him, drawing me into his mouth with so much finesse that I have to hold on to his shoulders to stop from falling over.

He looks up at me and runs his tongue up the length of me before giving a small frown. “Do we have a condom here? Or

something we can use as lu—”

“Yeah,” I manage to get out. “My work bag over there.” I nod in the vague direction of it sitting by the door where I put it when we ended up here.

“You just happen to have condoms and lube in that bag?”

I can feel myself blushing. “Um. It’s my...*work* bag.”

“Right. Your boss.”

“Yeah,” I whisper.

There’s a flicker of annoyance on his face, but he pushes on my hip to go to my bag and get what we need instead of continuing the conversation.

I get the impression that he hates the idea of my boss and me, even though he’s never met Hugh, and up until three days ago, he hadn’t met *me*.

I put it out of my mind and turn back to Dylan. He’s sitting back on the sofa, his eyes dark, a sinful smile on his lips. His gaze trails over me as I walk back, and I can’t help but want to keep that image in my head for eternity.

I want to smugly show Joclyn back in Atlanta that *this* guy wants to have sex with me.

Dylan props himself up and gestures for me to lie on my back on the couch. When I do, he holds himself above me and takes a moment to drag his gaze over me, a smile of appreciation crossing his lips. “I’ve wanted this since I met you,” he breathes.

I grin and reach for him, guiding him closer to me. “Then come get it.”

He focuses on what he’s doing for a second until he’s fully seated, the faint ache lessened by the heat of his gaze. I reach for him again, but he puts a hand on my chest and holds himself at a distance, gently pulsing his hips into me, making me groan with the pleasure.

“You know why?” he pants. “Why I wanted you since I saw you?”

I whimper at the slow torture, but he keeps it up, regardless of my protestations.

“Other than the fact that you’re hot, which you *know*, and your ass looked incredible in those jeans...” He reaches under me and squeezes my ass to remind me what he’s talking about. “It was the spark in your eyes that did it for me.” He leans down and kisses me, his body going still. “This sharp tongue. You made it look like you were going to breeze into this town and didn’t give a shit who knew it.” He places his hand under my chin and tilts it up so I can meet his gaze. “But you do care and you’re lonely, but you’re so lovely, Clay Miller, and I’m going to prove it to you if it’s the last thing I do.”

I whimper with desire, and he runs his hand over my hip, hooking my knee over his thigh, giving him easier access. He uses it, sinking deep and making me moan, which echoes through the empty building and out into the howling wind.

I give up all hesitations, throwing them out with the blizzard. For tonight, it’s just Dylan and me, and there’s

nothing I want more.

Dylan drags out both of our pleasure until we're both exhausted, curled up in each other's arms, the storm the only reminder that there is still a world outside.

When I wake up the next morning, Dylan's warm embrace is the first thing I notice. I snuggle back into it and close my eyes again. Everything else can wait.

"Good morning" comes a voice that I was *not* expecting.

I open my eyes again and see Nolan there, looking more than a little pissed off.

Luckily Dylan and I had remembered to put our clothes on before falling asleep, but I'm sure Nolan isn't stupid enough to believe that we were chaste last night. I sit up slowly and stretch my neck, feeling the effects of the exercise I'd done. I've never had sex as good as it was with Dylan, and I'm eager for more. "The door is clear, then?" I mumble, still half-asleep.

Dylan stirs from his position mostly underneath me and squints in the bright lights of the morning.

His hand lands on the small of my back before he looks up to see Nolan standing there. Something inside Dylan changes instantly, and there's a tension in his shoulders that I haven't seen all night. He needs to be relaxed again, and I'm irritated at Nolan's interruption.

"Oh. Nolan. You're here early, aren't you?"

He scowls. "*No*. I'm not. It's almost ten. Your phone must be going crazy. The blizzard last night damaged a lot of the

prep for the festival.”

Dylan frowns and grabs his phone. “It’s dead.” He taps me to move properly and stands up, pulling the jacket we had been using as a blanket over his shoulders and sliding his shoes on. He glances at me. “Uh...did you want me to take you to the Maple? I can, I guess, try to get there—”

“I can do that,” Nolan says with a scowl. “Look at that? Something I have the ability to do that mighty Dylan Turner can do too.”

I chuckle. “I’ll be okay. I’m sure Nolan can help dig my car out.” I say it lightly, but I can’t help the heaviness in my throat at Dylan’s lack of acknowledgement of last night. We had fantastic sex, and he hasn’t even *looked* at me.

“Er...bye.” Dylan leans over the sofa and gives me a quick peck on the cheek. It’s as impersonal as a stranger, and my bewilderment must be obvious to everyone.

“I have a power bank in my car, so I’ll have my phone charged and ready to go soon. Call me if you need anything,” Dylan mutters.

I watch him until he’s completely gone from sight before I turn to look at Nolan. I hate the pained expression on his face, so I busy myself with getting myself put together as best as I can. I need to get back to my room at The Red Maple to wash off the smell of sex and sweat that is covering my body.

“I thought you said you needed longer than three days—”

“Yeah, well, apparently it was three days and one night. Ha.” I stand up and pull Dylan’s jacket over my shoulders, wincing at my aching limbs. Nolan rolls his eyes. “It’s also none of your business, Nolan. You know that, don’t you?”

He blushes and nods slowly. “I know.” He holds up a folded piece of paper. “I have something that might help you with your questions from last night.”

I reach out to take it from him, but he moves it quickly out of my grasp.

“Don’t be mean to me, okay?”

My shoulders drop at the wavy tone of his voice, and I give him a smile. “I’m sorry. Of course.” I exhale a laugh. “You’ll find someone, Nolan.”

He snorts and gestures to the door Dylan just walked out of. “Why? Have you? Sure didn’t look it. He couldn’t wait to leave.”

He must see my face fall as he hands me the paper without saying anything. My eyes widen as I scan the documents.

“Wait... They want to use the land of The Red Maple—”

“As a multilevel hotel block, yes.”

“But I don’t—”

Nolan sits on the sofa next to me. “I don’t know what for yet, but I *think* they want to open a different sort of tourist attraction during the warmer months. Enough for a giant hotel block, at least. Obviously Redhaven is only known for its

Christmas season. We get a few weddings here and there in summer, but Christmas is our time to shine.” He shrugs and leans closer to me. “I think something is happening, but I can’t figure out what it is.”

“Who is *they*?”

“The council. The mayor.” Nolan shrugs.

“Tom Bradley, right? I’ve come across him already.” I pull my notebook out of my bag and flick through the notes I took last night. “There’s something odd about him I can’t quite put my finger on.”

“Well, you and I are the only ones who feel that way in Redhaven.” Nolan sits next to me and sighs. “He’s run unopposed for six years now. Everyone loves him.”

I glance at Nolan in surprise. “You don’t like him?”

“Oh no. Definitely not.” Nolan looks uncomfortable and taps the paper in my hand. “Anyway, I think Tom has something to do with this, but I don’t know what yet. I’ll have to keep looking.”

I blink at him before nodding at the information. “Can I keep this?”

Nolan nods. “But if anyone asks, you didn’t get it from me.”

“Sure, sure,” I mumble vaguely. I stand up and pull my bag over my shoulder. “Can I take you up on that offer for the ride back to The Red Maple? I need a shower and, um...” I tap the paper. “I need to do a bit of detective work.”

“Of course!” Nolan looks absolutely delighted at my request, and he eagerly leads the way to the exit.

Chapter Eight

DYLAN

“Hey, Uncle Dylan!”

I turn at the last second to see Aiden barreling his way to me. I manage to grab him just as his foot catches on an icy patch of the sidewalk. He grins breathlessly as I haul him upright.

“Careful, bud.” I hand him my snow shovel, and he slowly starts scraping it across the sidewalk to clear the last of the snow. “Is it a snow day today, or was Grammy nice?”

“It’s a snow day. Grammy said I should still go to school anyway, but Poppy told her she was being silly and that I should go help you shovel snow instead.”

I chuckle and look for where my mom is standing, talking seriously with Rosie and Josie. “Come on, then. Have you had breakfast? We’ll go to the diner and get something to eat.”

“Okay.” We trudge through the snow for a moment before Aiden looks at me, a thoughtful expression on his young face.

He's looking more and more like Rachel, and it brings a pang to my chest every time I see it. "Uncle Dylan?"

"Yeah?"

"Do you have a boyfriend?"

I trip over a clump of snow on the sidewalk but manage to right myself before landing on my ass. "What?"

"I asked Grammy, and she said that you had a boyfriend."

I don't know how to respond. I've never gotten even close to this point before, and I certainly didn't think I'd be here now. Not after one night.

"Is it that man from the news? He's staying at the Maple."

"I, um—"

"Can I meet him?"

I give him an awkward smile. "I...don't think so, Aiden." How do I explain my situation to an eight-year-old? "Maybe one day." *When you're old enough to understand.*

I spot Dad sitting in one of the booths as we get to the diner, and once I've ordered for Aiden and me, I sit across from him.

"Hey."

"Hey, Dyl. How was your night? You never made it back."

"Yeah. Got stuck at the news station. Doors swing—"

"Out," Dad finishes.

"Mm..."

Aiden's and my food get delivered, and I tuck into my grilled cheese sandwich hungrily. I've been surviving on two chocolate bars and a can of Sprite from the vending machine, and with the amount of energy I burned last night, that's not going to cut it. I've had a lot of sex before—good sex too—but last night had been on a whole other level. Clay and I had worked so well together, and every expectation I'd had of that moment hadn't come close to the real thing. It's a shame Nolan had to ruin what could have been a great morning.

As I eat, Dad studies me before his weathered face splits with a grin. He keeps grinning right up until Aiden sees a friend from his class at school and they eagerly run out to go play in the snow.

Dad leans forward as soon as Aiden is out of earshot. "The *newsreader*? The sullen guy with the skinny jeans and the high heels?" He chuckles as I raise my eyebrows at him and keep eating. "He's got a pretty face though. I just didn't think that was your type."

"*In my vicinity* is my usual type," I mutter.

Dad snorts, but doesn't respond.

I press my palms on the table and purse my lips. "Good, though. My God."

"Shame he's only here for a few weeks, then," Dad says with a glint in his eye.

"Mom told Aiden I had a *boyfriend*. What'd she do that for?"

Dad rolls his eyes. “What did you want us to say? He’s a smart boy. He notices things.”

“There hasn’t been anything to notice.”

“He’s seen the newsreader wearing your jacket, kiddo. He knows what’s up. Yeah, maybe we told him you had a boyfriend so that it wasn’t so surprising when it’s *actually* discovered.”

I sigh. “Well, all it did was make Aiden want to meet him. I can almost guarantee that Clay does *not* feel the same way.”

I spot the man we’re talking about in the street, Aiden’s beanie pulled tight around his face and several layers around his thin frame. An image of him from last night, eyes closed and moaning as I made him feel good, pops into my head, and I feel myself blushing. Dad sniggers behind his coffee mug.

Clay spots me, and I give an awkward wave through the window. “He’s going to join us,” I mumble.

“The more the merrier,” Dad says with a grin. “I should probably be going to prepare the wedding bells, right?”

I growl at him as Clay appears at our table, giving me an awkward smile. “Hey. Good morning.”

“Good morning. Again.” I shuffle over and make space for him to sit down as Clay breathes out a sigh of relief.

“Oh, I wouldn’t want to—”

“Sit down, son,” Dad says calmly. “There’s more than enough room. Want something to eat? I’ll get Janice on it.” He

hands Clay a menu and gets out of his seat with a grunt. “I’ll be right back. Need to use the bathroom.”

Clay exhales loudly as he studiously reads the menu. “Your dad seems very...amiable. Did you tell him about—”

“Small town, Clay.”

“Yeah, but surely not—”

I take a bite of my sandwich. “I didn’t go home last night. My truck was at the news station, and five people knew I was looking for you in the first place. Three of those being notorious gossips, including my own mother. Even if we hadn’t slept together last night, it would have been on everyone’s lips this morning.”

He looks over at me and raises his eyebrows. “I’m glad we did, then. At least the rumors are true.” He leans forward and lets his gaze drop to my lips and back again. “And if I’m going to be on anyone’s lips, I’m happy for it to be yours.”

“In that case, I’m going to tell anyone that’ll listen that I had the best sex of my life last night.”

Clay hums. “How about neither of us tell anyone anything and we can go somewhere more private?” He gives me a calm smile. “To talk about it. Obviously.”

I grin and contemplate the quickest way I can get him to my house and naked again. “Why don’t you order something to eat so we’re not sitting here all day, okay? You can’t survive on chocolate bars from the vending machine.”

Clay looks around us, the desire behind his eyes obvious. “Will your dad mind?”

I shake my head and read the text message I get. Debbie’s mistletoe has been not only knocked over during the storm last night but has disappeared altogether. I sigh and let her know I’ll try to find who took the opportunity to steal the damn plants. I *know* who took it, but getting it back is low on my to-do list, especially with Clay clouding my thoughts.

Clay returns after ordering, and I point to Dad’s empty seat for him to take. “He went the wrong way for the bathrooms, so I don’t think he’s coming back.”

He shakes his head. “Your family is *terrible* at communication. First you try to set us up pretending to be *someone else*, and now your dad says he’s going to the bathroom and then goes in the other direction.”

I study him before chuckling and leaning back in my chair. “Mom called him outside as soon as he got up. And *maybe...*” I lean forward and lower my voice. “*Maybe* I was flirting with you.”

Janice puts Clay’s food in front of him, and he gives her a cute little nod of thanks. His gaze lands back on mine. “*Maybe* you could have just openly flirted with me and we wouldn’t have had any confusion.” His eyes sparkle. “We would have gotten to last night a whole lot quicker. In fact, you could have had me then.”

I snort. “What would you have me do? *Hey gorgeous, come here often?* I was bent pretty far over that sink when I

absolutely didn't need to be. I couldn't have been *more* obvious." I chuckle and distract myself with watching Aiden out the window. There's that guilt in my stomach that is always there when I remember that my life is forever changed by Aiden's presence. I know I have to give Cherie an answer by the end of the year, and now that Clay is here looking hot as fuck in his skinny jeans and too-high boots, I'm regretting not having told her already. Clay probably would have stayed if Aiden wasn't there.

Clay's expression softens, and he leans on the table, looking out at what I'm looking at. "It's not just you now, is it?" he says softly.

"No." I clear my throat and look at him. "Not that it really matters. You'll be gone in two weeks, right?"

I instantly regret my choice of words as I watch Clay shrink. One thing *not* to say to the person you slept with last night is reminding them that they're leaving soon enough that nothing will happen between you. I lean on the table and exhale a laugh.

"I didn't mean it like that. I just—"

"Wanted to make sure I wasn't under any illusions of you moving to Atlanta for me when the two weeks is up. I know."

I'm too surprised to speak, but I manage to splutter out a laugh. "*Moving to Atlanta?* Was that even a *thought?* Absolutely not."

Clay's cheeks flush red, but before he can answer, he gets a call from someone named Joclyn, and he frowns at the screen before giving me an awkward smile and disappearing out of the booth.

I watch him for a moment, pacing over by the old-fashioned jukebox that doesn't work anymore, no matter how many times I've tried to fix it, and wince when his back is to me.

"Uh-oh. I know that look," Mom says from above me.

I jump and look up at her, standing next to my booth. She leans over and steals a strawberry off Aiden's abandoned waffle. "Take the whole thing," I mumble to her. "Aiden won't be back to eat it."

Mom puts her hand on my shoulder and glances over at Clay, who is randomly pushing buttons on the jukebox. "It's okay, you know," she says softly. "You're allowed to let go occasionally."

I clear my throat. "There's mistletoe to take back from Robert, Clem, and Rosie. There's only so much—"

Mom sets her elbows on the top of the booth behind me and leans down to whisper closer in my ear. "Sweetheart, you're my son and I love you. I only want your happiness in life. I've watched you grow and change and love, and not *once* have I seen you look at another human being like you've looked at that man over there. It might be nothing, but you're allowed to *let go*. Have some *fun* for a change."

"I don't know what that is," I mutter.

“Oh, *yes*, you do.”

She chuckles as Clay starts walking back towards me, and I smirk at her. “Are you telling me what I think you’re telling me?”

She winks at me. “I’m your *mother* and I would never suggest anything of the sort.” Clay arrives at our table as Mom clasps her hands in front of her. “Now, you kids have a fun afternoon. I’ll look after Aiden. I’m sure there’s help to be done after last night.”

I purse my lips and look at my phone to see another text from Debbie. “That’s fine, Mom, thanks, but I really have to go get this mistletoe back.”

She scowls. “You know, you’re making this really hard for me. I’m being *nice*.” I meet her gaze steadily, and she rolls her eyes. “*Fine*, I’ll get Rosie to give Debbie the mistletoe back.”

“*Thank* you. And tell them it just puts *me* out, not Debbie. I *told* you to leave the mistletoe alone this year.”

She waves her hand and leaves the diner. I slowly turn back to Clay.

“Did your mom just tell us to go have sex?” He purses his lips. “I love your mom.”

“Mm... Is everything okay?” I whisper.

He sighs, and any future plans are forgotten about momentarily. “Yeah. It was my co-worker back in Atlanta. Uh, apparently Hugh, my boss, was supposed to check in with me, but he gave the task to Joclyn to do instead.” He looks out the

window, but I get the sense of heartache that is surrounding him.

“Clay?” I whisper. “Did you *love* your boss?”

He snorts quickly. “No. Definitely not.” He gulps. “But... you know...he was someone who seemed to care about me in some way. Or so I thought.” He chuckles, but there’s no humor in it. “You know, when I found out I was coming here, he told me that when I got back, everything would go back to *normal*. Not being in a relationship or anything.” He scowls. “Not that I *wanted* it, but... Oh, I don’t know.” He closes his eyes and breathes in slowly. “I didn’t think I’d be here at thirty, you know?”

“Me either,” I whisper, looking out at where my mom is trying to convince Aiden to give up his snowball fight and help the town. “In fact, my life hasn’t gone to plan since it started, but we’re both here and we’re somehow alive, and I vote we take that...you know, *life*, and go celebrate it back at my place.”

Clay stares at me for a moment before slowly grinning. “Are you *flirting* with me, Dylan Turner?”

I drain my coffee. “Not this time. This time I’m propositioning you.”

He laughs and practically drags me out of the diner towards my truck.

Chapter Nine

CLAY

I hear the door downstairs open and the faint sound of an excitable child's voice. I grin and prop myself up in bed, waiting for the inevitable footsteps on the stairs.

It doesn't take long.

There's a brief tap on the door before Dylan swings the door open and barrels his way inside, shutting and locking it behind him.

"*Good morning,*" I say as he gives me a breathless grin and struggles taking his shirt and shoes off simultaneously. I open the blanket from the bed for him to get in, and his grin gets wider.

"*Someone's all ready.*"

"For like an *hour*. I nearly thought you weren't coming and I would have to do the job myself."

Dylan strips his pants off and slides under the covers with me, running his cold hands over my skin. "It was twenty minutes, Mr. Dramatic. I apparently couldn't think of a reason

why Aiden and I had to come to this house, and he made me go through his homework with him.”

I grin and roll on top of him, holding his wrists above his head. “Your hands are fucking freezing. No touching.”

He leaves his hands next to his head as I kiss his neck, trailing down. “We don’t have much time,” he pants. “I have to take Aiden to school, and I have to—”

We’re interrupted by a timid knock on the door just as my mouth is about to make contact with the straining erection in front of me. Dylan makes a strangled noise in the back of his throat, and the covers are pulled over my head. I frown and unearth myself, nodding towards the locked door.

Carole Turner clears her throat. “Uh, Dylan, I know you’re busy...fixing the sink, but Aiden wanted to ask—”

“Uh, yeah, sure... Let me just—” Dylan props himself up on his elbows and holds a finger to his lips at me. I sit up on his thighs and scowl at him before pulling the warm covers over my shoulders.

Aiden speaks through the door. “Can I go to Tommy Bradley’s house after school? Apparently he’s going to...”

I tune him out, still annoyed that I’m some big secret. It’s been a few days of this. Sneaking into my room like we’re teenagers. Running out as soon as Aiden is within earshot. I’m getting sick of it. Sure, Aiden’s only a kid, but after doing a little bit more research on Rachel Turner, I imagine Aiden knows more than Dylan gives him credit for. There’s being a

fling, and then there's being embarrassed to be seen with me... I'm beginning to think Dylan is the latter.

Suddenly, Aiden's request comes to mind again, and I frown at Dylan. *Tommy Bradley?* I mouth. *The mayor?*

"His son," Dylan whispers. "Junior." He opens his mouth to answer Aiden, but I put my hand on it and shake my head quickly.

"No," I whisper. "Say no."

Dylan frowns, over dramatizing his motions instead of speaking it. *Why?*

Because... Just trust me. I'll tell you soon.

He frowns in uncertainty before looking over at the door.

"Uh...no, bud."

There's a surprised silence on the other side of the door. From both Carole *and* Aiden. "Wha... No? Why not?"

Carole clears her throat. "I thought it was—"

Dylan grimaces and squeezes his eyes shut. "Uh...I was..." He gives a resigned sigh. "I was thinking I might have a movie night tonight. Watch a Christmas movie. The first of the season." He clears his throat and glances at me. "And maybe Clay might want to come too."

I sit up slowly, a smile spreading across my lips. "Really?" I whisper.

On the other side of the door, Aiden gives a gasp of delight. "Yeah, Uncle Dylan? I get to meet your boyfriend?"

Dylan winces and waves his hand at me. “I’ll explain that,” he whispers, but I’m feeling so nice about him wanting me to spend time with his family that I don’t mind. Although if Aiden thinks I’m Dylan’s boyfriend, why am I constantly shoved into rooms and the door shut in my face until Aiden has been sent away?

“Yeah, if that’s...okay. I know it’s...” Dylan sits up and turns his back to me. “I know it’s something we did with your mom, so I don’t want to—”

“No, this is *great*, Uncle Dylan! Ooh, can we have hot chocolate, like we did with Mom?”

“Sure, buddy,” he says weakly. I watch Dylan’s spine as Carole and Aiden leave the bedroom door, and I reach out to put my hand on it. He’s obviously not comfortable with anything that just occurred.

“I won’t go,” I whisper. “I don’t want to be—”

“I want you there,” he says, twisting his head to look at me. “And he’s been wanting to meet you for a while now.”

I lean my chin on his shoulder. “I’ve wanted to meet him too.”

“You *have*? Why? I was convinced that you...*didn’t*. You found out he was there, and that seemed to change something for you. I assumed—”

I silence him with a tender kiss. “Shh.”

“We’re even more out of time now,” he murmurs against my lips.

“I said shh.”

He chuckles and pushes me back, making the springs sing underneath me. I try to grapple for him to stay pressed up against me for as long as I can, but he chuckles and easily untangles himself from me. “We’re out of time. But *stay* here, like this, nice and hard, and I’ll be back to get it.”

I pout as he gets out of bed and pulls his jeans on. “You’d better be quick,” I say, watching him sulkily. “Otherwise I’ll deliberately break the sink so you have to come fix it.”

“No need. Sending me a nude selfie of you will get me here *much* faster, and you’ll still be left with a broken sink.”

My mouth drops open in surprise. “*Really?* You are full of surprises, Mr. Turner. Never would have picked you for a sexy photo kind of guy *or* a finger in the ass kind of guy, and yet you’re both?”

He chuckles and leans over to kiss me now that he’s fully dressed again. “I’m *more* than a finger kind of guy. Whenever you want to swap, I’m good for it.” He runs his still-cold hands down my body and delicately circles my erection. “I want this.”

I think I make some sort of a sound in response, but I don’t know what it is. He laughs at me and makes it to the doorway.

He leaves before poking his head back in. “Clay?”

I blink at him.

“You’re the best sex I’ve ever had in my life. Whatever you want me to be, I’ll be it.”

I relax into the bed and pull the pillow over my face, moaning loudly into it. I hear Dylan's laugh as he shuts the door and steps loudly down the stairs.

I am in *big* trouble now. I stretch out in bed and whimper at the thought of leaving in a few short weeks, when all I want to do is pretend for eternity that this could be forever. God, what a thought. *Forever?* Here? With Dylan? This was never part of my plan.

There's a brief knock on my door, making me jump and scramble for the covers on my bed.

"I don't mean to be your personal messenger, my dear," Carole's voice says quietly through the door, "but Nolan is downstairs, eager to see you. What will be the safest option? Tell him you'll meet him downstairs, or send him up here?"

"Oh God. The first one. Let me get, er, dressed, and I'll meet him there."

"That's what I thought. I'll keep him busy, have no fear."

I reluctantly get dressed and text Dylan to let him know that I have been commandeered by the person who wants to take his place and that our sexy morning plans have been postponed, much to my disappointment.

Dylan: *You know how to bring me home quickly. Tell Nolan if he wants to see me angry, he should try steal you away.*

I snigger and make my way downstairs. As expected, Nolan is sitting there, his eyes trained on the doorway, waiting for me. He jumps up as soon as he sees me and his smile widens.

“I could have met you upstairs.”

“I’m sure you could have,” I say calmly. “What’s up, Nolan?”

“I’ve got something I think you should see,” he says with a grin. I notice the way his gaze drops over me, but he does well enough at hiding it. He looks over at Carole Turner standing nearby. “Maybe in private?”

I chuckle and point towards the door. “Can we walk to town? I need some breakfast.”

Nolan nods and leads the way as I go to grab Dylan’s jacket from the mud room. In there, I spot a thicker jacket with a note attached to it, my name written on the front.

Clay, this will keep you warmer. Look down. You have new shoes! Be safe. - Dyl

I stare at the note and let the smile spread across my lips. I bring my gaze to the floor and see a pair of weather-resistant boots, still in the box.

Nolan peers around the corner as I put my new shoes on, admiring them. They’re not the usual boots I would buy for myself and they have no heel, but they look surprisingly good. They make my legs look longer, something I didn’t think was possible.

When I right myself and look at Nolan, he’s nodding in appreciation at my new shoes. “They, uh...look good on you. Are they new?”

“Mmm...” I hum. “Uh, Dylan bought them for me? Apparently.”

Nolan sighs dramatically. “Of course he did.” He waves a piece of paper in my face. “Well, *I’ve* got something for you too, Clay. No, it’s not expensive new shoes that I’m surprised Dylan can *afford*, but it’s more information about the mayor that you’ve wanted.”

My thoughts are taken away from the shoes, and Nolan has all of my attention. “Oh!”

He leads me outside—the warmer jacket keeping me nice and toasty—and once we’re a few feet away from the Maple, he shows me the paper in his hand. It’s a whole bunch of handwritten notes, and Nolan takes it back off me to explain it out loud.

“It’s not just The Red Maple that’s getting hit,” Nolan explains. “It’s the whole town. Property taxes in Redhaven have gone up three percent a year since Tom Bradley became mayor.”

I stare at him in shock. “But that’s... *How?*”

Nolan shrugs. “I’m not sure. But Rosie’s bar is not going to be able to survive for much longer. The diner is already struggling, and this might be its last Christmas season. The regional hospital, the cinema, the news station... They’ve all been hit in some way.” He stuffs his hands in his jacket pockets and stops me from walking. “I haven’t said the biggest news yet.”

“Go on,” I whisper.

His mouth is pressed into a thin line, and I get the feeling he’s upset about whatever the news he’s about to reveal is.

“They want to open a theme park here. *That’s* the big tourist attraction. Everyone is going to kick back on the idea, so they’re driving them all out first. We’ve got the space. They want it.”

My first instinct is to laugh. “A *theme park*? Here? That’s such a stupid thought.”

I start walking again, but Nolan doesn’t follow me.

“The mayor is running for Congress. He needs the votes. He’s trying to look like the good guy here.”

I stop to look at him. “He said in an interview that he’s trying to *stop* the rise in property taxes.”

“While greenlighting the theme park plan, yes.” Nolan suddenly looks older than he is. “Tom Bradley lives in Alistair County. His office is conveniently on the border of the Redhaven district. He’s just out of Redhaven’s jurisdiction. Nothing he puts into place will affect him.”

Holy fuck.

Nolan’s news plays on my mind for the rest of the day. I *knew* the mayor was shady—there was something there that reminded me of my own father—but it seems like the idea of a theme park in Redhaven is more a distraction than anything. The amount of work—and funds—that would go into

redesigning an entire town seems excessive. Not to mention there's no direct route to Redhaven.

I'm still lost in my head as I sit at Dylan's kitchen breakfast bar, waiting for Aiden to get home so I can meet him.

"Are you okay?" Dylan asks, moving into my eyeline and squinting at me. "You don't have to do this—"

"What's the deal with the mayor?"

Dylan frowns and goes back to riffling through his fridge.

"Alright, Seinfeld. And *what's* the deal with the mayor?!" he says, imitating Jerry Seinfeld.

"That was a *terrible* Jerry Seinfeld."

"It was not!"

I roll my eyes. "I've watched every episode of *Seinfeld* ever made. I could quote the entire thing. *Trust me*, that was a terrible impression."

Dylan rests his palms on the bench and narrows his eyes at me. "*I* have watched all of *Seinfeld* too."

I blink at him. "Really?"

"Yeah, so don't feel special. Used to be on at the hospital when my sister was there."

I grin, my original question about the mayor forgotten. "An ex-boyfriend claimed he was an extra on the show and made me watch it. My love for the show lasted way longer than the ex-boyfriend did."

“An extra on *Seinfeld*? How old was your...” He shakes his head. “Never mind. I don’t want to know.” He turns away from me. “Back to your original question... What is your obsession with the mayor? He was born and raised in Redhaven, cares about the people, and he’s *fine*.”

I hum and look at my laptop screen sitting in front of me with information about Redhaven and the local council areas. Redhaven *doesn't* have the space for a theme park. Not without going to other council areas, and as far as my research has led, no one else is being affected.

Dylan looks over at me again. “He hasn’t invited you to something you don’t want to do, has he?”

I snort. “Does he do that often?”

“He’s happily married as far as I or the local gossips know.” He leans against the bench in front of me and folds his arms. “So? What’s your deal?”

“I think he’s hiding something.”

Dylan rolls his eyes. “Look, you’ve come from a big city. There are probably corrupt people left, right, and center in big cities. This is *Redhaven*. As I said before, everyone knows everything about everyone. There’s no room for corruption.” He leans his elbows on the counter to get closer to me. “Can we drop the mayor thing? He’s just a guy.”

I narrow my eyes and bridge the gap between us, kissing him slowly. “A guy who is *hiding something*.”

Dylan groans and walks past me. I track him and spin on my chair when he moves into the living room.

“Okay, think about it. You do a *lot* for this town, right?”

“I guess.”

“I bet there’s things you would change about this town to make it a better place to live?”

“Everyone has *thoughts*, Clay.”

“Sure they do. What has Tom Bradley done for this town in the last six years? Give me a list. Off the top of your head. Go.”

He’s saved from answering by the door opening and Aiden stepping in, stamping the snow off his boots. He sees me sitting at the bench and grins in excitement. I grin right back, but I can see Dylan is anything but comfortable about this situation.

I get off my chair and walk closer to Aiden. “Hi! I’m Clay.”

“I’m Aiden. I’ve wanted to meet you for *so long*. Do you like video games?”

I chuckle. “Uh...sure. What games do you like to play?”

Aiden dumps his bag on the living room floor. “Come on. I’ll show you!” He gestures for me to follow him up the stairs. Dylan makes a small noise at the back of his throat, but I wave him off. I’ve got this.

Aiden spends close to an hour showing me all of his favorite games, showing me everything in his room, and explaining

every cool object he has.

He ends the tour with holding out a little heart-shaped box to me.

“What’s this?” I whisper.

He gestures for me to open it, and I see a little gold locket. With tender fingers, he takes it out and carefully opens it to see a picture of his mom. “It was my mom’s. She gave it to me.”

I study the little picture and sigh. I’ve read more about Rachel Turner since the first night with Dylan, and I’m beginning to understand Dylan’s reluctance to talk about Rachel in any way. Giving her older brother a six-year-old child he was in no way prepared for seemed to be a final act of defiance. Poor Dylan. Poor Aiden. Neither of them is benefitting from this.

“I’m glad you’re here,” Aiden whispers as I look at the locket.

“Oh, yeah? Why’s that? Because you get to have hot chocolate tonight?” I tease.

He gives me a small smile. “No, because Uncle Dylan gets lonely. He’s only got me, you know?”

I’m struck by the seriousness on the child’s face, and I give a soft smile. “Well, I think you’re doing a pretty good job of keeping him company, Aiden.” I clear my throat when I hear the door downstairs. “*That* sounds like your grandparents are

here. Why don't we go downstairs and play *Just Dance* while Uncle Dylan gets everything ready for dinner?"

A wicked grin crosses his face. "I'm going to win."

"I don't know," I say brightly. "I used to be pretty good at it!"

Aiden giggles and runs out of the room before I can even make it to standing. When I do, I see Dylan standing in the doorway.

"Thank you," he whispers.

I lean up and brush my lips against his. "Thanks for inviting me." I fall into his embrace further and deepen our kiss, all the nerves in my body singing for his attention.

"Come on, Clay!" Aiden calls up the stairs.

Dylan pulls away and pouts. "Maybe there was a very good reason I didn't want you to meet him. Only because he is now going to hog *all* your time." He kisses my neck as I laugh.

"*Later*, I am all yours."

"Looking forward to it," he murmurs, watching me as I head downstairs towards where Aiden is impatiently waiting for me. I can feel Dylan's heated gaze on me, and I realize it's all I want for as long as I can have it.

Chapter Ten

DYLAN

I t's nearly midnight, Aiden's long since gone to bed, and I've got Clay's tongue in my mouth and my hands in his hair as we grapple for each other on the sofa. It's been a long evening of watching Aiden and Clay play *Just Dance* and Clay talk to my family and tease Aiden. It makes me more sad than anything. Clay is integrating himself into my life so perfectly, but he's going to leave soon. I found myself watching Aiden too, watching how he reacted to Clay, laughing with him like he'd always be here. Like they *both* would. I chose to spend most of the night away from everyone else, stepping back and letting it all happen without me, and when I got a call from Clem to say that something had happened to the electricity at their house, I took the distraction without hesitation.

When I came back, Clay had noticed my distance and gotten quiet himself.

"Did I do something wrong tonight?" he'd asked quietly when Aiden was in bed, my parents had left, and I had started to tidy up.

I shook my head but didn't answer his question. Instead I'd led him to the sofa, hoping to distract myself with his warm lips and eager tongue.

It's worked so far.

I slide my fingers into the top of his pants, and he draws away from me, smiling with swollen lips and glassy eyes. His fingers play with my hair as he catches his breath. "Let's go to your bedroom. I don't feel right out here when Aiden could wake up and see us."

He must see the smile leave my face as he tilts my chin to look at him again.

"What's wrong, Dylan?"

"Nothing," I whisper. "Actually, I should...um, really finish tidying things up here."

I get up to Clay's bewildered expression.

"Wait," he murmurs. "Are you telling me to go back to the Maple?"

I sigh and walk into the kitchen to avoid seeing him. I place our hot chocolate mugs in the dishwasher with more care than necessary, and I hear the pad of Clay's bare feet on the tiles behind me. I don't turn around, but I know he's frowning.

"This is getting complicated, Clay."

"Complicated?" he scoffs. "*How?* Because I said we should move to your bedroom? I think that part is rather uncomplicated."

I lean on the sink and stare out the dark window. I can see his reflection, and he doesn't look angry like I thought. He looks sad. I twist to look at him. "This isn't our life, Clay," I whisper. "It's pretend."

Clay looks away, scratching at something on my kitchen bench, his jaw tight. He gives me a vague smile and doesn't meet my gaze before walking to find his jacket and shoes by the door. "Thanks for the evening," he says, his voice clipped and formal. "I had fun, pretend though it was."

I can feel the breeze of the door opening from here, and I close my eyes to gather myself in the silence before walking quickly towards it.

"Clay," I call out, seeing his silhouette getting farther and farther away. "*Clay.*"

He doesn't turn around. I growl and make a snowball with the snow from the porch railing, lobbing it at his head.

The second snowball hits, and he stops in his tracks, slowly turning to look at me in amazement. "Did you just *throw a snowball* at me?"

"Yes. Come back here."

He takes a few small steps towards me before crouching, rolling a snowball up, and standing to his full height again, holding the snowball in his palm with narrowed eyes.

"I was trying to get your attention, Clay. Come back here."

Before I can react, the snowball is hurtling towards my head, landing square in between my eyes and knocking me

back a step, momentarily blinded.

“What the *fu*—”

A second snowball lands in almost exactly the same spot and I growl, trying to gather as much snow as I can without moving off the porch. I’m only wearing socks, my pants, and my thin sweater. I am *not* dressed for a snowball fight. A snowball sails over my shoulder and hits the door. Another one lands in my chest.

“You’ve got fucking good aim,” I mutter, my shots not landing anywhere near as often.

Clay grins as I manage to dodge one. “I played baseball in college. Surprised? Rude. And homophobic.”

I find myself chuckling out a breathless laugh as I launch another attack on Clay, who dodges most of them. The only one that hits gets the edge of his jacket sleeve.

He holds his arms out to the side. “Come on! Hit me! If you can hit me, I’ll go back inside with you and go into your bedroom to warm up.” He smirks. “I won’t move.”

As my snowball gets closer to him, he drops his arms and jumps out of the way.

“Hey!”

“Oops. I lied. See ya.” He laughs as he turns and walks back towards the Maple.

I scowl and contemplate how long it would take for me to put my shoes on and chase after him before I narrow my eyes

at Clay's spine and run out into the snow. I loop my arm around his waist, making him squeal with laughter, and haul him back towards my house.

"It is *too* fucking cold out here for this," I say through gritted teeth as he tries to get out of my grip. He laughs loudly and kicks his legs to get me to put him down. It only works as he unsteadies me and I go stumbling forwards, letting him go so that he can save himself.

As soon as I'm on my hands and knees, the icy wet seeping through my thin clothing, Clay laughs hysterically and starts kicking snow at me.

"I'm going to die of frostbite, and it will be all your fault," I growl, getting up and scooping up snow to throw back at him.

"Bullshit. You'll be fine."

He looks up in surprise as snow starts to fall again, landing gently in his hair. I let the snow fall out of my hand and step towards him, delicately brushing the snow off his cheeks and ignoring the chill in my toes. He softens under my touch, his eyes still bright with a childlike delight that I've never seen from him. It reminds me of Aiden, and everything comes rushing back. All the disappointment, the pain, the loneliness... I drop my hands.

He gives me a soft chuckle and looks away from me. "It might be pretend," he whispers, holding his face up to the snow and closing his eyes. "But it's the most real thing I've had."

He brings his face down again, and I kiss him slowly, tasting the snowflakes.

“Tomorrow,” I whisper when I pull away, “Aiden and I are making Christmas cookies to take to the hospital. Will you join us?”

His eyes flutter open, and he smiles serenely. “I’d love to.”

“And right *now*... I’m *very* cold and I don’t know if I have the capabilities to warm myself up, you know?”

Clay wiggles his eyebrows. “I *might* be able to help with that.”

“That’s what I was hoping you’d say.”

The warm house is a relief, and I peel my wet socks and shirt off in the entrance, taking my time and enjoying Clay’s gaze. His shoes and jacket come off, but I nod towards the staircase for the rest.

Clay sits on my bed in my bedroom as I move to the attached bathroom to take the rest of my clothes off.

“You coming in or staying there?” I ask with a smirk.

He gives me a wicked grin. “I’m going to watch you.”

I run the water of the shower and wait for it to get suitably warm to ease my freezing extremities before stepping in, making eye contact with Clay as I do so.

All he does is watch me. He sits on the end of my bed where he can still see me and watches my every move. Every drop of water that runs down my body is studied. Soap suds trailing

down my body feel like fingers, and I have to make the conscious effort to avoid touching myself in case of ending this before anything has happened. His gaze is as heated as the water over my shoulders, and by the time I'm washed and have stepped out of the shower to dry myself, I'm as hard as a rock and breathing heavy. He hasn't touched me physically, but just the knowledge that he's *watching* me is the most amount of foreplay I think I've ever had. And, by *far*, the hottest.

When my head appears again after toweling my hair, Clay is standing up, one knee on the bed, his hand dipped into the front of his—*my*—sweatpants. “Better?” he says, his voice smooth like butter.

“Not yet,” I murmur. I reach him and tug on the hem of his sweater, pulling it up over his head slowly. His skin is cooler than mine, and I run my hands over his body, clutching to its difference.

Right this moment, I know what I want. I want *Clay*. I want to pretend, like he is, that our pretend is real.

I sink to my knees and tug his sweatpants down until my prize is revealed, his hand wrapped tight around it, going commando once again. It's a seduction technique that I live for from him.

“You drive me insane,” I groan as I lean forward, taking him in my mouth and hearing the satisfactory moan from above me. His hands tangle in my hair before he slowly tugs me back to look up at him.

“How loud are you when you get fucked?” he whispers.

A slow grin spreads across my face. “Loud enough to drive you crazy, but quiet enough that I don’t wake up anyone else sleeping in the house.” He breathes out shakily, and I lean farther back on my knees to smirk at him. It’s what I’ve wanted since I saw him stuck in that snowbank—him behind me, using my body to bring himself off. A reminder of how simple things could have been in a different life. “Would you like that?”

He bends at the waist and draws my lips onto his, forceful and commanding. I love it. He stands upright again and repositions his hips near my mouth. “In a moment,” he says simply. “Get me close, but don’t bring me off.”

I hum and get to work, enjoying this new side of Clay that I haven’t seen yet, in this fake life that can’t exist for too much longer.

And when we lie on the bed and Clay gives me the best sex I’ve had in my life, I can almost believe that this is real.

Chapter Eleven

CLAY

I wake up before Dylan, his arm draped over my hip and his knee tucked underneath mine. We haven't woken up together since the night in the station, so I relax into the sensation. Hugh let me stay over a few times after sex, but he was always out of bed before I woke up and was always awkward with me when I would make it out of the bedroom. I'm not usually an early riser, but something about Dylan's bedroom has me feeling refreshed and comfortable. It's a nicer mattress than my one in the room at the Maple at least.

Dylan is fast asleep as I disentangle myself from his embrace, and I study him for a moment before lightly pressing my lips to his. Last night was the first time in a long time that I've felt entirely at *home* with someone. Dylan had relaxed again, as he so often does when it's just the two of us, and had given everything over to me. We might be playing pretend, but there's something about Dylan and me that is so goddamned real.

I pull my clothes on and check my reflection in his bathroom before venturing downstairs, knowing Aiden might be awake. I don't know their routine for the weekend, but I can't imagine he'll sleep for too long.

I'm right.

He's sitting in the living room, pajamas still on, eating a large bowl of cereal and watching TV. He barely blinks at my appearance so early in the morning, and I breathe a sigh of relief. I know he's been through a lot already, but Aiden is such a sweetheart. I wish Dylan could get out of his head long enough to see it too.

"Good morning," I say softly. "What are you watching?"

"Phineas and Ferb."

I chuckle at his lack of attention to me and get my own bowl of cereal, sitting next to him to watch with him.

We're sitting there, both glued to the TV, laughing at the same bits, when Dylan comes downstairs, looking uncertain about the fact that he slept in so long.

I give him a calm smile. "Good morning."

He smiles nervously. "Morning. Coffee?"

"Please."

I follow him into the kitchen and rest my ass against the bench near the coffee machine as Dylan gets it prepared. "I don't normally sleep in that long. I'm sorry." I don't think he's going to kiss me or make any acknowledgement of last night

with Aiden within hearing distance, but he surprises me with a tender kiss. He squeezes my hand gently and turns back to the coffee machine. “I thought you’d skipped out on me.”

I laugh. “Even if I had, you would have known where I was. Redhaven’s not big enough to hide in.” I look over at Aiden, who hasn’t so much as moved a muscle. I drop my voice to a whisper. “But, *no*, not after last night. It was...”

“Fun,” he murmurs.

“Mm...”

The coffee machine beeps, and Dylan hands me a mug. He gently taps his against mine. “Cheers,” he whispers. Before he can take a sip of coffee, he gets a call, and he sighs at it. “Hey, Robert. Yes, I got your text last night. I was...in the middle of something.” He raises his eyebrows at me as I smirk into my coffee mug.

I touch his waist on the way back to the living room, leaving him to his phone call.

Aiden drags his attention back to me. “Are you going to help us make cookies today?”

I look at him in surprise. “Um...if that’s okay with you. I don’t want to join something that is for you and Uncle Dylan.”

He grins at me. “You can stay. You’re funny. And you make Uncle Dylan laugh, which no one *ever* does.”

I chuckle. “Well, count me in, then.” I take a sip of coffee. “I’m sure people have made Uncle Dylan laugh.”

“Not that I’ve heard. He just sighs a lot and does this...” Aiden does a flawless impression of Dylan’s unamused exhaled laugh, and I can’t hold back the chuckle.

“He definitely does that. But, look, maybe we don’t *want* to hear Uncle Dylan laugh. Maybe it’s a really evil laugh or something.”

Aiden bursts into laughter just as Dylan comes back in the room. “I have to go pick up these arcade game machines from Haven, the town over, that Robert wants for the festival.” He purses his lips. “Clay, they’re being picked up close to a Walmart. Would you like to come see if you can find some different clothes? I know you won’t be here for...” He trails off and looks at Aiden before changing his mind. “Anyway, Aiden? You can either stay here with Grammy and Poppy or come with Clay and me.”

I smile at Dylan. “I’ll come with you. It’ll be nice to have clothes that fit me.”

“If Clay’s going, I’ll go too,” Aiden says, turning back to the TV.

Dylan scratches his chin. “Alright. TV off, Aiden. Go get dressed.”

Aiden screws his nose up but reluctantly gets off the sofa and makes his way up the stairs to go do as he was told.

I breathe out as I realize the situation we are both in. Meeting Aiden was fine, but watching cartoons with him or

baking cookies with him or going to buy clothes with him is a mistake.

“Maybe I won’t go with you,” I whisper. I look at the floor before closing my eyes. “I think I get what you were saying last night.”

“Yeah,” he breathes, but I don’t know what to. He sits next to me and sighs. “Last night was...*great*, Clay. It felt like the...”

“The beginning of something,” I say in his hesitation. “But it can’t be because we’re actually at the *end*.”

Dylan gulps and takes my hand, sending a nervous glance to the stairwell. “I was, um...*thinking*...”

I’m immediately on edge, but Aiden clomps down the stairs before anything can be said.

“Wow, that was...quick,” Dylan mutters, releasing my hand. “Uh, okay, everyone. Let’s go. Clay, come too, please?”

I sigh at Aiden’s confused frown, before I nod and stand up. “Let’s go.”

Dylan’s *thought* plagues my mind as we make the drive to Haven, New Hampshire to get the arcade machines, but it’s not until we’re wandering through Walmart, desperately trying to pick out clothes that I would *want* to wear, that Dylan and I get a chance to talk alone. Aiden has found the game section, and he’s more than content to stay there and play the trial game they have set up.

“What were you saying earlier?” I say to Dylan as I flick through a rack of men’s coats that my grandfather would have worn. “Before we left?”

Dylan abandons a shelf of T-shirts and rests his elbows on the rack I’m looking at. He takes a deep breath, and the nerves are evident in his eyes. “I was...wondering what you were doing for Christmas, that’s all.”

I frown. “I have no plans for Christmas.”

“At all?”

I snort and find several plain long-sleeved tees that will do the job. “*Christmas* is merely a time of year where I sit in my lonely apartment and wait for whatever boyfriend at the time to get back from seeing his family before he...” I notice a kid walking past. “Um...*anyway*.”

Dylan smirks. “What about your family?”

“*What* family? I haven’t spoken to my father in decades, and my mother forgets I exist.”

Dylan rounds the rack and gently pulls me by my waist towards him. “*Well*...if you have no...*prior plans*.” He twists his lips around each other. “Why don’t you stay in Redhaven for Christmas?” He smiles awkwardly. “With me?”

I don’t know what to think, and the range of emotions I’m feeling must be playing out on my face. Adding an extra week here? Wouldn’t that be delaying the inevitable? But a whole *extra week* with Dylan? That sounds wonderful.

I clear my throat and lean up to kiss him slowly. “Let me think about it. I’ll...have to figure out what to do about work for that extra week. Not that work seems to give a shit.”

“Of course,” he whispers. “Well, the offer is there. I’m sure Nolan will be ecstatic,” he adds dryly.

“That is *not* a point in favor, Dylan.”

He sniggers and looks around us. “You might need more clothes if you do stay though. Remember that.”

I look at the rack in front of me, not taking in any of the items of clothing that I’m looking at.

Will one extra week turn into more? Will I be *able* to leave at the end of all this? I mean, Redhaven is a dump, but Dylan isn’t. I look over to where Dylan is holding up a jacket to inspect it closely. I’d made that man fall apart under my fingertips last night, and I want to do it again. I want to wake up next to him again, have snowball fights... Hell, even getting stuck somewhere for the whole night was fun when I was with him.

Fuck. I think I’m falling in love with Dylan Turner.

That was *not* part of the plan.

Almost to add to the confusion I’m feeling, my phone rings with a call from Hugh.

I frown at it and hit answer.

“Clay,” Hugh says, breathing heavily.

My frown deepens. “Is everything okay?”

“Er...yes, well...” He exhales loudly away from the phone before turning back. “I had a heart attack,” he says softly.

I startle, my eyes widening. “Oh my God! Are you okay? What happened? You shouldn’t be having—”

“I’m fine. It was apparently minor, and I should be able to go home tomorrow.”

Dylan looks over at me in concern, but I’m too busy focusing on the fact that Hugh had a *heart attack*. “I can fly back to Atlanta—”

“No need, Clay. That won’t...just, uh, keep doing what you’re doing there. I was just calling to let you know.” The phone moves away from his ear, and there’s a muffled “Thanks, babe.” A younger man’s voice sounds, but I can’t hear what they’re saying.

“Who was that?” I ask slowly when Hugh gets back on the phone.

“Oh, no one. Uh, someone giving me my medication. That’s all.”

I narrow my eyes at the stupid jackets in front of me. Calling someone *no one* is a sure sign they’re actually *someone*. “How did you have a heart attack, Hugh?” My jaw is unusually tight. “I have a feeling it was one too many Pasta and Wine nights at Morelli’s, wasn’t it?” I snap.

“You’ve been there in New Hampshire!” he cries before he sighs heavily, catching his breath.

“Yeah, because you *sent me here!* You said I should leave until things smooth over!”

“Things *aren't* smoothed over!”

I growl, my hand automatically balling into a fist. “I don’t understand! You said things were going to go back to normal when I got back, but you’ve apparently got—”

It dawns on me in the middle of a Walmart in the middle of nowhere.

“Oh, holy *fuck*. It was never just me, was it?”

Hugh sighs again, and it’s hard to tell if it’s because of the heart attack or that he doesn’t know what to say. “Clay, we both know that you were using me to get to the Schneider story—”

“Which I *didn't* get,” I hiss. “And there was—”

“I needed more. I’m sorry. Let’s not do this over the phone, okay? When you get back to Atlanta in a few weeks, we’ll discuss this privately. I’ll see you then. When do you get back again?”

I hang up the phone, leaving me boiling mad a thousand miles away and his question unanswered.

Maybe I needed more too.

Dylan is resting against a low shelf, watching me with raised eyebrows.

I exhale quickly, taking a second to calm myself. “Sorry,” I mutter.

“You okay?”

I nod before putting my hand on my forehead. “God, it’s one blow after the other with him.” I frown. “Not literally.”

I rest next to Dylan and let the disappointment wash over me for a second.

He smiles at me and nudges me. “I picked out something for you.”

He holds up a vibrant neon pink blazer with tiger stripes all over it.

“It matches your eyes,” he says seriously, and it manages to break through the melancholy that is overwhelming me.

I grin. “Nothing about my eyes is pink or tiger stripes, which means you clearly haven’t looked at them enough.”

Dylan chuckles and looks behind him. “I *did* find this though. Being serious.”

He hands me a Christmas sweater that has a pair of Christmas tree baubles on it with the word BALLS written underneath it. I blink at it as he grins.

“Look, if you stay with me for Christmas, I can guarantee the blows are going to be the fun kind. We’ll make them all sorts of festive. How do you feel about candy canes?”

I screw my nose up. “Anywhere near my body other than my mouth, hard pass.” I point to the sweater. “If I stay, do I have to wear that?”

“Yes. One hundred percent.” He looks behind him and pulls another sweater up. “Here is mine.” He holds it up. It’s a picture of Santa with ‘Where my ho-ho-hos at?’ written across the top.

“Oh dear Lord,” I groan.

He wraps his arm around my shoulder, and we walk through towards the gaming area where Aiden is, thankfully leaving the Christmas sweaters behind. “I did find one that says ‘When I think about you, I touch my elf’.”

“That sounds like a sexual harassment claim waiting to happen by all those poor elves.”

Dylan chuckles and kisses me on the head as we walk. “You deserve more than him,” he whispers in my ear.

I sigh and squeeze him tighter.

I know.

Chapter Twelve

DYLAN

I've been relegated to actually baking the cookies while Clay and Aiden decorate those that have already been made.

I get distracted watching Clay concentrate hard on decorating his sugar cookie in the shape of a gingerbread man, his eyes focused, his shoulders rounded. I get a glimpse of his tongue every now and then as he concentrates, and it's enough to distract me into thinking about him on his knees, that tongue put to good use...

He finishes, sitting back with a satisfied brush of his hands and holding up his finished creation to show me.

He's made *me*. He wiggles his brows. "It goes with this one." He holds up one he made earlier that looks like him. He puts them both on the table, side by side, as I laugh, and he searches through the cookies to get another gingerbread man-shaped one. "We've just got to add an Aiden."

Aiden looks over and giggles at the two cookies next to each other. “You’ll need a smaller cookie.”

“Oh. Right.” Clay studies the shapes they have left. “Do we have a small person cookie cutter?”

“Not here,” I mutter. “Maybe Mom does.”

“Well, go get it. Aiden can join us in Cookieland as soon as you make it.”

I groan dramatically, but I head towards the door anyway. “I’ll be back in a moment.” I gently place my hand on Clay’s shoulder as I walk past, and I catch Aiden’s gaze on the gesture. He looks away, but I notice the small smile on his young face as he pretends to look back at the cookie he’s decorating.

I think about it on the walk over to the Maple. Clay is the only man Aiden has ever really seen me with. Especially since Rach died. Aiden’s opinion hadn’t mattered prior to that. Mom is in the living room, chatting to a guest, and I smile politely at the two before walking into the kitchen. There’s bound to be a smaller cookie cutter here.

“What are you looking for?” Mom says when she has finished her conversation and has joined me in the kitchen.

“Uh...a child gingerbread person cookie cutter.” I sigh and keep searching. “Clay is decorating cookies as us apparently, and he needs a smaller one for Aiden.”

“Ah.” Mom gives me a small smile before pointing to a drawer under the oven. “Try over there.” She leans on the

kitchen island, and I can feel her eyes on me as I start looking. “Things seem to be...going well for you, Dyl.”

“Mm?”

“I was watching you last night.” She looks over to the window at the back of the house. “You and Clay. In the snow.”

I freeze and stare at the kitchen utensils in front of me instead of her.

“It was nice to see you looking so free again. You haven’t been that way since...well...” I know the end of her sentence. *Since Rachel never offered you a choice.* I don’t know what I would have chosen if she *had* given me one, but I know that the moment I found out will stick with me forever. Rachel *knew* that I wasn’t cut out to be a parent figure. I’d barely even babysat the kid before he was thrown at me.

Which makes me think it was Rach’s final “fuck you” to me. No one will ever be able to change my mind on that.

I stand up with the right cookie cutter and turn to Mom, who is still looking out the window. “Clay isn’t staying. Don’t get ideas,” I mutter.

Mom sighs as I start to make my way back to where Clay and Aiden are. “Dylan, I know Rach didn’t—”

“Save it,” I snap. “We both know whatever you’re about to say is a lie.” I slam the door behind me and trudge through the snow, each step feeling heavier than the last.

I place the cookie cutter in front of Clay dramatically before turning back and grabbing my thicker jacket.

“I have to go help with something for the festival,” I mutter. “I’ll be back later.”

Clay frowns at me in concern and follows me to the door, where I slip my work boots on. “Is everything okay?” he whispers softly to avoid being heard by Aiden. “You don’t want to stay and help—”

“Aiden can go to my parents if you don’t want to be stuck with him.”

Clay steps back, his eyes widening in surprise, and he throws a cautionary look over his shoulder to where Aiden is. “Please watch what you say,” he whispers. “He’s not immune to it.” He scowls at me. “Whatever happened at the Maple, fix it before you come back here, okay?”

He’s technically telling me off, but there’s something sexy about the way his lips are moving. I take ahold of the side of his head gently and press our lips together, feeling the surprise run through Clay.

He leans back and gives me a soft smile. “I’ve got cookies to make. You’ve got to...” He squeezes my arm gently. “Go get some air, I think.”

“Yeah,” I whisper. “I’ll be back. You’re going to be—”

“Perfectly fine, yes.”

He ushers me out the door, and I stand on the porch for a moment, looking out at the calm scene before me. There’s a blanket of snow on the ground, no one else around, and the tall, unwavering building of The Red Maple standing proud.

I sink onto the front porch, everything feeling so overwhelming all of a sudden.

Before I can head inside and ask Clay to give *me* all of his attention and not, for once, have to be divided by something else, I get a message from Debbie, asking me to come to her stall to help with the damn mistletoe again. It gives me something to focus on at least.

I've always liked Debbie. She has her heightened ideals about love and romance and she meddles too much for her own good, but she's sweet and has always looked out for me as much as she can. I'll always return the favor. She's been in Redhaven longer than my family has; I'm convinced she's as much a part of Redhaven as Redhaven is a part of her.

She has a hot coffee and a croissant from the diner there waiting for me.

"Payment," she says, smiling kindly. I give her a smile and get to work.

She sits at the bottom of my ladder as I straighten up the sign that she had been complaining about. Luckily this issue was to do with the weather, not human involvement.

"That new man of yours is a sweetheart," she says casually, and I get the feeling this is why she's called me over. The sign could have waited. Gossip right from the source couldn't.

I look down at her and chuckle.

"He was over here the other day. Filming pieces for the festival report, he said. Had Little Nolan with him."

“Little Nolan is twenty and in college.”

Debbie waves her hand as if that information is irrelevant and continues talking about Clay. “Said he’d do a lot of the report on festival day right here! In front of my booth!”

“He said that, did he?”

“Mmhmm... He’s very funny, isn’t he?”

I look down at her again and frown. “What are you trying to get me to say, Deb?”

She holds her hands up. “Nothing! I’m not saying anything.”

I climb down the ladder and hum under my breath at her.

“Not saying anything, other than he’s funny, handsome, charming...” She gives me a sly look. “It’s a good thing you’ve already snatched him up.”

“Sign’s all fixed, Debbie.”

“Thank you, dear.” She follows me out as I pack things back away in my truck. “Poor Nolan though. Was following your man around with the look of a hopeful puppy.” She walks faster as I do. “Aiden must be excited to have Clayton here. I’ve always thought he’d be better if you were in a stable relationship. Rachel always running off was never good for him.” She’s almost out of breath by the time I make it back to my truck, and she hands me something in a brown paper bag. “Here. It’s some mistletoe. Go kiss your man.”

I give her a weak smile and throw the stupid plant on the passenger seat of my car.

I'm nearly home when I pass Kerrie and Lance selling their Christmas trees. I come to a rolling stop and look at the mistletoe plant.

"Fuck," I whisper to myself.

I pull over to the side of the road, pay an incredible price for a tree that is going to die in my living room, and make it home so that maybe Clay and Aiden can help me decorate it.

Chapter Thirteen

CLAY

When Dylan left the first time, I noticed an ease that came about Aiden that disappeared again as soon as we heard Dylan's footsteps on the porch.

Aiden had been talking to me quite happily about people in his class at school, his friends, what he liked to do, TV shows he liked to watch, but when Dylan was about to enter, he quietened down and focused on his cookies again.

"Very nice," Dylan says, looking over Aiden's shoulder at the decorated cookies. "I'm sure they'll love them."

Aiden gave a little sigh of contentment and helped carry them back over to the kitchen so we could package them up.

Dylan jerks his thumb over his shoulder. "I bought a Christmas tree."

Aiden's eyes widen in disbelief, and he nearly trips as he walks. "A...Christmas tree? *You* bought one? You never buy a Christmas tree."

“Yep. Well...I did. We’ll decorate it when we get back. Clay, come help me bring it inside.”

I screw my nose up but trail after him outside anyway. It’ll give me a chance to talk to him without Aiden nearby.

“Hey, can I have a word with you?”

“Later. We have to go deliver the cookies to the hospital before the shift change at four.”

I sigh and look at my watch before pursing my lips. He leans down and briefly kisses me, and I rest against the door to the truck. I don’t think I’ll be much help anyway, and Dylan managed to get it by himself in the first place.

“But tonight, Aiden is going to a sleepover with some friends from school, so we’ll have the whole night.”

“To talk,” I clarify. “You owe me an—”

He gives me a dirty look. “I don’t owe you anything, but fine. Yes. We can talk.”

It’s true. He doesn’t owe me anything. I’m only going to be here until Christmas, but it feels like there’s something I can help with here. I just don’t know what it is.

Christmas tree safely delivered inside to wait for its decorations, I sit in silence next to Dylan as he drives, the cookies on my lap, the forty-minute drive to the hospital. There’s 70s rock music playing on the speakers, as Dylan refuses to have any Christmas music playing in the car, and the closer we get to the hospital, the more tense Dylan gets.

Aiden hops out the car as soon as we get there, and I trail alongside Dylan. “How often did you do that drive?” I whisper. “When your sister was—”

“Every day.” He exhales slowly. “Mom can’t drive, and she and Dad couldn’t leave the Maple for too long anyway.”

I frown as he walks faster into the waiting area. “Wait. Where did Aiden live?”

“At the Maple. In the guesthouse. It was Rachel’s before it was mine. He’s never moved.”

That’s new. He flashes me a small smile and walks into the waiting room, signaling the end of our conversation.

It’s a small regional hospital, and I notice a tin on the reception desk that says *Save Our Hospital!* on it. I stand back and watch Dylan and Aiden greet the nurses on staff, and I’m struck by how at ease Aiden is with being in the vicinity of so much death.

He’s going to leave soon, I think as I watch Dylan closely. My presence in Redhaven seems to be reminding Dylan of how much better off Aiden will be without him.

After several rooms of watching Dylan and Aiden together, talking to the patients and giving them their cookies, I wander through the hospital back to the waiting area, curious about the sign on the counter.

There’s soft Christmas piano music playing faintly over the speakers and a weak Christmas tree in the corner, old tinsel on its branches and a few weary-looking baubles. I study it for a

moment before turning to face the woman on the other side of the counter. “What’s happening to this hospital?”

She gives me a wary look. “Can I help you find someone?”

“No thank you.” I put my hands in my pockets and lean against the counter, trying to appear casual. “I’m with Dylan Turner. I’m curious about what’s happening with the hospital.” I tap the tin. “What exactly does it need saving from?”

“The landowners,” she grunts. “We’re the only hospital for miles. People want to take our land?”

“Who?”

She rolls her eyes and returns to her computer. “I shouldn’t be saying anything, boy. We’re government-run here. Everything will—”

She looks over my shoulder and sits up straighter. “Mr. Bradley.”

I turn and get a glimpse of the man I’ve seen in photos countless times. He’s walking into the hospital as if he’s greeting fans at a speech. I narrow my eyes but force a smile on my face.

“Tom, please,” Tom says with a white-toothed grin that threatens the smile on my face. “How’re we doing here, Natalie?”

“We’re...keeping our heads up, Tom.”

“That’s the way to do it! Keep it up.” He doesn’t so much as acknowledge a single second of my existence. “Mind if I take

a look around?”

Natalie falters for a minute. “Uh...if you want to. I’ll get you to sign—”

I smile and step forward, extending my hand. “Mr. Bradley. We finally meet.”

Tom’s eyes meet mine, and there’s an instant recognition that he tries to hide. “I’m sorry...you are?”

I laugh freely. “Oh, you know who I am. I’ve been eager to meet you, Mr. Bradley. Everyone gives you raving reviews around town.”

Tom’s smile has frozen. Trying to figure out what the hell I’m playing at, probably.

“I apologize, I really don’t know who you—”

Dylan appears around the corner, and I smile over at him. “Oops, I appear to have gotten lost.” I step closer to Tom and lower my voice. “You’ll know who I am soon. Trust me.” I wink at him and walk confidently towards where Dylan is standing, staring at me with narrowed eyes.

“I hope you didn’t destroy everything,” Dylan whispers under his breath as we walk down the hallway towards where Aiden is sitting and talking to an elderly lady.

“No, no. Have no fear. I *can* walk into a town without leaving a bombsite in my wake.”

“I highly doubt that, Mr. Miller. You haven’t so far. Everywhere you go, you leave little explosions.” He takes my

hand and squeezes it gently. “I’m just here bracing myself for the big one.”

I suddenly look around us and pull him into an empty dark room. “Clay—”

I tug him close and pull him against me, sliding my hands in the back of his hair and pressing my lips to his.

“Clay, we really shouldn’t—”

I keep my mouth on his but listen to him and slow down. I hum and close my eyes. “Sorry,” I whisper. “I think I’m starting to get horny whenever I hear soft jazz Christmas music playing.”

He thinks about it for a moment, listening to the music over the speakers. “Don’t put that in my head, Clay. Redhaven *is* soft jazz Christmas music. I won’t be able to go out in public again.”

I bite my grin and urge him close again. “For now, you have me. We still won’t be able to go out in public though.”

He grins. “That’s a risk I’m willing to take,” he whispers, leaning down and kissing me again, palming my ass and pushing me hard against the wall near us.

“If you keep this up, I’ll be here till New Year’s,” I breathe as he kisses down my neck, causing a whole lot of blood to rush to one part of my body.

“My birthday is the end of January, so at least until then.”

“Then... Valentine’s Day...”

“St. Patrick’s Day.” He leans back. “Are you Irish?”

“Unfortunately, no, but *my* birthday is two days later.”

He laughs and kisses me slowly before pulling away. “As much as I love making out with you in dark rooms of a hospital, we have to go back out there. Aiden’s going to his sleepover soon, and I need to get you home and undressed before I lose my fucking mind.”

Dylan moves to peer out of the room, and I let my gaze sweep over him.

“We have to decorate the tree, remember?” I murmur.

He looks back at me and groans loudly. “*Fuck. This* is why I don’t do Christmas trees. There’s always so much work.”

I grin, and he nods us out of the room, the coast clear.

It’s on the way home, Aiden listening to headphones in the back seat and the tension easing out of Dylan’s shoulders as we drive away, that I notice the brown bag on the dash. I gasp in delight and tug out the mistletoe, tied with a glittery red bow.

“You got a Christmas tree. You got mistletoe... Someone is getting in the festive spirit.”

Dylan lets out his exhaled laugh. “I was given it. Thanks to *you*, actually. You’ve gone and convinced the whole town that we’re a goddamned Christmas miracle.”

I laugh and put the mistletoe back in the bag. “Maybe we are.”

“Anyone could have found you in the snowbank, Clay.”

“But they didn’t. You did.”

“It’s a—”

“It’s Christmas *magic*.”

Dylan snorts so loudly that he starts coughing. “You don’t even like Christmas.”

“*Christmas magic*,” I whisper dramatically before slumping in my seat and looking out at the snowy landscape. “And this is...well, the first time I can remember that I’ve ever actually celebrated Christmas.”

He looks over and gently reaches out, placing his hand on my knee. “Well, you’ve come to the right place,” he whispers. “Redhaven and Christmas go hand in hand.”

Not for much longer, I think. I place my hand on his and don’t say anything.

It’s only later, when the Christmas tree is all decorated and Dylan has gone to take Aiden to his sleepover, that I realize this is the first year I can remember that I’m not lonely at Christmas.

The little bag of mistletoe has made it inside, and I get up from the sofa, tacking the mistletoe in pride of place in the doorway to the kitchen.

There’s also a note in the bag that I didn’t see before.

Dylan,

You've found a man who's as special as you are. Don't let your past hold you back. It's time you stopped letting other people dictate your future.

Debbie

I smile at it before slipping it back into its bag and return to the sofa to wait for Dylan to get home.

Chapter Fourteen

DYLAN

There's a very large part of me that hopes that Clay has abandoned the idea of talking tonight. Every nerve in my body is thrumming in anticipation of getting a whole night alone with Clay. We're about to play pretend again.

Clay is sitting on the sofa, staring at the Christmas tree with a glass of wine in his hand when I get home, and I appreciate the scene for a moment.

It's warm in the house, and he's got bare feet again, a sight that never fails to get me going. I imagine he's not wearing underwear under those sweats, and his jacket zip is pulled down enough that I can see he's not wearing a shirt under it. He *has* abandoned the thought of talking.

He glances over at me and smiles. "Aiden get there okay? I'm surprised you're letting him go to a sleepover at eight years old. Sleepovers are the *worst*. At least at eight, he's not likely to be watching porn, right?"

I nod, distracted by my thoughts. When Clay gets up and stands in front of me, I run my finger slowly down his chest until the top of the zip stops me. “You wanted to talk?” I murmur.

“Later,” he breathes. “It’s been a whole day of listening to jazz Christmas music, and I’m just about ready to explode.”

I tug down the zip on his jacket and achingly slowly push it off his shoulders. “Is this going to be over before it begins?”

He grunts as my lips land on his collarbone, and he tilts his head back, giving me easy access to his neck. “You’ll just have to drag it out.”

“Oh, I will,” I whisper hungrily, wrapping him up in my arms and sliding my tongue down to his nipple. He lets out a strangled moan before remembering we’re alone in the house and no one will be able to hear us. He seems to slip out of my arms easily, falling down onto his knees and releasing my jeans, right there in the living room in front of the Christmas tree. “This is going to be the hottest Christmas ever, isn’t it?” I breathe as he looks up at me with a wicked grin on his lips before diving forward and taking me down as far as he can. “Oh, sweet Jesus,” I gasp.

He chuckles around me, and it’s all I can do to stop myself from moving my hips into his mouth.

I groan and take a few steps away. “I need more control than I have.” I tug him to standing and push him to kneel backwards on the sofa, pulling his pants around his thighs and

kneeling behind him. He makes a low guttural sound in his throat and pushes his ass back into my face.

“You’re so good at that,” he pants.

“Quiet,” I mutter. “Or Santa’s going to come early.” I bite him on the ass suddenly.

He squeals in surprise, before I can’t take it anymore. I get to my feet and position myself behind him. “Are you ready for me, or do I need to do more?”

“I’m ready,” he begs. “Please.”

I enter him slowly, enjoying the sigh that travels through him. His long, slender spine is stretched out in front of me, and I run my hands down it, enjoying the view. I whimper and press my lips to the spot between his shoulder blades. “God, Clay. You are so...”

I don’t know the end of my sentence. Everything I could say seems so fake or superficial.

It’s only when he reaches back to get me to start moving properly that I figure out the end of my sentence.

You are so real.

The sentence plagues my mind for the rest of the night. We move to the bedroom, Clay tucked with his spine against me, my fingers drawing circles on his thigh as we recover.

Maybe I *could* move to Atlanta with Clay when this is all over. Aiden can move to live with Cherie. I’ll move to live with Clay.

Clay must feel the direction of my thoughts as he finds my hand and entwines our fingers. “Aiden’s a good kid, you know?”

I grunt and kiss the top of his shoulder. “Let’s not talk about —”

Clay shifts in the bed until he’s looking at me. “What happened with Rachel?” he whispers. “Why do you treat Aiden like you do? He’s a *kid*.”

I gulp and try to figure out how to get out of this conversation. I don’t want to have it. With Clay. With Dom and Dad. With anyone. I barely want to have it with myself. I groan as I sit up. “I should go check the—”

“*Dylan*,” Clay says, but I hear the pain in his voice surrounding the frustration. I feel him prop himself up on his elbows, but I don’t want to look at him. “Look, I don’t know details, but I know that *I* have been Aiden before. I’ve been left alone, ignored, forgotten, made to feel like my presence on this planet is a deliberate attack against someone else.” He sighs and sits up properly. “So what happened with Rachel? Your problem is not with Aiden.”

My throat feels suddenly dry. Our pretend is real again, and I want it to stop.

“When we played our truth or lie game, I lied,” I say softly, my eyes closed. “I’ve had a boyfriend. A serious one. He was in Redhaven two years ago. He was a contractor, working on the extension of the hospital. It, uh, coincided with Rach’s cancer treatment.”

Clay doesn't say anything.

"I would drive Aiden out to see Rachel, and I would see Oliver at the same time." I turn to look at him, but his expression is impassive. "His time in Redhaven was always going to be short. Everyone's time in Redhaven is short, but... He got a job in Chicago before the hospital was finished." I take a deep breath. "He invited me to go too."

"And you couldn't. 'Cause of Aiden."

"Actually, no. I agreed. Packed up my apartment. Organized to get the fuck out of here. Down to the packing up of my things and buying a plane ticket."

It all comes flooding back, and I have to turn away from Clay again. "*Then* Rach died. And Oliver made it very clear that he wanted no part in raising a child. No one ever would." I shake my head. "So, instead of moving to Chicago, I moved into the guest house. Instead of moving in with someone I loved, I moved in with a six-year-old I didn't know."

I feel Clay's hand on my shoulder blade, and I look at him slowly. "Rach knew that I didn't want to be a dad. She knew that Oliver didn't either."

"She wanted the—"

"She was close with Cherie, Clay. My cousin? The one who has offered to take him since? In fact, Cherie thought Aiden *was* going to go live with her. At the *last fucking* minute, Rach changed her mind and named me in her will instead. She'd always been like that. *Jealous*. She knew I had something that

she was never going to get. I was going to have someone who loved me, and I wouldn't be in this fucking town anymore—the two things she craved. She spent her short life *ruining* other people. Ask anyone in this town, and they'll say that Rach was their biggest tormentor.”

Clay urges me to look at him. “And think about what that means for *Aiden*, Dyl. He was an outsider, and you've treated him as such ever since. You were heartbroken and angry and grieving for a life you thought you were going to get, but Aiden had just lost his *mother*.” Clay pulls the covers over himself angrily. “This is what I wanted to talk to you about in the first place. Aiden tries so hard to be perfect, Dylan. He wants to *stay*. With *you*. He loves you, and you won't show him the courtesy of acknowledging his existence half the time. He's not stupid. You treat him like he's holding you back, but really, that's all *your* doing.” His anger builds. “What do you *mean* no one ever would want a part in raising a child? That's bullshit.”

“It's happened ever since. A guy finds out that Aiden is around, he leaves. Just like that. It's always a plausible excuse, sure, but they're gone.” I turn to him and scowl, his anger fueling mine. “And you're leaving too, Clay. Remember that. You can get angry all you like about how I've dealt with all of this, but you are going to *leave*. Why do you care about how Aiden is raised if you're going to leave in the next few weeks and you'll never think of him again?”

Clay folds his arms across his chest and stares out the window.

We're interrupted by my phone ringing with the contact for the house I just dropped Aiden at. It's too much. "I can't even get one fucking night alone," I growl, but Clay snatches the phone out of my hand before I can let it ring out.

"Hello? This is Clay Miller—" He gives me a side glance. "Yes, Dylan's boyfriend. Is everything okay with—"

I close my eyes as I hear the tinny sound of Marcus Harris's mother, knowing whatever is being relayed to Clay is not good news. Clay gets up and rushes to put on clothes.

"I'll be right there," he says, hanging up and throwing my phone on the bed. "What's the address to the Harris house?"

"What happened?"

"Eight-year-old boys being assholes. That's what happened. They locked him in a cupboard for two hours and decided to go to someone else's house instead without telling anyone Aiden was there." He puts one hand on his hip. "Address. Please."

"I'll go with you—"

"I can do this one myself, Dylan. I don't think it'll make much difference, do you?"

I stare at his defiant expression for a moment. "Five Dancer Street. It's near where you got stuck in the snowbank. I'll go —"

He's gone before I can finish my sentence.

Chapter Fifteen

CLAY

A iden isn't upset when I barrel my way up to the front door of the Harris house. He's not even angry, like I am. It's almost like he knew this was coming before it happened.

He is silent for a lot of the ride back to the Maple, and I don't know what to say to him any more than he knows what to say to me.

It's only when we're pulling into the drive that he speaks, his body pulled tight against the window, staring out at the soft snow-covered ground. An eight-year-old with too much on his shoulders already.

"I'm sorry," he whispers.

I turn to look at him in surprise. "Sorry? For what? That was young boys being idiots. I've had enough experience with them myself."

His shoulders slump as I pull the car to a stop in front of the guesthouse. "I know Uncle Dylan wanted to spend time with

you without me getting in the way.”

It dawns on me as I switch the engine off, plunging us into silence. “Aiden, did you agree to go to that sleepover because you thought Uncle Dylan wanted you to?”

In the dim light of the car, I see him shrink further, until there’s a soft sob. “I don’t want him to send me away,” he breathes. “I know he wants to. He wants me to live with Cherie. I don’t *want* to live with Cherie. It’s always so *loud* there.”

I shift in my seat and hum under my breath. I’m out of my depth, but I take a deep breath and speak to him like I would an adult. “I think Uncle Dylan wants what’s best for you. He wants you cared for and loved and to *not* have to go to a sleepover with people who are mean to you. If there’s somewhere that *is* that for you, Uncle Dylan wants it. He loves you, Aiden. Sure, he shows it in strange ways and he’s not great at communicating it, but he does.”

Aiden keeps looking out the window, his sobs quietening. “I don’t want him to send *you* away either.”

I chuckle. “That’s a little more complicated. I have a—”

“He got a *Christmas tree*, Clay. He got it for you.”

“He got it for *us*.”

Aiden shoots me a bored look and starts to get out of the car. He trudges past my window, towards the Maple.

“What are you doing?” I call out, shivering as I get out of the car. I got dressed in a hurry and didn’t account for the

weather apparently. “It’s too cold—”

“I’ll sleep at Grammy and Poppy’s.”

I exhale loudly. “Come stay at home, Aiden. You were promised a sleepover. You’re going to get one.”

He turns back and studies me dubiously, but I turn and walk determinedly towards Dylan’s house.

When I get inside, Dylan is standing in the kitchen, his gaze hooded, his palms holding himself up on the counter. I raise my chin to him and give him a confident smile. “Can your mattress be taken off your bed?”

He stares at me exactly like the way Aiden did just a few moments earlier. “Yes,” he says.

“Good.”

Aiden appears in the doorway, sharing a look with his uncle.

“Aiden, help Dylan shift the sofa back. I’m going to get Aiden’s mattress.”

I don’t wait for either of them to respond as I head upstairs, trying to figure out how the hell we’re supposed to be getting Dylan’s mattress downstairs.

I’ll tackle that in a moment.

Aiden’s mattress is easy to move, but it’s as I’m placing it on its side to move that I spot the page of a newspaper stuck between the slats and the mattress.

I throw a brief look at the door before leaning closer to look at it.

REDHAVEN, NH: Redhaven resident Rachel Turner was arrested again yesterday for drunk and disorderly conduct in a nearby town. Turner reportedly tried to break into a local bar and threatened the owner with bodily harm.

Across the middle of the article in deep red pen is a childish handwriting and the words YOUR MOM IS CRAZY.

There are footsteps on the stairs, so I hurriedly focus on getting the mattress out of the room, pretending I never saw the article. How long has Aiden had that for? What idiot kid decided to give Aiden something to remind him of what his mother was like?

It's Dylan on the stairs, and he sighs as he sees me with Aiden's mattress. "What are we doing?"

"You mean tonight? Or our future? Tonight, we're having a sleepover. Future... Who fucking knows."

Dylan rubs the bridge of his nose before looking down the staircase. "Aiden?" he calls out.

His little face appears at the bottom. "Yes?"

"Catch." Dylan pushes Aiden's mattress down the stairs as Aiden laughs in surprise. "Can you set that up in the lounge? Clay and I need to get my mattress down. Make sure there's room."

"Okay!"

Dylan gestures into his room. I know I need to apologize for what happened before I left to get Aiden, but my heart hurts all of a sudden, and I don't know how to say anything without

bursting into tears. I was supposed to come to this stupid town, report on a stupid Christmas festival, and get the fuck out of here. Why the hell am I planning sleepovers with eight-year-olds and catching goddamn feelings for their uncles? This was never part of my plan.

Dylan clears his throat and steps closer to me. “I’m...sorry. About what I said. I...” He sits on the bed and sighs.

I lower my voice. “Aiden knows you are going to send him to live with Cherie.”

“I know,” he whispers.

“He told me tonight that he doesn’t want you to send him away.” Dylan gazes up at me, and I see the war behind his eyes. I slowly sit next to him. “He knew those kids were going to be mean to him, and he went anyway to give us a chance to be alone.” I stare at a spot on the carpet and hum. “*You* knew those kids were going to be mean to him, and you sent him anyway.”

Dylan does his customary exhaled laugh. A laugh without being one at all. “No, I didn’t. I’m not that heartless. You were right, Clay. I was heartbroken. Angry.” He looks down at his fingers. “Angry at Rachel, at my parents, Aiden, Oliver, myself... Anyone who came too close. It *drove* me. Made me get up every morning.”

I don’t know what to say. I can’t even process my own problems at the moment, let alone Dylan’s too.

“I think we should move this mattress downstairs and talk about it later,” I whisper. I get up to do exactly as I said, but Dylan reaches out and takes ahold of my wrist.

“Clay.”

“Yes?”

He keeps ahold of my wrist, but he stands up to face me, running his thumb down my cheek. He doesn't say anything for ages, until he gives me a shy smile. “Thank you.”

“For what?”

“Being someone I'm not.”

I exhale a smile and nod. “I don't think two of you in a relationship would work out together, would it?”

“It hasn't so far.”

That one comment lets me know exactly what his ex was like.

“Does Aiden know about Oliver?” I ask as we get into position, moving the mattress. It's big and lumpy, but Dylan shows no discomfort in moving it. I'm struggling.

“I mean, they'd *met*, sure. We'd occasionally stop by the Maple to see Mom and Dad. Rachel would have dumped Aiden on them and disappeared for two weeks as she regularly did. I wouldn't say Oliver and Aiden ever really had much to do with the other. Even in the same place, they didn't talk.”

We make it to the doorway, and Dylan puts his side of the mattress down before quickly twisting over it to kiss me. It

might be the only time we can kiss for the rest of the night, and he seems to remember that too. I pout when he goes to pick up the mattress again and pull him back for a lingering kiss.

“Remember, *you* decided to plan this sleepover,” he murmurs. “He could have gone to bed, and I could have done all sorts of things to you. Instead, we’re sleeping on the living room floor.”

I grin and nudge him out of the room. “We’ve got time before Christmas for you to do all sorts of things to me. One night isn’t going to make a difference for us. It *will* make a difference for your nephew. So let’s go.”

Aiden is waiting eagerly when we manage to get the mattress down to the living room.

“We are never doing this again,” Dylan mutters. “It was hard enough getting this *down*. How the hell are we supposed to get it back up again?”

“That’s a problem for *tomorrow*,” I say lightly. I turn to Aiden and grin. “So, it’s your sleepover! What do you want to do? Play video games? Watch a movie? Try to guess what you’re getting for Christ—”

“Can we play a board game?”

Dylan looks like he wants to grimace, but I think the idea of playing a board game sounds excellent. “Yes! Great idea. What do you have?” I narrow my eyes at Dylan. “I imagine he doesn’t have any. Is there some at the Maple?”

Dylan holds up his hands in defense. “Whoa. Rude. I have board games.”

Aiden looks dubious. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen any board games.”

He giggles as Dylan lightly pushes him on the shoulder. “Yes, you have. Go get one you want to play. And *not* Monopoly. I don’t have the patience or the desire to argue with Clay all night.”

I fold my arms as Aiden runs off. “Why do you think we’ll argue with Monopoly?”

“Tell me we won’t.”

I grin as Aiden comes back with The Game of Life. “Good choice.”

Dylan can’t suppress the groan quick enough, but I take his hand and squeeze it gently. *It’ll make a difference*, I mouth, and Dylan sighs before lowering himself to sit on the floor near the coffee table.

I might not have had people to play board games with when I was a kid, but I’m not going to let that happen to Aiden. Dylan might not like it, but I’m suddenly determined to bring them together.

Once the game is underway, Dylan loosens up and even starts to look like he’s enjoying himself. It’s a nice change from his normal stoic silence whenever Aiden is nearby.

When the game finishes (Aiden wins, but I don’t think Dylan was trying all that hard), Aiden is adamant he isn’t tired

but falls asleep within ten minutes of the movie Dylan reluctantly puts on.

We wait ten more minutes before we turn it off.

“That wasn’t so bad,” I whisper to Dylan as I cuddle up to him on his mattress across the room from Aiden’s. “You even looked like you had some—” I gasp dramatically “—*fun*.”

“You were wrong. In that game, I ended up with a *wife* and *five* children.”

“I gave you a husband, thank you very much.” I chuckle softly and lean into him, his arm going around my shoulders. He studies my face for a moment, his expression lit up by the Christmas tree lights that we haven’t turned off yet.

“Can I ask you a question?” he asks.

“Sure.”

“Why have you only dated men older than you?” The surprise at his question must be evident on my face, as he expands on it. “You said you don’t date when we first got together. You made it clear. But *so much* of what you’re doing, what *we’re* doing, is dating. I just want to know why you said that at the beginning if maybe a relationship *is* what you want?”

I can feel myself blushing, and I turn away from him, rolling onto my back. “That was two very different questions. I...wouldn’t say I *do* only date men older than me. I, uh...” I hesitate on my answer, mainly because I don’t particularly *know* what the answer even is. “I’ve always wanted a family.

Or at least a place to belong. So much of my life has been spent looking out for myself, and I want to let someone else do it for a while.” I play with my fingers with a nervous smile. “Younger men don’t usually *want* to look out for anyone other than themselves, and men my age expect to not *have* to.”

Dylan props himself up on his elbow and gives me a confused smile. “When you found out I had custody of Aiden, you *left*. You barely wanted anything to do with me, so why are you now saying you want a family and you always have?”

I look at him in surprise. “It’s *because* I want a family that I left. This thing between us was always supposed to be a fling, Dylan. A distraction. Something to take my mind off what was happening in Atlanta. I couldn’t risk getting attached—”

“What changed your mind?”

I pause and move to look at the Christmas tree. “I’m not sure it has.”

Dylan breathes out evenly for a few seconds before he looks over his shoulder towards Aiden’s sleeping frame. When he’s satisfied that Aiden is still asleep, he faces me again, his eyes wide with hope. “Look, when Christmas is over, I...” He gulps. “Why don’t I...move to Atlanta? With you? I can look out for you so that you don’t have to. And I’ll—”

“Send Aiden to Cherie?”

Dylan looks at me dumbly. “Well, *yeah*. But wouldn’t it be —”

“No, Dylan.”

He looks like I just slapped him. “N-No? No to...”

I sit up and make sure Aiden is still asleep. He is. “Our earlier conversation about how you treat him like a burden won’t change anything, will it?”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

I chuckle sadly. “I’m a second chance for you. You’re going to ditch the person who needs you more than anything else and move at the first opportunity.” I lie back down and face away from him. “If you send him away after everything I’ve said, I’m gone too.”

I can *feel* the anger radiating off Dylan. “Are you telling me it’s both of you or neither of you?” he whispers.

I don’t answer. Dylan curses under his breath for a moment before lying down properly.

When I wake up the next morning, Dylan is nowhere to be seen and Aiden is sitting on the sofa eating cereal.

“Morning, Aiden,” I say with a stretch, trying to breathe some life into my body again. “Did you have a fun sleepover?”

Aiden grins at me. “Yes. As long as *everyone* remembers that I am the winner.”

“I don’t think you’ll let us forget, babe.” I crawl off the mattress and groan as I crack my neck. “I’m not young enough to have sleepovers apparently.” He chuckles as I go get some breakfast. “Any idea where Uncle Dylan is this morning?”

“He left. He said he had some work to do in town.”

“Ah.” I freeze with my head in the fridge. “Uh, do you have school today?” I look at the time on my phone before smirking. “I guess not? It’s already nearly ten.” I purse my lips and hum, but Aiden smiles nervously.

“I’ll go see what Grammy and Poppy are doing today, and I’ll stay with them.”

I finish getting out my breakfast, thinking over the conversation Dylan and I had last night. “Why don’t you come with me today? I have to film some stuff for the festival report. You can be my assistant.”

Aiden looks delighted at the suggestion, and when he runs upstairs to get dressed, I stare at my phone and send off a quick message to Dylan. I assume he’s comfortable with Aiden staying with me all day, but there was no discussion on it whatsoever. Before I can say anything, there’s a swift knock on the door and Carole Turner sticks her head in. “Mr. Miller,” she says in surprise.

“Clay. You can call me Clay.” That *has* to be the two hundredth time I’ve said that in this town.

“Right. Is Dylan here?”

“Gone to help out something in town. As is...normal Dylan behavior.”

Carole chuckles, and Aiden comes clomping down the stairs in his warm clothes for the day. “Morning, Aiden.”

“Morning, Grammy! I’m going to be Clay’s assistant today.”

Carole takes note of the mattresses in the living room. “I thought you were going to be at the Harris’s all morning.”

I set my mouth into a thin line and shake my head subtly when Aiden can’t see me.

Aiden straightens his shoulders. “No, I decided to have a sleepover here instead. *And* I won the game we played last night.”

“That’s wonderful,” she says with a smile. “Aiden, darling, can you run to the Maple and help Poppy with shoveling the drive before you go?”

He groans loudly, but one look from his grandmother and he drags his feet to the front yard.

Carole smiles kindly at me once we’re alone. “I want to… check that you’re okay looking after Aiden all the time. I don’t think Dylan—”

“I feel like I’m more okay with it than Dylan has ever been,” I say softly.

Carole nods politely. “I think so too. I was just confirming that Aiden isn’t in the presence of *two* people who find his company a chore.”

I give her a tight smile. “He won’t get that with me.”

She nods and turns back to the door. “Well. It’s a shame you’re only here for a short time, isn’t it?”

I don't respond, for the crushing blow has hit me yet again.

Chapter Sixteen

DYLAN

Despite the frustration of our conversation last night, my spirits are lifted when I see Clay in the middle of Main Street, chatting with Robert.

Nolan is standing nearby, watching Clay intently with the eye of a hawk, and Aiden is next to him, playing with some buttons on the camera in his arms.

I hover in the eaves of the diner for a moment to watch the group. As Robert leaves, Clay strolls over to Nolan and Aiden, and he points down Main Street.

Nolan animatedly says something, and Clay reaches out and puts a gentle hand on his arm. I'm surprised at the rise of jealousy in my throat. Clay isn't supposed to be touching *Nolan*. He's supposed to be touching *me*.

Aiden gives a nod of approval to whatever Clay said, and the three of them walk out of my sight.

I sigh and shove my hands in my jacket pockets. I still have work to do at Gingerbread Lane to get it ready, and Clay

probably doesn't want me to interrupt anyway.

I know it's my fault. Clay *could* have been touching my arm, but I keep pushing him away. By all accounts, that should have been me to stand next to him and Aiden while he gets his work done.

"You alright, Dyl?" Janice says as she comes out of the diner.

"Yeah. Yes, I'm fine." I give her a small smile and hurry towards Gingerbread Lane to avoid any further questions.

As luck would have it, Clay is at Gingerbread Lane, talking to Nolan's camera. Aiden is taking his role of assistant seriously and is taking notes on a clipboard. There's something that tightens in my chest watching Clay fitting so nicely in my world.

As I get closer, Clay finishes his report and his gaze lands on me before a large grin spreads across his face. Take *that*, Nolan.

He makes his way to me, leaving Nolan and Aiden by the camera, and I'm relieved at the excitement to see me. After last night, I didn't know what he was feeling.

"Good morning," I say when he's close enough to hear.

"Morning."

He gives me a happy smile and leans forward to kiss me slowly. I reciprocate, knowing Nolan is watching. "Hey, *so...*" I clear my throat and look around us. "You want to go out for dinner tonight? Just the two of us?" I smile weakly. "Uh, Mom

and Dad are taking Aiden to go see my aunts for tonight. They'll probably stay there. It has been on the calendar for ages. I'm not trying to—"

Clay laughs. "A date sounds nice. I'm sure the diner will have space."

I grin and wrap my arms around him. "I was thinking bigger. We'll go out of Redhaven."

He tilts his face up to mine and squints. "Are you trying to get laid by taking me to dinner?"

I lean in close to his ear. "If I was trying to get laid, I would skip dinner."

Clay gives me a smirk and steps away from my arms. "In that case, I'm looking forward to dinner."

I'm distracted from flirting with Clay by Aiden making a sudden exclamation of pain.

We both turn to look at him in alarm, and he's searching the snow around his feet furiously.

"What happened?" I demand.

Nolan holds his hands up in defense. "I was just standing here!"

"The locket," Aiden wails, digging into his pockets with snowy fingers before looking again at the ground around him.

Clay sighs.

"What?"

Clay looks at me as he bends to help Aiden search. “Aiden brought his mom’s locket with him. The one with her photo in it.”

My first instinct is irritation. “*Aiden*. How could you take that out of the house? You *know* the rules. If you’re going—”

“I know,” Aiden says miserably, his tears breaking the surface and running down his cheeks. “I didn’t mean—”

“You’re just being careless. You—”

“Dylan,” Clay says sharply. “Enough. It was an accident. Either help us look for it, or go do whatever you came this way to do. What you’re currently doing isn’t helpful to anyone.”

I snap my mouth shut as Aiden gulps and slowly bends down to keep looking in the snow, not able to look me in the eye.

“Where do you last remember having it?” Clay asks Aiden, but I don’t stay to listen to the response.

It’s been less than five minutes with Clay this morning, and he’s already pissed at me again. *If you send him away after everything I’ve said, I’m gone too.*

Those words hurt to think about. Sending Aiden away to live with Cherie is the best option for him. Stuck here with me in Redhaven is *not* going to help him grow as a human being, and Clay coming in at the last minute and thinking he knows better isn’t helping.

Clay didn't know Rachel. He doesn't know the hell she put me through our entire lives. The hell she *continues* to put me through, despite her death.

I loved her as one forced to by familial relations can, but that love didn't have to extend to any children she produced. There was a limit, and she crossed it.

The thoughts spin round and round my head all day, and before I know it, I've kept busy enough that it's time for Mom and Dad to pick Aiden up.

"Hey, kiddo," Dad says, sticking his foot on the bottom of my ladder as I try to get the last of the lights up onto Mrs. Cuthers' rooftop, ready for the lighting ceremony tomorrow night.

"Aiden's with Clay," I mumble. "Or he was last I checked."

"I know," he says calmly. "They're at the Maple."

I glance at him and climb down. "Then why are you here?"

"I, uh, wanted to talk to you about something." Dad follows behind me as I collect my things and take them back to my truck.

"If it's about Aiden's damn locket, I don't know where it is."

Dad chuckles softly before hesitating. "The Maple is going to have to close, Dylan."

I stop in surprise and face him. "What?"

“We can’t keep up. Not now.” He sighs and puts his hands in his pockets. I’m suddenly aware of how tired he looks. How *old*. Dad’s never looked *old* before.

“Where are you going to...*live*, Dad? This isn’t just the case of selling the family business. It’s...” I can’t comprehend the news. “It’s *everything*.”

“*We*, Dylan,” he whispers. “We’re going to have to include the guest house. You’re affected by this too. You... Aiden.”

I freeze before taking a slow breath. “This is our *house*, Dad. They can’t force us to—”

“Dylan...”

“We have been *here* in Redhaven for years, Dad. Too many goddamn years. And *this* is how they treat us?”

“Everyone’s getting hurt in some way. It’s not just us.” Dad sighs. “It stings, sure. I thought it’d be us being too old to do it. We’re not too old to stop yet.”

I scowl and get in my truck, a rise of anger in my throat again. At least this time it’s anger at the right thing.

Clay is sitting by the fire at the Maple, halfheartedly listening to my mom prattle on about something, but even I can tell that Clay is lost in his own thoughts.

He glances at me when I walk in, and Mom clears her throat, patting me on the shoulder as she walks past. “Aiden, put your shoes on. Do you need anything from your place before we go?”

I tune her out and sit opposite Clay, studying his handsome face. He looks younger for some reason, sitting here in front of the fire, his brain busy working.

I clear my throat. “Does your investigation into the mayor have anything to do with us being kicked off our property?”

He looks at me in alarm before his expression settles into his reporter neutral. “As in...you think being kicked off your property is a *result* of my investigating or that it’s the very thing I’m investigating?”

He doesn’t move his gaze away from me until I give up and laugh. “Do you still want to go to dinner? Jackass though I am.”

He breaks his intense stare and smirks. “I do.”

“Excellent. As soon as you’re ready, we’ll go.”

Clay looks over my outfit and screws his nose up. “Don’t you have something other than plaid?”

“What’s wrong with—”

“Everything. Go change. Go say goodnight to Aiden. I’ll meet you back here.”

I must admit, when I’ve changed and we’re in the truck heading out of Redhaven, the change of clothes makes this event feel so much nicer. I’m in a good mood, despite everything.

I let him put whatever music he wants on the radio, and I rest my hand on his knee as I drive. He looks hot—an outfit he

brought with him from Atlanta. The tight burgundy shirt has my mouth watering already, and not for food. I thought he'd change into the same boots he used to wear when he first got to Redhaven, but he's surprisingly wearing the boots I bought for him.

I keep getting distracted by him, and I shift in my seat, trying to focus on the road. "You know, I, uh..." I clear my throat. "I'm not very good at, er, dating. I wouldn't say I have ever actually...gone on a date."

He looks at me in surprise. "What do you mean? Weren't you about to move to Chicago with a *boyfriend*?"

"Yeah, but we skipped the dating part. Maybe it would have been different if I *had* gone to Chicago." I give him a weak smile. "I've never done *this* before."

His hand tangles with mine as it rests on his thigh. "Am I your first?" he says with a sugar-sweet smile.

I roll my eyes at him and pull into the parking lot of the restaurant.

Clay holds my hand as we walk inside, and I *feel* rather than see his reaction. He leans in close to me. "I can see why you don't date," he mutters. "Why aren't there nicer places like this back home?"

I frown at him. "There'd be nicer places than this in Atlanta."

Clay blushes a deep red and concentrates on a rosy-cheeked elf that is stuck to the window. "I meant Redhaven," he

mumbles. He clears his throat. “So, I guess this is the local date spot?” He leans closer to me. “I’ve seen almost every couple in here back in Redhaven.”

I raise my brows. “It’s either here or The Orange Chicken on the other side of Redhaven. Give you a choice of flavor.”

He grins. “I think there’s too much choice back in Atlanta. There’s something from every corner of the world on every street.”

I chuckle, and we get shown to our table. “There’s that Christmas music again.”

Clay listens to it for a minute before turning a sly grin onto me. “So it is.”

“The restrooms are—”

He studies the menu. “I’m a man of virtue, Dylan, and I’m not going to be reduced to a quick fuck in the men’s bathroom in the middle of nowhere.” He twists his lips. “Yet, anyway.”

I smirk before resting my arms on the table. “Okay, let’s play a game.”

“A game? This is *dinner*, not *game night*.”

I wiggle my eyebrows. “How many glasses of cheap wine would it take for me to convince you to go to the restroom with me?”

“A lot,” he answers blandly. “And then I’ll pass out and it will be a *hard no* from me on that front.”

“Hmm...” I look around us and purse my lips. “Okay, how many glasses of wine would it take for us to have a nice dinner with spectacular conversation before we make out in my truck?”

The edges of Clay’s lips twitch, but he still pretends to read the menu. “Probably not that many.”

The waitress comes up and gives us our glasses of wine we’d ordered before we sat down.

“Cheers, then,” I say with a grin, picking up my glass and holding it out to him.

He puts the menu down, finally paying me attention. “Cheers.” He takes a sip before grinning. “How many glasses of wine will it take before the spectacular conversation starts?”

I laugh in surprise—a genuine laugh—and his gaze explores my face.

“I take it back. It wouldn’t take a lot to convince me to go to the restroom.”

I can’t help but feel light for the first time in a long time. There’s a weight off my shoulders that only ever happens when I’m sitting and laughing with Clay Miller.

“Can I ask you something?” Clay asks suddenly.

“Mm?”

“Why didn’t your parents take Aiden? I know it was Rachel’s wish that he stayed with you, but *wishing* has little legal hold.”

I sigh and lean on the table. “Mom and Dad were always needing to clean up after Rachel’s messes. When she died, all the debt, the hospital bills, the financial problems the Maple was already having... it became too much. They were virtually broke. Still are, really. It’s why they have to look at selling. Then Mom broke her leg just before the social worker arrived and there was no going back.” I smile weakly and take a sip of wine again. “I suppose they could now, but, I don’t know, they’re getting older. Getting weaker. They wouldn’t be able to run the Maple *and* look after him. Not that there might be a Maple soon.”

Clay seems sad at my explanation, but he’s interrupted from responding by the waitress.

Once we’ve ordered our meals, the conversation switches to Clay’s life in Atlanta.

“You’ve lived there your whole life?”

Clay hums. “Apart from a short six months after college where I thought I’d met my future husband and moved to Portland. Turns out he was a dick. With a gambling problem. And didn’t like me all that much, as is the common theme.” He shrugs. “So I moved back to Atlanta and went back to the same boring life I’d led before it.”

“Well, at least you had friends there.”

He reacts strangely to my sentence. “Yeah, well...I, uh, didn’t really have that many friends to begin with, and the ones I did have...” He sighs. “I burned more bridges than I

should have when I left. I was young and stupid and thought I was going to be on top of the world.”

“Been there,” I whisper.

“Yeah. I ended up losing all my friends, and they’re all married now or committed in some way. One of them has kids with his husband, which is not something I ever saw coming. I thought *I* would be the first to...” He looks down at the table in between us and doesn’t finish his sentence. “I didn’t even get invited to their wedding, and that’s how I knew I fucked up.”

“Were you close?”

“He was my college roommate.” He puts on a fake smile. “Anyway, I bet they’re all laughing now that I’ve been sent to a small town in New Hampshire to report on a Christmas festival and *not* reporting on the embezzlement story that I had hoped to get.” He gulps hard. “I actually think they haven’t given me a single thought in years, so...”

“You’re not easily forgotten, Clay.”

“I’m not easily remembered.”

I smile sadly and take his hand over the table. “At the very least, no matter what happens between us, Nolan will always remember you.”

That works. Clay grins and squeezes my hand. “He’s funny. If he were ten, fifteen years older, you’d have some competition.”

The thought makes me uncomfortable. “Uh...wow. Is that the, uh, the only deciding factor? His *age*?”

“Why? You jealous?”

I can feel myself blushing. “Of Nolan? No. Please.”

“Oh my God, you *are*! Why? Do you think it wouldn’t take that much to take Nolan into the restroom?”

“*Would* it?”

He sits back with a cocky smile. “Maybe. Maybe I’ll keep you guessing. Keep you on your toes. If you’re not careful, I’ll call—”

I growl at him as our food arrives, and in the dimly lit room with the gaudy Christmas music and the over-the-top decorations in time for the season, I realize I don’t want to be anywhere else or *with* anyone else.

“Clay?”

He looks at me in anticipation as he starts preparing his food. “Yeah?”

Stay with me.

I don’t know how to ask him to.

“No matter what we are in the future...you’d make a great dad.”

Judging by Clay’s reaction, that was the best compliment I could have given him. He wants someone to recognize that trait in him and give him the opportunity to explore it.

“Thank you,” he whispers.

I hold out my wineglass again. “I know life hasn’t turned out the way either of us expected, but...cheers anyway.”

He clinks his glass against mine and smiles.

Chapter Seventeen

CLAY

I stretch out in Dylan's bed and am surprised to find him still beside me. "Good morning," I mumble as he blinks his eyes open.

"Mmm..." He nuzzles his nose into the corner of my jaw and kisses whatever skin he finds there. "Made better with you here."

I grin and let my eyes close again. "Thanks for the date last night."

"Who says the date has to be over?" His lips hover at the edge of my mouth until I twist my neck to give him access. "I might not have dated before, but it's custom to give early morning blowjobs, isn't it?"

"For sure, but don't you have a job to do or something?" I whisper as he trails his lips from my mouth down my jaw to my collarbone.

"I definitely have a job to do." He crawls on top of me and kisses his way down my torso. "It involves you—"

He's interrupted by my phone ringing. He narrows his eyes as we both stare at the phone on the nightstand.

"It involves you *ignoring that* while I make sure it's worth it."

I grin and put my hands behind my head. "There's no one I would want to interrupt this for anyway. You can carry on."

He nods once in satisfaction by my answer and gets down to work. God, he's good at this. It's times like these that I can pretend that this *is* what our life could be every day. Sure, most days Aiden is here. And The Red Maple is about to be sold to the highest bidder so they can tear it down and build a theme park, but for now, I have my boyfriend's warm mouth wrapped around me, we went on a great date last night, and tonight is the opening of the lights display at Gingerbread Lane.

For right this second, life couldn't be more perfect.

Dylan draws off of me and narrows his eyes. "You're thinking about something."

I splutter out a laugh. "What?"

"You're thinking about something. You're normally more... involved."

I smile in amusement and prop myself up on my elbows. "Sorry. Do you want to swap?"

He moves up until our faces are aligned. "How many glasses of cheap wine would it take to help you focus?"

“None, but your cock in my ass will help.”

He hums through a smile and gestures me to roll over while he gets a condom and the lube from his nightstand. “Last night was fun,” I muse while I wait for him. “In your car...” I look over my shoulder. I stretch loudly, pushing my chest on the mattress and dragging my ass in the air. “I felt like a teenager.”

“That *is* my hope for our dates, Clay. You to feel like a teenager.”

I chuckle as he climbs back on the bed behind me. “I hope not.”

Morning Dylan takes his time. Or maybe it’s Dylan without the worry of Aiden in the house. Either way, he draws out the sensations until I think my head is going to explode.

If he’s trying to remind me what life could be like without Aiden around, it’s stupidly tempting.

The call I ignored was from Janice at the diner. I frown at my phone while I go make coffees and Dylan has a shower.

I tap on the bathroom door before poking my head in. “Hey, I’m heading to the diner for something. The missed call was Janice.”

“Okay,” he says over the running water. I get a glimpse of his skin through the shower door, and I push my face right up against it. He chuckles and splashes water at me. “Get me a muffin, will you?”

“What type?”

“Surprise me.”

I grin, and after looking one last time at his gorgeous form, I head out into the freezing morning air towards the diner.

“Hey,” I say, stamping the snow off my boots as I get there. “Everything okay?”

Janice looks over from the counter. “Clay, my dear. Hello!”

I frown and lean on the countertop. “Hi?”

With a large flourish, she points to a basket all wrapped up in a Christmas bow sitting near the till.

“What is it?”

“It’s yours!”

I inspect it closer. “*What* is it?”

Janice rolls her eyes. “It’s the Christmas basket raffle. You won it.”

I chuckle in confusion. “Did I even *enter* a Christmas basket raffle?”

“Yeah, silly. You put your name and number on the receipt, and you went in the draw.”

I purse my lips. “Huh. Well, there you go.” I vaguely recall Dylan doing something with my receipt, but I didn’t know he was putting my name for it. “Er...thanks?”

“You are welcome. Would you like to pose for the basket raffle winner’s circle?” She points to a row of photos on the wall near the jukebox, and I study it with a grin.

“It’s very linear for a circle.”

She grins and pulls out her phone. “Come on, Mr. Reporter, give me a smile. I’ll get it printed out and stuck up there.”

I’m sure if Dylan was here, he’d be rolling his eyes, but I hold the large basket up and smile the biggest smile I am capable of.

“Gorgeous. It’ll go with all the others.” She slides her phone into the pocket of her jeans and claps her hands. “Was there anything else I can get for you or Dylan while you’re here?”

“Just a chocolate muffin will do.” I purse my lips. “And a chocolate chip one too, please.”

She bends down to get them out of their display case. “You coming to the lights tonight?”

“Yeah, of course. Not only because I’m reporting on it, but I don’t think anyone is going to let Dylan *not* be there in case something breaks.”

“And something always breaks.”

I chuckle and load the muffins on top of my enormous basket. I stupidly walked here. “I’ll see you tonight, then!”

“Bye, sweetheart.”

I’m nearly back at Dylan’s house when I spot Nolan sitting on the front step of the Maple. He frowns in confusion when he sees me.

“Did you—”

“Win the Christmas basket raffle? I did.”

“Aw, man. I entered it five times this year.”

I grin and nod my head back to the guest house. “I didn’t see your face on the winner’s circle wall.”

He smirks as I struggle to get through the door. “I’m surprised you agreed to go on the wall. Isn’t it all only old people?”

Dylan is shirtless and standing nursing a cup of coffee in the kitchen when Nolan, my basket, and I walk through.

“Is someone trying to win your affections?” he says dryly.

“*You*, apparently!” I dump the basket on the counter and grin. “I won the Christmas raffle at the diner. On the receipt that *you* put in.”

“Ah, so *I* won a Christmas raffle.”

“Not so fast.” I push his hand out of the way and stand in the way. “*I* am in the winner’s circle, *not* you. *My* picture is on the wall.”

Nolan perches awkwardly at Dylan’s breakfast bar. “I really thought that was only for old people.”

I wave my finger at him and start unwrapping my prize. “Just you wait. I’m going to fill that wall with pictures of my face.”

Both Nolan and Dylan stop in surprise at what I just said. Even I can’t believe what I said, but instead, I open the basket with more of a flourish to distract them. I know it doesn’t work with one glance at Dylan’s face.

“What are you doing here anyway, Nolan?” Dylan asks, reluctantly making him a cup of coffee along with the one I never made for myself before I left.

“Oh, right.” Nolan turns to me and effectively ignores Dylan again. “Wondered if you had a game plan for tonight? What are we covering? Is it shots to camera or...”

“Haven’t decided yet. Something simple, probably. My report is on the Christmas festival, not the lights festival.”

“It’s all the same,” Dylan says with a mouthful of the chocolate muffin. Knew it. I offer Nolan my chocolate chip muffin, and he slowly picks at it.

“Still, my focus is on the Christmas festival and what’s happening on Main Street.” I think about it for a second. “Isn’t the Christmas festival in a few days? I thought you said this place got busy for the holiday period?”

“It will. Just wait, my dear.”

I know Dylan only said it to remind Nolan that I’m his first, but it’s nice to hear him say it anyway.

Nolan either doesn’t hear it or pretends not to and picks off more of his muffin. “It’s true. There will be people everywhere.”

I tap distractedly on the counter. “Should I be giving up my room at the Maple? I’m here most nights anyway, and if there’s someone that needs the room—”

“I really don’t think it’ll make that much difference,” Nolan says as he straightens his shoulders, and Dylan chuckles.

“Move your stuff over, Clay. I’ll tell Mom that the room is free.”

“I wonder how long for, right?” I say miserably, turning to Dylan. “Have they said the timeline?”

He shakes his head, but Nolan perks up at the conversation change. “You know, I can probably get you into the mayor’s office. There’s bound to be something—”

It’s surprisingly Dylan that has the strongest reaction. “*Absolutely* not. Don’t go breaking the law, Nolan. And *especially* not you, Clay.”

“It’s not breaking the law if it’s my—”

I groan loudly. “Dylan’s right. It would be breaking the law.”

“What would you be able to do with the information you got while there anyway?” Dylan continues, strolling past us and towards the staircase. “I will not be bailing either of you out of stupid ideas. Remember that.”

Nolan watches him leave before twisting his lips as he turns to look at me. “I wouldn’t tell him where you got the other information, then.”

“Ah, the difference is I don’t *know* where I got the information from.”

Nolan chuckles. “I don’t think Dylan will notice a difference, but...” He shrugs. “He’s your boyfriend, I guess.”

“Hmm... I’ll handle him. I still think breaking into the office is a bad idea, but I like the way you’re thinking. There has to be *something* we’re missing as to why he needs the town ruined.”

The front door suddenly opens, and Aiden stands there with a big grin on his face. “I’m home!”

“Hey, buddy!” I say as his eyes widen at the large basket on the breakfast bar.

“Oh my gosh, did you win the Christmas raffle? That’s so cool! What’s in it?” He dumps his bag on the landing and rushes into the kitchen, climbing onto the seat next to Nolan and riffling through the basket. “Is it only boring adult stuff?”

I hand him a box of cookies. “Here you go. I’ll see what else you can have later. How was your night, Aiden?”

He shrugs, his attention still heavily focused on the basket’s contents.

Dylan comes downstairs, and I watch as both uncle and nephew settle into each other’s presence again. Aiden tenses up, and Dylan loses some of his smile.

“Hi, Uncle Dylan.”

“Hey, kiddo. How was Aunt Jenna and Aunt Raya’s house?”

“It was fine. Grammy and Poppy want to move there. I don’t like it that much.”

It’s obviously the first time Dylan is hearing of this, and he frowns in concern at the still-open door of the house. “Aiden,

can you please remember to keep the door shut? It's too cold out there."

"Sorry," Aiden mumbles, already opening the box of cookies and digging into them.

Dylan looks towards the door and points to it. I know what he's saying without words, and I nod, gesturing for him to go talk to his parents about the decisions they're making without input from Dylan.

"We really need to save the Maple," I mutter.

"Just tell me *how*, and I'll do it," Nolan says.

I sigh. If only it were that easy.

My thoughts are scrambled as to what the next step is. I *know*, without a shadow of a doubt, that the mayor is up to something that is more realistic than a theme park. I wonder if that was Nolan's imagination running wild or if there are actually plans being drawn up for a theme park to avoid suspicion. But suspicion of *what*? Why would a mayor want to drive the members of the town out of it?

When Nolan leaves, Dylan is still talking to his parents and Aiden is happily watching TV (and probably avoiding any homework he might have). I sit on the armchair near Aiden and look at my blank laptop screen.

No one is going to give me access to what I need. I'm a reporter, not an investigator. I think over Nolan's offer again but know that Dylan is right. I could get arrested, and being

arrested fits into my life plan even less than the idea of moving to Redhaven does.

Instead of pondering on the idea of the mayor, I open my Instagram and hover over the search bar. I quickly type in my college roommate's name, but his Instagram is on private and I'm not friends with him to see his posts.

In fact, I can't see any of my old friends' posts. Either they're on private or they don't post anything.

Of course Joclyn has her Instagram public, and I scroll through her page, ignoring that tug of jealousy as it appears in my stomach. That's *my* life.

Even Hugh has a profile, and his latest picture is one of him and a man younger than me cozying up to the camera. Anger burns through me, but I manage to control it before I startle the child sitting near me.

I check the notifications that I've never bothered to look at, and I'm surprised to see a lot of the members of Redhaven have been following me.

I haven't posted anything since my arrival in Redhaven, so I quickly take a photo of the tree and my Christmas raffle win, as well as a photo of a snowman Aiden and I made a few days ago, one of the inside of the Maple, a photo of Nolan and me from the TV station, and a good old-fashioned selfie for good measure, uploading them all at once with the caption *Redhaven, New Hampshire – a Christmas dream.*

It doesn't take long for Joclyn to comment on it.

LOL sucks to be you.

Hugh likes the post, which makes me audibly growl. Nolan comments a bunch of fire emojis and a smiley face, and almost an hour later, just before Dylan walks in the door, Dylan comments on the post too.

All the more dreamy cause you're here.

I can't help the sigh of contentment and the blush in my cheeks.

Chapter Eighteen

DYLAN

Robert has a megaphone, which is never a good idea. He's standing on a makeshift stage with Tom Bradley and his regular fake smile. Nolan is filming, which leaves Clay free to be tucked under my arm as we wait for the lights to be switched on for the first time this season. Sure, I've seen them all on during the day, but this is the big event. Aiden is, as always, standing close to Clay, pressed against his front, Clay's arms wrapped around him. My parents are near us, Mom leaning into Dad for warmth.

To anyone else, we'd look like the perfect little family. A perfect little family that will be broken up by the time the New Year bells toll. Mom and Dad will go live with my aunts Jenna and Raya as soon as the ink is dry on selling the Maple. Clay will go back to Atlanta. Aiden will go live with Cherie. I will be able to move where I please. As I think about it, I realize I have no clue where I'd go unless someone is telling me where. I was going to move to Chicago for Oliver. I thought of moving to Atlanta for Clay. Where would I go for myself?

“Ready, Redhaven?” Robert asks excitedly. He holds out an oversized red button towards Tom, which is purely for aesthetic, as the button doesn’t actually press anything. “In three, two...”

“One!” everyone around us yells, drowning out the megaphone.

Tom pushes the button, and slowly all the lights, sounds, and inflatables blink to life, shrouding everyone in brilliant light.

“Whoa,” I catch from Clay before he realizes I’m watching and tries to hide his fascination.

“Come on,” I whisper, tugging on his hand. “Let me show you a proper Christmas here in Redhaven. To make up for the ones you didn’t have as a kid.”

He grins and squeezes my hand tight as we walk down Gingerbread Lane.

“This is insane,” he breathes as Aiden finds some friends from school to admire the lights with. Clay wraps his arms around my waist and grins at me. “I’m going to have to do my work in a moment, but...” He looks around us again. “This is magical, Dylan. This is *Redhaven*, isn’t it?”

“Yeah,” I whisper. I lean down and kiss him slowly. “I’m glad you’re here.”

“So am I.” He grins and plants a kiss on my nose. “Oh God, imagine *me* saying that.”

I laugh as we get ushered down the snowy lane by the crowd around us. “I think Redhaven might be rubbing off on you.”

“I think the man I’m sleeping with has more to do with that than the town I’m in.”

“He’s a lucky man.”

Clay looks up at me and raises his eyebrows. “He’d better believe it! I don’t give it up for just anyone.” He holds up a finger. “Don’t say anything in response to that, or you won’t be getting it again.”

I laugh and take his hand, strolling down the street. “I am lucky,” I whisper in his ear. Something about the lights and the atmosphere has got me sappy and romantic.

“You seem to be getting into the Christmas spirit all of a sudden,” he says, stopping to look at a display of inflatable Santas on a roof. “It’s a shame there isn’t soft Christmas jazz playing. It’s just all this pop stuff.”

I chuckle. “It won’t be far away, I’m sure.”

I’m nostalgic tonight, knowing it could be the last time these lights exist as they are. Who knows what will happen to Redhaven when the people leave it? Clay smiles as he notices the sudden drop in my mood. “What did your parents say?” he says quietly. “About moving away.”

I shrug. “They just said it was an option. They spoke to Raya and Jenna about the *possibility*. Aiden overheard.”

“Ah.”

Clay looks for Aiden amongst the running children and smiles when he spots him.

“Have you thought about what you’re going to do?” he whispers, shoving his hands into his jacket pockets.

“Not yet. I’m going to live in the moment.”

Clay keeps his gaze on my face, stepping closer and holding his face near mine for a kiss. Before I can give him one, Nolan interrupts, because *of course* Nolan has to interrupt.

I growl at the back of my throat, and Clay grins, wrapping his arm around my waist.

“I thought we should get some of the shots we need to,” Nolan says, squinting his eyes at me. “That way Clay can be free to make out with you in front of everyone all the sooner.”

I purse my lips. “Make out with me?” I push Clay towards Nolan. “Okay, quick. Go do whatever you need to do and come back to me.”

He laughs and gestures Nolan away back to the beginning of Gingerbread Lane.

“You know, I don’t think I’ve ever seen you like this.”

I turn in surprise to see Debbie standing at her hot chocolate stall, a thoughtful expression on her face. “And what is *this*, Debbie?” I ask with a chuckle, moving out of the way of a particularly large group of people from out of town.

“*This...in love*. You look at that man like you want to—”

I grimace at what I believe will be the end of her sentence.

“—*spend the rest of your life with him.*” She narrows her eyes at me. “I don’t want to know what you thought I was going to say.”

I relax and accept a cup of hot chocolate from her before leaning on the wooden table *I* built for her. “Clay’s not staying, Debbie. His job won’t be here for too much longer anyway. Don’t get any ideas.”

She studies me closely for a second before getting distracted by handing hot chocolate out to Aiden and his friends. I snatch his beanie off playfully, and he growls at me to get it back.

I watch him run away, trying to avoid spilling his hot chocolate, and I sigh. “Besides, I don’t think many of us will be here for much longer, right? I’m sure you’ve heard—”

“There’s too many of us to drive us all out,” she says confidently. “I think it’s silly rumors.”

“Those silly rumors are closing the Maple.”

Debbie freezes. “Is it true, then?”

“Not unless something drastically changes before Christmas Day.”

“There *has* to be something we can do, Dylan. Where are your parents going to go? You? Aiden? If the Maple closes...”

I *know* the end of her sentence. If the Maple closes, so does Redhaven. The Maple is the only accommodation close to town.

I spot Tom Bradley smiling a fake-looking smile at his surroundings, talking to a few members of the community. I get a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach when I look at him, and I suddenly think that Clay might be right about him.

I give a vague smile to Debbie and walk towards him.

“Ah, Mr. Turner,” he says. “Just the man I wanted to see.” He claps his hand on my back and leads me back towards the front of Gingerbread Lane. “I was wondering if you’d thought about taking up a position on the town council.”

“And...why would I do that?”

He frowns. “We’ve talked about it.”

“We talked about it *in the past*. There’s nothing about the idea that is appealing *now*.”

“Why not?” He pulls me into a quieter section off Gingerbread Lane. “I know things have been tough since Rachel—”

“Don’t,” I snap. “You don’t know anything. Especially because you don’t seem to know that The Red Maple is being forced to close. I *doubt* that is something you didn’t know already.”

He gives me a bland smile. “I don’t keep on top of what happens on private property, Dylan. That’s not my job.”

There’s something about the sentence that seems rehearsed. Over his shoulder, I see Clay watching us in suspicion.

“No, I’m not going to work for the council, Tom. You’re running us all out of Redhaven anyway. What’s the point?”

I shoulder past him, but he calls out before I can get too far away. “Your boyfriend is a feisty one, isn’t he?”

I stop in my tracks before turning to face him. “*What?*”

He shrugs casually. “I’m just surprised. I thought it unusual that you’ve found someone that is so like your sister. I know you and your sister didn’t really get along, after all.”

My mouth is unusually dry, but I manage to set my jaw and force a smile. “You don’t keep on top of what happens on private property, I thought. Stay the fuck out of my business.”

I walk away before he can say anything else, and Clay meets me halfway. “What was that?” he says, eyeing Tom, who is still standing behind me.

“That was a warning, Clay. You have to be—”

Clay folds his arms and smirks. “It means I’m onto something, isn’t it? No one would feel the need to threaten people close to me if they weren’t scared of me finding something out, right?”

I hate to admit that he’s right. I groan. “Just *be* careful, okay? Who knows what shit he could do?”

He grins as Aiden comes into sight again. “I’m a reporter, Dyl. I’ve dealt with worse people than a small-town mayor.” He threads his fingers with mine. “I’ve finished all the work I need to. Let’s go home. I’ve got some things I want to do to you once Aiden is asleep.”

I smirk and put the conversation with Tom out of my head.

It's only later, when I'm getting my breath back after being thoroughly fucked, that I remember Debbie's conversation. I grin to myself as Clay kisses my shoulder and murmurs how good I make him feel.

I know I've told myself I have to live in the moment, but maybe the future wouldn't be so terrible to think about if Clay was there to think about it with me.

Chapter Nineteen

CLAY

I blink my eyes open slowly, before it hits me what day it is. Christmas festival day. The reason for my early morning wake up is obvious when Dylan's phone starts vibrating again on the nightstand.

I curl around him, trying to cling to this cozy moment for a few minutes longer, but I know trying to keep Dylan from going crazy will involve me letting him go and help.

"I'm going to throw that phone out the fucking window," he mumbles, still in the clutches of sleep.

"As much as I'd love for you to do that so I can keep you all to myself, I have a feeling that the rest of the community will think it rude."

He rolls over and sighs, tucking me in against his body. "Shh," he whispers, closing his eyes again. "Not yet. I'm sure I'll barely see you today. Let me make the most of it."

I chuckle and nuzzle my nose into his neck, inhaling the wonderful scent of him. It's a scent I know I'll forget way too

soon after I leave. The thought makes me squeeze him tighter, clinging to the smallest bit of hope I have that there will magically be an answer to all our problems. It's a thought I've had a few times now, but there's a part of me that actually wants to *stay*. In *Redhaven*. With this weird little community I've found.

I'm not sure how much of Redhaven will stay as it is in the coming months.

Before I can try to encourage more of a sexy start to our morning, the bedroom door flings open and Aiden comes barreling in, grinning from ear to ear. "It's Christmas festival day!" he says brightly. "Come on! We've got to go!"

Dylan grunts as I draw away from him, suddenly nervous at Aiden seeing Dylan and me cuddled up together in the same bed. I know Aiden isn't stupid and he's well and truly aware that Dylan and I are together and that we share a bed, but I'm not sure where his knowledge stops.

"Let Uncle Dylan rest for a few more moments," I tell Aiden. "He's going to be busy for the next few days. Why don't you go downstairs and get breakfast, and I'll join you in a minute."

"No! You have to get up!" Aiden jumps onto the bed, and I watch the frown fall over Dylan's face, but I grin and lunge for Aiden.

"Maybe *you* need to *sleep*." I try to tackle him down to the bed as he shrieks in excitement about our new game.

“Both of you need to *leave*,” Dylan mutters as he gets kicked in the back by Aiden’s wayward foot.

“Don’t mind him,” I whisper loudly to Aiden. “He hasn’t had enough beauty sleep.”

I place Aiden on the floor, and once I’ve gathered myself in a large sweater borrowed from Dylan to brace the cold downstairs, we head down for breakfast.

“Okay, so what’s the game plan for today?” I ask as Aiden eats his cereal while I’m waiting for my coffee. I rest my elbows on the bench and lean over as I wait for his answer.

“Arcade. Food. Reindeer.”

“All good choices,” I agree. “I need to buy Uncle Dylan something for Christmas. What do you think I should get him?”

Aiden purses his lips in deep concentration. “A puppy.”

“I *don’t* think Dylan would like a puppy for Christmas.”

Dylan appears from the stairwell, having overheard our conversation. “I absolutely do not.”

“Well, what *do* you want?”

I catch his gaze as it travels over me as I’m leaning provocatively against the countertop, and he licks his lips. “Nothing,” he says slowly. “I don’t need anything.”

I smirk at him before turning back to Aiden. “I think we’ll think of something a little more than nothing, won’t we, Aiden?”

Aiden grins and nods.

When I've sent Aiden upstairs to go get dressed so that we can go, I don't have enough time to turn around before Dylan's hands are on my waist. "I've got everything I'll need for Christmas, Clay."

"I can't put *me* under the Christmas tree, can I?"

"Sure you can. You'd be a hell of a lot more fun to unwrap too."

I twist in his embrace and kiss him lightly. "It's Christmas festival day, and *you* have work to do."

He sighs. "I'll see you there?"

I nod as he kisses me again, but we're interrupted by the front door opening and Dylan's parents strolling in. His mom's eyes widen a little before she recovers.

"Oops. Sorry, boys. Dyl, didn't realize you'd still be here. Clay, I brought you over the jacket you left in the hall closet."

"Ah. Thanks. I was looking for that." I move out of Dylan's embrace and take the jacket. "Coffee, Carole? Joel?"

They both say yes, and I lean up to quickly kiss Dylan on the way through the kitchen.

"I'll see you when we get there."

Dylan pouts but leaves anyway just as Aiden comes back downstairs.

"Morning, Grammy and Poppy!"

“Good morning, sweetheart,” Carole says. “You excited for today?”

“Yeah! Clay and I were making our game plan.”

Carole chuckles. “Remember, Aiden, Clay needs to work today too.”

“I remember,” he mutters, “but not the *whole* time.”

I screw my nose up. “I *hope* I’m not working the whole time. But maybe you can be my assistant again today.”

He studies me seriously. “Maybe. I might be at the arcade though.”

I burst into laughter and hand Dylan’s parents their coffees.

Joel looks between us all for a few seconds before clearing his throat. “Alright, kiddo, how about you and I go outside and help get my truck ready to go? We have stuff to take to town, so we’d better get started.”

Aiden doesn’t question it, but I see Joel’s sly smile at his wife before Carole and I are left in silence.

“It must be nice to have today here already,” she starts softly. “This is what you came for after all.”

I look into my coffee mug. “Uh, yeah. It’s... It’ll be nice to have the story done, I guess.”

She smiles weakly. “Uh, do you have...an idea when you’re...leaving? I feel like both Dylan and Aiden will need some—”

“Not until after Christmas. Still have some time.”

Carole raises her eyebrows. “Christmas? Wow. I thought you were...”

“I was. But, uh, Dylan asked if I wanted to stay. So...I am.”

Her shoulders relax and a soft smile comes over her face. “Oh, that’s great, Clay. It’s...been real nice to have you here. And if Dylan is inviting you to stay for Christmas...well, he must feel the same.”

I give her a weak smile, and she gestures outside. “I’ll go help the boys with packing the truck for the last of the things they’ll need. Do you want to get dressed and meet us in the yard? We’ll go in together.”

“Sure. I’ll be there a minute.”

I put one foot on the staircase as Carole makes it to the door.

“Hey, Carole?”

“Yes, sweetheart?”

I try to formulate my sentence. “I, uh...just wanted to say that, no matter what happens in the future, know that I’m fighting. For Dylan, for Aiden...for the Maple.” I gulp and manage a smile. “I haven’t really had anything to fight for in my life. So, uh—”

“All Dylan does is fight,” Carole says. “Thank you for taking that off his shoulders for a change.” She looks out into the yard before stepping closer to me and lowering her voice. “We know about Cherie’s offer.”

I exhale slowly and nod. “Yeah. So does Aiden. He says he doesn’t want to go.”

“I don’t want my grandson sent away any more than you do, Clay. I know you’re adamant on Aiden staying with Dylan.”

I frown. “Wait, you think he *should* go?”

She clears her throat and pauses for a moment that lets me know the answer before she says anything. “Everything is changing so much this year, Clay. *No*, I don’t want Aiden to go. I don’t think he’ll do as well there as Dylan thinks he will.” She stares at the floor before lifting watery eyes to meet mine. “But I miss *Dylan*. My *son*. The Dylan before all this happened. I lost my daughter *and* my son in very different ways. Rach was...” She looks out the door again before sitting heavily on the step near me. I sit diligently next to her. “Rach was a handful. Ever since she was a little kid. We took her to see doctors, but...nothing ever came of it. We just didn’t have the funds.”

“Are you worried Aiden is the same?” I whisper.

“He’s not. He’s already not. He’s so much like Dylan. If you knew Rach, you would have thought that Aiden wasn’t her kid at all.” She sighs loudly. “Dylan got lost amongst it all. It was hard not to lose him. He quieted down when Rach got loud. He did what was expected of him, never complained, kept to himself.”

“To his own detriment.”

“Yes. I don’t know what went through Rachel’s head when she changed Aiden’s guardianship last minute. I don’t know if it was deliberate or not. But watching Dylan shoulder the extra responsibility when he already had done *so much*... It broke us all.” She smiles at me and pats my knee. “No, I don’t want Aiden to go away, but I want Dylan to be *at peace* with the decisions he makes.”

She gets up and brushes off the dust from her pants. “And Clay?”

I wait expectantly.

“Oliver was never going to stay when Aiden was involved. Dylan didn’t even ask him to.” She gives me a confident smile. “He doesn’t ask for things he assumes to be wrong.”

I nod, knowing exactly what it is she’s telling me. When she leaves the house, I hurry upstairs to get dressed, my mind in a whirl.

It’s all I can think about until we get close to Main Street and my mouth drops open in shock.

Joel chuckles. “Impressive, isn’t it?”

“My God.” Joel pulls into a parking space, and I get out, my eyes wide. There are people *everywhere*. It’s as bustling as any large city would be at this time of year. There’s music playing, and the sound of laughter and conversation. There’s snow on the ground, but it won’t last much longer with the amount of foot traffic there is. Lights are blinking merrily, the smell of food is lingering in the air, and there are a few Santas roaming

around, greeting everyone and asking for children's wish lists. There are people selling things, and the occasional reindeer walks past with eager passengers on its back. It's like I stepped into a Thomas Kinkade painting.

Even *yesterday* it didn't look like this; the town was as dead as it usually is.

One of the Santas walks up to me, red-cheeked and out of breath. I know it's Robert before he even opens his mouth. "Thank God you're here. Apparently someone stole all of Debbie's mistletoe again, and she's—"

"I'll go check it out," I say with a chuckle. "Where's Dylan?"

"One of the banners fell down overnight, and he's up on a roof to try to fix it."

I wince and turn to Aiden. "Coming with me or staying with Grammy and Poppy?"

"I'll stay with them."

I know it's because he doesn't want to see Debbie, but I let him go and make my way down Main Street to find Debbie, marveling at the amount of detail that has gone into this event. There are children with their parents following a scavenger hunt, there are elaborate window displays that have seemingly popped up overnight, and there is such festive magic in the air that I forgot that I have a job to do. I spot Nolan at the mistletoe booth, trying to calm Debbie down.

Nolan notices me first. "Hey. Can we talk about somet—"

“Clay,” Debbie interrupts when she sees me. “Do you know where my mistletoe is? I can’t believe they took it *this* close to the festival. It’s already started!”

I frown. “I’ll go find it. Stay here so I know where to find you. Nolan, I’ll talk to you later.”

I go to Rosie first, but she has no idea what I’m talking about. She’s not that good of an actress and she’s swamped with customers, so I can’t imagine she’d do something as childish as take Debbie’s mistletoe the morning of the festival.

Josie, Janice, and Carole all say the same thing. Robert is the one to tell me about it, and the last thing he wants is a panicked and irate Debbie when he’s dealing with everything else, so I can’t imagine it’s him.

I round a corner to try to find my next suspect—Clem—when I spot the mayor holding a suspiciously large armful of mistletoe.

“*Hey*,” I say loudly, enough for him to jump in surprise. “That’s a hell of a lot of mistletoe you’ve got there. Someone’s in for one hell of a kiss.”

Tom relaxes when he sees it’s me. “I just confiscated it off some kids. Seems like they were having a bit of fun at Debbie Warner’s expense.”

I narrow my eyes and take it off him roughly. “*Why* would they do that?”

“*Why* would *I*?” he says smoothly.

I smirk. “I didn’t accuse you of anything. I asked why the kids would take all of Debbie’s mistletoe. It seems oddly specific and not much gain. I’d think they’d target the donut stand before the *mistletoe*.”

“I don’t pretend to know what goes on in kids’ heads, Mr. Miller.”

“Mm...” I turn and stomp back towards Debbie’s stall, almost running into Dylan coming the other way.

He blinks at the mistletoe in my arms. “You know that I’ll kiss you without that, right? You didn’t need all of it.”

I chuckle and kiss him gently. “I think the mayor stole it. I’m returning it.” He frowns but walks alongside me to return the mistletoe to its rightful owner. “You got down from the roof okay, then?”

“Falling off is remarkably quick.”

I chuckle as we get to the stall, and Debbie sags in relief. “*Thank you*, Clay. Who had it? I’m so sick of those—”

“I think it was just some kids, Debbie. Sorry. I saw it all lying on the ground behind the diner.”

Dylan throws me a confused glance, but I hand it all back and stay to help set it up again while Nolan starts filming some of the B-roll for the rest of the report.

As soon as Debbie’s stall is back up to scratch, she gives me a big hug. “Thank you, my dear. Nearly ruined me. That’s a lot of money down the drain.” She waves a finger at me. “Nearly gave up this year! But *no*, it doesn’t matter how many times

they steal it, I'm going to keep *selling it!*" She yells the last half of her sentence to the people around us, and I chuckle.

I'm about to leave when something adds up in my head and I turn back. "How long have you been in Redhaven for?"

"All my life. I was born in the hospital here, and I'll be damned if I don't die there."

I purse my lips. "So...how long have you been selling mistletoe?"

"It was my father-in-law's business before it was my husband's, and now it's mine."

"And how long have people been stealing it?"

She rolls her eyes. "Only recently. People have too much time on their hands. They ought to pay attention to their *own* business."

I hum but get distracted by Dylan returning from whatever task he'd been assigned to do. "Is the mistletoe stall back up and running?" he asks with a smirk.

"Yes, sir." I lean on the wooden bench and grin. "Would you like to buy some? You look like you could do with a kiss."

Debbie gasps in delight and points us towards a small section of her stall that has been dedicated to a photo booth. She flaps around as she sets up her camera. "Alright you two...get in there. Let's christen this mistletoe, shall we? And what a perfect couple to do it."

Dylan groans, but I tug on his hand as we walk in front of the backdrop.

“Merry Christmas,” I whisper as I tune the rest of the world out now that I have Dylan there in my arms again. I cup his face as his expression softens.

“Merry Christmas, Clay.”

He kisses me slowly, ignoring the camera and the potential audience, and when we pull away, we’re both blushing.

“Now *that* is a kiss, my goodness!” Debbie says, handing me a Polaroid of us to keep. She took several photos it seems, so I write ‘Thanks, Debbie!’ on the bottom of one of them and hand it to her to pin to her stall. By the time we walk out of the photobooth, there’s a line waiting to get their photos taken and Debbie looks pleased as punch.

I want to wander through the festival with Dylan now that everything is underway and he’s not needed until something breaks, but Nolan comes up and takes my hand, pulling me away from Dylan. “Work to do. Let’s go. I *really* have to tell you—”

“I’m coming, I’m coming.”

I notice the look of displeasure on Dylan’s face, but I blow him a kiss and follow Nolan through the crowd.

Chapter Twenty

DYLAN

I'm getting pretty pissed off at Nolan cockblocking me, but all I do is a low growl and let him get away with it. I have to admit, watching Clay do his job is kind of hot.

His professional news reporter voice is completely different to his normal voice, and I stand to the side, unable to contain my grin.

As he finishes up his report, he catches my eye and smiles wide before brushing Nolan off, sending him on his way, and walking over to me.

“Hey, Mr. Reporter. You’re kinda hot.”

“Only kind of?” he whispers, wrapping his arms around my shoulders. “You’ll get only *kind of* hot later, then.”

I hum and pull him close. “If I say you’re as hot as I think you are, we’re going to start a goddamn fire.”

“Call the fire brigade,” he murmurs, just before his lips meet mine.

I pull back, aware we're in the middle of the street with hundreds of people around us. "God, you have no idea how badly I want you right now. What a time to get horny."

"It's the Christmas soft jazz, isn't it? It gets to you."

I rock back on my heels and look around us again before twisting my lips around each other. "When do you need to do something more for this report?"

"I'll do some little interview shots in a..." He trails off and narrows his eyes. "Actually, it all depends on why you're asking."

"You know why I'm asking."

He shoves his hands in his pockets and casually looking around us. "I don't think we can go all the way home and back again."

"I wasn't thinking we should."

His eyes widen. "*Dylan*. There's so many more people around than normal. Whatever you're thinking—"

I grab his arm and start walking. "Come on. There's a part of Redhaven you haven't seen yet."

I lead him towards Rosie's bar. I know Rosie will be too distracted by customers to notice me, and the last thing I want right now is questions.

As expected, Rosie is trying to keep up with the demand and doesn't pay Clay and me the slightest bit of attention as I

lead Clay through the customers to the locked door on the other end of the room.

I pull the keys out of my pocket and usher Clay through.

Clay frowns in the dark space, but I nod towards a staircase. He mumbles something under his breath but gingerly climbs to the doorway at the top of them.

Upstairs is a large studio apartment, with a kitchenette, a bathroom, a bed and, what I'd hoped was still here, a pool table. A few boxes are lying around, but there's not much else.

"We're not in Rosie's apartment, are we?" Clay asks nervously, looking around the sparsely decorated space.

"No. We're in mine."

He looks at me in surprise. "*Yours?*"

"I told you. I only moved into the guest house because it's where Rach lived. I didn't want Aiden to live here—it's not exactly child-friendly—so I gave the apartment back to Rosie and said she could rent it out if she wanted to or use it as a storage room. No one is using it."

Clay purses his lips and runs his fingers across the felt of the pool table. "So, when you said you didn't know how to play pool...you forgot to mention you had a pool table in your apartment?"

"Slipped my mind," I murmur. I stand in his way and take his hand as he reaches me. "Speaking of that... Did you win or lose that little game?"

He clears his throat, his eyes dark with desire. “That depends. What were the stakes again?”

“I think it was...if you *won*, I’d help you with your festival report. And if you *lost*? I’d bend you over the pool table and do whatever was in my mind.”

Clay steps in between my legs. “In that case, I *definitely* lost.”

His lips find mine with an impressive aim, and he pulls me as close as he can get, hands grappling for me. I haven’t felt this wild for someone in a long time, and all I want is to rip his clothes off and take him for as long as I can. I want him *here*. With me. For the rest of my life. The thought makes me kiss him harder.

“Fuck, you drive me wild,” he says breathlessly, pulling away from me, only enough to shove my jacket off my shoulders and try to force my shirt over my head in the same motion. It doesn’t work.

I take over from him until we’re both almost naked and he’s back in my embrace, his tongue fighting for top spot in my mouth.

“What was in your head?” he moans as I drag my tongue down his collarbone to his nipple and take it between my teeth gently. “You want me on my knees?”

I’m already uncomfortably close, so I spin us both around and pick him up so he’s sitting on the pool table. I have him in my mouth before he can recover from being spun so quickly,

and he gasps out his moan, dropping back to rest his elbows on the felt.

“God, Dylan,” he breathes. He curses loudly, and I move down, cautious not to let him get too close.

I stand up when I can’t take it anymore and place my hand on his stomach, feeling his muscles contract as he props himself up higher to catch my lips in a searing kiss.

“What’s in my head,” I say, suddenly out of breath, “is this for a long time, you, here with me, forever, but *God*, this isn’t going to last long at all if you keep looking at me like that.”

He lets out a breathless laugh before kissing me again, slower and more deliberate than before. “In that case, why don’t we do your original suggestion?”

He pushes me back gently before rolling over, his delectable ass lining up perfectly with my straining erection.

I hum and kiss up his spine. “I mean, now I don’t get to see your face.”

“Mmm... That was giving you problems a few seconds ago.”

I slowly push into him and wait for the moment Clay accepts the intrusion and relaxes around me. I wrap my arm around his chest and kiss his shoulder blade. “God, you feel so good, Clay.”

He whimpers in my embrace and urges me to start moving, pushing his hips the small amount he can in this position, until it becomes too much and I have no choice but to push him

back down on the table in front of us and give in to his demands.

As I expected, I come first, but I manage to drag it out enough that it doesn't take long for him to catch up, and then I collapse on top of him. "Fuck, Clay," I mumble. "You're going to kill me."

He chuckles underneath me, and I slowly get off him, finding my clothes and making sure he is steady on his feet. I'm too scared to check my phone in case someone is looking for me, but I definitely don't feel as tense as I did when I woke up this morning. Maybe I need Clay around every morning.

"Sorry for dragging you away from your first festival experience," I say with a grin as Clay pulls his clothes on and rests on the pool table for a moment. I'll never be able to look at that pool table again without remembering this moment.

"If it's like this, I encourage you to pull me away from the festival," he says with a grin. "But I *do* want to go exploring now that I don't have as much important work to do." He winces. "Nolan might say otherwise."

"Yes, well, make sure you tell Nolan about what I can do to you on a pool table, yes? He might not be as eager to steal you away."

Clay gives me an amused smile. "Is that what this was? Marking your territory?"

"Something like that," I whisper. *And maybe watching you while you were working made me realize that I'm actually*

falling in love with you.

I don't say it.

Clay looks down at the jacket in his hand before slowly placing it over his shoulders.

“We should—”

“Hey, Dylan?”

I frown at him. “Yes?”

“If you, um... If you want me to stay...with you and Aiden.” He gives me a nervous smile. “All you have to do is ask.”

I stare at him, unsure of how to respond. Clay clears his throat before chuckling and running a hand through his hair. “I'm just saying...if what's in your head is me here with you, forever, you're going to need to ask me to stay.”

I find I don't have the words to say, but Clay doesn't ask for words. He gives my hand a squeeze and leads the way back out of the apartment to find Mom and Aiden standing nearby.

“There you two are,” Mom says. “We've been looking for you. Clay, Aiden says the two of you have a date with the arcade.”

Clay rubs his hands together excitedly. “Let's go.” He looks up at me expectantly. “You want to come too? Show off your old-man skills?”

I frown at him as Aiden giggles. “I am *not* an old man. I'm sure I can beat you at most, if not all, of those games.”

“You want to bet on it?”

I roll my eyes at him and wave a quick goodbye to Mom as Aiden takes Clay’s hand, and then we walk towards where Robert has set up the gaming center.

“They have *Just Dance*,” Aiden says, pointing it out to Clay.

“Ooh, it looks like a competition. Come on, bud. Let’s see if we can enter it. We’re pretty good.”

I chuckle as I watch them talking to Fiona, the person in charge of the *Just Dance* competition, but I’m suddenly suspicious when Aiden leans up to whisper something in Clay’s ear and Clay throws a glance at me.

I know what they’re doing a few moments later when the announcer says the names for the next round of the competition is none other than Aiden and Dylan Turner.

I turn to look at Clay, and he raises his eyebrows. “If your name has been called, you *have* to participate. It’s law.”

“It is—”

He nudges my shoulder and goes off to buy himself a hot dog. Maybe a dance competition is exactly what I need to take my mind off Clay’s lips surrounding a hot dog. Fuck, I’m horny again.

You’re going to need to ask me to stay.

Aiden looks nervous, and I gather it was his idea to put my name down instead of Clay’s.

“You sure about this, buddy?” I say. “I haven’t played *Just Dance* in ages.”

“Yeah! It will be fun!”

I give him a gentle smile and ruffle his hair. “Alright, let’s do this. You’re *sure* you don’t want to do this with Clay? He’s probably better at it—”

Aiden shakes his head firmly, and I see Clay standing a safe distance away with his hot dog. He gives me a bright grin and a thumbs-up.

“You used to play this with me all the time, Uncle Dylan. Do you remember? When Mom was here still.”

I look at him in alarm. “I...I remember. You were a lot smaller then though.”

“*That’s* why I want to do this with you.”

I give him a weak smile and wait for our turn on the apparent dance floor. If it hadn’t been for Clay, there’s no way I would have been close enough to Aiden today to be entering a dance competition, and now that I’m here, I find I don’t really have anything to say to the boy. It’s been two years of feeling *temporary*. Of making sure he’s content enough in life to be able to move more permanently.

Has that been *my* life too? My gaze rests on Clay again as he’s now talking to my mom. Maybe Clay has been right this whole time.

“Dylan and Aiden Turner!” comes the voice, indicating that we’re supposed to walk onto the dance floor, in front of the

screen that shows *Just Dance*.

Aiden's hand slides into mine, and he squeezes ever so gently before walking in front of me. It makes me smile, and I follow him.

I've labeled this kid as "Rachel's son" and haven't stopped to think that maybe her genetics didn't pass down as much as I'd assumed they had. It had been Oliver to draw those conclusions from the beginning. He'd known about Rach just as much as I did. There was no way he was going to look after Rachel Turner's fucked-up son.

The game starts, but I feel stuck to the spot. "Oh my God," I whisper before looking down at Aiden, who is staring at me in concern, posed to start the dance. I crouch suddenly and pull him into a hug.

"The game has started, Uncle Dylan," Aiden says urgently in my ear.

I grin and pull away, turning my attention to the game. "Then let's play."

Aiden beams.

Chapter Twenty-One

CLAY

Dylan and Aiden come in third in the *Just Dance* competition, but there's a lightness to Dylan that I haven't seen before. Something happened to him before the dance started, but I haven't been alone with him to ask him about it yet.

His hand is warm in mine as we make our way through the crowded street. It's getting dark, but all it does is make the twinkling lights more vibrant. The old buildings transform into a magical Christmas town, and I'm surprised to find it starts gently snowing, making me feel like a little figurine in a snow globe.

When I look back down away from the darkening sky, I find Dylan watching me with a shy smile on his face. There's something so childlike and innocent in his expression, and I hold his hand tighter. "Come on," I whisper with a grin. "I haven't done nearly enough shopping."

He chuckles and wraps his arm around my shoulders, drawing me in tight as we amble down the row of stalls.

“What are you getting your mom and dad?” I ask vaguely, peering at a collection of quilted potholders. “And what should *I* get your mom and dad?”

“I normally do something for them around the Maple. Aiden makes something for them at school. Gifts done.” He shrugs weakly. “I’m not much of a gift giver.”

I frown at him. “Really? You’ve bought me a lot of stuff since I’ve been here.”

“Ah, well, *yes*. But I’m not trying to sleep with my parents.”

I chuckle, and we move on to the next stall. Candles. “I would have slept with you without you buying me things.”

“Now you tell me,” he mutters.

I smell a candle and close my eyes. “Ooh, this one smells like you.” I pay for it as Dylan frowns.

“What, sweat and frustration?”

“Nope. Apparently—” I read the label on the candle “—warm amber and cedarwood.” I smell it again before tucking it under my arm and moving on to the next stall. Dylan gets stuck talking to someone, and I walk by myself to the next stall. I still want to buy something for Dylan, Dylan’s parents, and Aiden, but I can’t imagine anything for sale here at the festival would be exciting or new for them. I’ll have to either find something online or head over to Haven.

When Dylan arrives at my side again, he’s holding a little wrapped box.

“What’s that?”

“A gift. For you,” he says softly.

I chuckle. “Didn’t I just say that I’ll sleep with you regardless of gifts?”

He holds it out impatiently, and I grin, taking it from him. I open it to find a Christmas tree bauble. On one side it has *Redhaven Christmas Festival, New Hampshire* on it, and the other side it has a *C* in glittery paint.

“I thought it could go on our tree at home. Match mine and Aiden’s,” Dylan says as I stare at it in a sudden rush of sadness. “Who knows how many more Redhaven Christmas Festivals you’ll get to go to.”

I smile sadly. “Thank you,” I whisper. “It’ll be—”

I get interrupted by my phone ringing with Nolan’s contact.

Dylan growls at the back of his throat. “He just doesn’t leave you alone, does he?”

“He’s harmless, Dylan. I am *technically* working today. In fact, it’s the whole reason I came here in the first place.”

Dylan doesn’t look pleased, regardless of logic.

I lean up to kiss him slowly. “Don’t panic about Nolan. *You* get all my attention, and he knows it.” I hand him back the bauble and the candle. “I’m going to find him to see what he wants. *And* I’ll remind him what you can do with a pool table so he doesn’t get any ideas.”

That earns a small smile from Dylan, and I hurry off to find Nolan so I can get back to my festival fun with Dylan and his family.

Several members of the public stop to talk to me about the festival and to ask if I want to interview them for it, and by the time I find Nolan, he's looking irritated and anxious.

“What’s wrong with you?” I say. “Sorry I’m late—”

“I need to talk to you, Clay. I’ve needed to talk to you for the entire day, but you keep blowing me off. Do I have your attention finally, or are you going to go running back whenever Dylan calls your name?”

I frown. “I’m here, Nolan,” I say tightly. “What did you need?”

He looks around us before grabbing my wrist and pulling me towards the nearest building.

“*Nolan*, what are we—”

“Shh,” he hisses. “I need to speak to you in private.”

I jerk my arm out of his, following alongside him. We reach the hardware store before Nolan pushes me towards the back room. The store is mostly unused during the festival, and the sound of hustle and bustle from the street fades the farther we get in the store.

“*Why* are we here? I don’t know—”

“The mayor has pocketed all the funds from the previous six years of property tax raises,” Nolan blurts out.

“*What?*”

He fumbles with the zip on his bag before pulling out a stack of papers and shoving them at me. “I-I spoke to a guy online who lives nearby. His dad is a tax agent. I made a comment about the rise of taxes here in Redhaven, and through that we discovered that, according to all reports made in and out of Redhaven, the taxes haven’t risen more than two percent in the last five years.”

“But...that...” I stare at the documents in my hand, unable to process the words on them.

Nolan nods. “There’s more. Obviously, because it was going to get noticed by *someone*, Tom Bradley has given a bribe to a tax agency farther north, and they’ve been filing fake and misleading tax forms on behalf of Redhaven’s Town Council for five years.”

“Holy—”

“There’s more!” Nolan is getting more and more agitated, and he looks like he’s about to start sweating. He adds another leaf of paper to the top of the stack in my hands. “Tom has started up a charitable foundation. It’s *super* vague about what the charity is *for*, but there’s a large chunk of council funds that get deposited to the fund every month.”

“How do council finances get decided on?”

“Vote once a month. A lot of the town goes. The Turners are members. So are Debbie, Rosie, Clem and Josie, Robert... Everyone.”

“And *everyone* votes for this charity?”

Nolan shakes his head slowly. “No. They don’t. They set some aside each month *for* charity, but it’s never been announced *where*. Tom throws words around every now and then. School funding, the hospital, environmental causes... I’d be surprised if any of those saw any sort of financial increase.”

I let out a shaky breath and sit on a chair. “*Wow*, Nolan. This is...” I suddenly look up at him. “How did you *get* all this? This is evidence and—”

Nolan winces. “I’ve withheld some information from you, Clay.”

“What?”

He sits next to me. “I’ve had a personal vendetta against Tom Bradley for, well, almost my entire life. In fact, it *has* been my entire life. I hate him, and I want everyone to see the awful man who hides behind that confident smile.”

My eyes widen. “He hasn’t, like...*you* know?”

He gives me a small smile and shakes his head. “He’s my dad.”

My mouth drops open in complete surprise. I had *not* seen that coming. “Whoa, whoa... Your *dad*? As in your *father*?”

“Yep. God help me.” He groans and looks at the floor. “He was married—still is—and was cheating with my mom. She got pregnant with me, and he tried to convince her that it wouldn’t look good to continue the pregnancy. She *obviously* disagreed, and Dad resented her for it. He made my life and

my mom's a living hell. He's still married to the wife, has three kids, lives in a fancy rich house, and thinks he can get away with treating people he sees as less than him like shit because of a mistake *he* made."

"Oh, Nolan..." I whisper. "I know the feeling."

"I know you do. I looked you up when I heard you were coming here, remember? I know all about you."

I clear my throat and study the paper in my hand. "Right. Let's try to figure this out, shall we? I'm going to assume you got these illegally."

"Oh yeah. I have easy access to his office. Unless it's not breaking in if I have a key?"

I laugh and think hard. "Is there anything else we can dig up?"

Nolan hums. "Not that I can get any evidence for so far. I've had a—"

"Why is he trying to draw people out of Redhaven? That's still not explained. If everyone leaves, his game plan is over."

"I can't figure that out either. *But* he's still got his eye on higher government. He tried to run for Congress a few years ago but didn't get enough votes. Maybe he thinks he has a shot at it now?"

I roll my eyes. "Yeah, with an illegal and fraudulent campaign? For someone who wants to be in Congress, he's not very good at following the law."

Nolan gives me a pointed look before leaning back in his chair and letting the room fall into silence. I scan the documents quickly, but they mostly involve figures of varying amounts that are from one account to another.

“What do we do now?” Nolan whispers. “This has...*much* higher consequences than what I thought was going on. I thought he was someone who tried to hush up a mistress, not...*this*.”

I give him a smile and put my hand on his shoulder. “Are you okay, Nolan? This has to be tough on you.”

He nods. “I want everyone to know what I know. To look at him the way I do,” he says quietly. “I want Tom to finally get what he deserves.”

Same, kid.

I take a deep breath and stand up, tucking the papers under my arm. “I’ll do this next bit by myself so you’re not involved. I’m going to break this story, Nolan. Are you ready for that?”

He gives me a determined look. “Everything I’ve ever said to you can be on the record. Do what you need to.”

I smile kindly at him before leaning down and gently pressing my lips to his cheek. “Good work, hon.” He blushes instantly, but I walk out into the loud festival again before he can say anything in response.

I find Dylan in the gaming center, playing a game with Aiden. “Hey,” he says brightly. “All done?”

“Not quite. Can I borrow the keys to your truck? I need to drop something at home.”

He frowns at me before fishing the keys out of his pocket and handing them to me. “Everything okay?”

“Yeah, of course. I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

Dylan gives me a quick kiss before turning back to the game he’s now losing. “Meet me back at the gazebo. It’s dark enough that they’re starting the dance floor.”

I raise my eyebrows. “*You* want to go on the dance floor?”

“I want to dance with you.” He does a dramatic move with the joystick on the arcade game and loses before turning to me. “I’m a romantic. Sue me.”

I grin and make my way out to Dylan’s truck. As I do, there’s a figure leaning against it. I square my shoulders, hyperaware of the documents under my arm.

“Hello, Mr. Mayor. To what do I owe this displeasure?”

Tom gives me a bland smile. “I think we need to have a proper introduction, don’t you think?”

“Oh, I think we’re past that.”

“Mm...” Tom folds his arms across his chest and smirks, a cocky quirk to his head to accompany it. “I wanted to know a bit about you, Mr. Miller. Spoke to a few people.”

“Find what you were looking for? I feel like I’ve got more on you than you have on me.”

In Tom's defense, he doesn't so much as bat an eyelid. "I spoke to your boss. Or...lover?"

I chuckle and push past him to unlock the truck. "He upgraded to a shiny new model. As did I. If we're done with this, I've got to—"

"Your father thinks your name is Craig."

I stop in my tracks and am unable to hide my reaction in time. I recover and give Tom a bland smile. "I'm surprised my father even knows I'm alive." I study him closer. "Interesting that you thought you'd get to me by bringing my father into this. You're obviously the epitome of fatherhood. I'll ask Nolan."

Tom laughs. "Look. It's no secret that my son has a crush on you. He never has been able to choose wisely. He's a teenager. He changes his mind constantly."

I narrow my eyes. "He's—"

"He's told you whatever he thinks will get you on his side. Think about it, Mr. Miller. I remember him looking you up before you got here." He leans closer to me and holds his hand around his mouth like he's telling me a secret. "I'd watch who you trust around here. We don't like outsiders." The smirk looks almost evil in the dim light, and he continues fake whispering. "Rachel Turner cost this town a lot of money. The Turners will never be on your side, no matter how easy you are."

I find I have nothing to say to that, due to the blind rage that has taken over my whole body, and I watch him saunter back to the hum of the festival.

I shakily climb into the driver's seat of the truck, throwing the stack of paper on the passenger seat before smacking my hands hard against the wheel. "*Fuck.*"

Tom's good. I have to give him credit at least. He's spoken to Hugh. If I break the story back in Atlanta, Hugh is going to discredit it. Tom has already linked the potential for my story to be compared to my father—a son sulking about losing a fortune. I cast a glance to the papers on the seat next to me. "I'm going to have to use you," I murmur. "I have no choice."

How right was he? Nolan's story was eerily similar to mine, and he'd already confessed to learning about me before I came, despite my appearance in Redhaven not decided until the last minute.

I drive back to the Maple, fuming mad the whole way.

Where did the evidence come from? Is Nolan stringing me along?

I spread the papers on the breakfast counter and start to scrutinize them closely.

You're not going to win this one, Tom! It's my turn.

Chapter Twenty-Two

DYLAN

I look at my watch again and frown before spotting Mom and Dad slowly dancing on the gazebo. I make my way over, hovering on the edge to not disrupt the other couples. “Have you seen Clay anywhere? He was supposed to meet me here an hour ago, and he’s not answering my calls.”

Mom shakes her head. “Sorry, dear. The last time I saw him was when he was with you.”

Dad frowns. “I saw him talking to someone by your truck a while ago, but I haven’t seen him since.”

I hum, more concerned than annoyed at this point. Clay has to be in trouble. “Can you keep an eye on Aiden?”

“He’ll stay with us tonight,” Dad says. “Give you a night off.”

I give him a tight smile and set off down the quieting Main Street. My truck is still missing.

As I get closer to where I had parked, I see Nolan arriving at his car, all the equipment for the station loaded in his arms.

“Hey, Nolan.”

He turns in fright, nearly dropping the camera in his arms. “God, you scared me, Dylan.”

“Have you seen Clay anywhere?”

He frowns in concern right away. “No. Not for an hour or so at least. Isn’t he normally attached to your hip? Just tug on his leash, and he’ll come running back.”

“Hm...” I pull out my phone again and try Clay again. I get his voicemail. *Again*. “Can you drop me at the Maple? I need to see if my truck is there.”

Nolan nods enthusiastically, his spat about my relationship forgotten, and starts chatting to me as he drives towards the Maple, but I tune all of it out, suddenly terrified of what has happened to Clay. I *knew* he should have stayed out of other people’s business.

Nolan pulls up in front of the Maple, switching the car off. I can see my truck parked in front of the guesthouse, so Clay obviously is around here somewhere. “You can go,” I say distractedly.

“Will you let me know that he’s—”

I get out and shut the door behind me, walking as quickly as I can towards the guesthouse. The door is locked, but the lights are on inside. Even the Christmas tree lights are on. When I fling open the door in a panic, Clay jumps a mile from his position sitting at the kitchen bench. His fingers are on his laptop, and he’s surrounded by loose papers.

But the biggest shock of all is the evil look in his eyes. There's a determination and a fire that I've never seen in him. This isn't broken and depressed Clayton Miller, the one I first met. It's the man who is going to get what he wants. It's what I imagine he's like in Atlanta, back in his own world. He blinks at me and his shoulders drop, the fire dimming.

“Oh, shit, *Dylan*. The gazebo. I completely lost track of time.”

I raise an eyebrow and fold my arms across my chest. “You just *disappeared* for over an hour, Clay. What the fuck happened?”

He gets up and rushes over to me, but I notice he closes his laptop first. “I had a... Hmmm, there was an *altercation* with Tom Bradley when I went to leave. God, he's a good liar.” He scowls, and the determined look comes back in his expression as he turns back to the papers. “I am *so close*.”

I growl, my relief turning into anger. “Just *leave* him alone, Clay. Leave him alone, and he'll leave you alone.”

“Nope. Not going to happen.” He looks over at me and raises his chin to study me. It's his reporter look, and it never fails to unnerve me. He's looking for a liar. “Is your family paying back debts that your sister caused?”

I frown. “What?”

“You don't get paid, do you? For the work you do around the town?”

“No, but—”

“Rosie owns your apartment?”

“Yes, because—”

“Who paid for Rachel’s hospital bills?”

I don’t even bother opening my mouth. Clay’s going to cut me off anyway.

He chews on his bottom lip. “How well do you know Nolan?”

“I remember him being born, Clay. What’s that got to do with—”

“What’s his last name?”

I sigh. “Meyers.” Clay looks at me in alarm. “Do you want me to say Bradley? He’s always gone by his mom’s last name.”

Clay breathes out heavily before glancing around, a look of desperation on his face. “I don’t know what’s true anymore.” With renewed vigor, he starts to walk past me. “*Debbie*. She’ll tell it to me straight. She’ll—”

I reach out and stop him from moving, simultaneously blocking the front door. “No.”

“Dylan, I just need to—”

“Whatever happened can wait. Whoever you need to talk to can wait. You scared me when you never showed up to our date, Clay. I thought something had happened to you. Instead, I find you’re trying so damn hard to find something about the *mayor*, for fuck’s sake. *Let. It. Go*. If you’re staying here in

Redhaven, you're going to need to get used to him being there."

Clay softens as he lets my sentence hover in the air around us, and a smile plays at the edges of his lips. "Am I staying?"

I know I'm blushing. I had been planning on asking him if he wanted to stay while we were at the gazebo. "Do you... want to?"

I can tell by the glint in his eyes that Clay isn't going to let me get away with this. "Do you *want* me to stay?"

"Clay..."

"*Dylan.*"

I groan in frustration and rub my face with my hands. "I was hoping you'd stay here, or wherever here is, with *me*. And Aiden." I smile weakly. "At least until New Year's."

He laughs and folds himself in my arms. "I'm going to need longer than New Year's, Dyl."

"We can maybe push it to my birthday."

He tilts his head, and I grin, pulling him into my arms and kissing him slowly. When he moves back, he stays close to me as he runs his nose down mine. "So...you want me to move to Redhaven?"

I chuckle. "I don't know how much longer I'll be here in Redhaven, but...we can go wherever together. The three of us. As a family."

Clay beams before getting serious again and moving away, back to his laptop. “I think I can save the Maple. I think I can save the whole town, Dylan.”

“By calling out the mayor?”

“No. By getting the mayor arrested for tax fraud, bribery, embezzlement, and whatever else I can uncover in the next few days. I don’t have long with this. I think Tom already knows I have this information.”

I close my eyes and sigh before sitting on the sofa. “Tom doesn’t like you as it is, Clay.”

“Oh, I know. He’s made that very obvious.” He climbs over the arm of the sofa and kneels next to me. “Babe, this isn’t just raising taxes for the citizens of Redhaven to push everyone out of it. This is outright *illegal*. He’s a long-term *con man*.” He grabs the front of my shirt and presses his face right against mine. “This is *my story*, Dylan. Mine. I’ve worked *so hard* to get here. I am not going to play nice with a man who is literally stealing from you. I told your mom that I’m going to fight, and I’m not about to back down now.”

I chuckle in confusion. “What are you fighting for here? I think this is less about the collective honor of Redhaven and more about you getting the revenge you’ve wanted against your father for your whole life.”

Clay’s jaw goes slack, and he sinks back into the sofa. “Fine. Ruin the entire town of Redhaven. Let a man walk free to continue his next *scam*, Dylan. You and Aiden can come

live with me in Atlanta, and we'll never have to think of it again. Easy.”

He moves back to his laptop before I can register that he's moving, and I sigh as I study his stiff back. “Clay...”

He doesn't acknowledge me, and I make my way over to him, bracing my palms on either side of him and pressing my lips to his shoulder. “Clay, please.” He doesn't budge, and I groan loudly, letting my forehead rest on the top of his shoulder. “I was going to ask you at the gazebo to stay here with me, but you stood me up.”

Clay's shoulders rise and fall with a sigh, and he twists his head so his cheek is resting against my head. He's only there for a moment before he shifts in my arms, facing me.

“What's your plan, Dylan?”

I grimace. “I don't know.”

“So, you want me to do nothing when I have the solution *right here* and we'll find somewhere to move, all three of us? What about your parents?”

I close my eyes. That's *not* what I had in mind. Truth be told, I'm scared to move anywhere. I'm scared to put so much thought into something that just ends up leaving me disappointed and frustrated. When I open my eyes, Clay is still intently staring at me, wordlessly asking for a solution. I scratch at my neck and groan loudly before nodding. “Fine. What's this evidence you claim to have? And *how* did you get it?” Clay looks dubious at my interest, and I step forward,

cupping his face in my palms. “Are you okay?” I whisper. “What did Tom say to you? I... I automatically thought the worst when I couldn’t find you.”

A small smile plays at the corner of his lips. “Sorry,” he breathes. He tugs me closer until our lips meet in a searing-hot kiss, the anger and determination from Clay meeting my relief. He pulls away from me, leaving me panting and hard, and grabs at my hand, tugging me towards the staircase. “You want to go back to the festival and dance with me at the gazebo?”

“I think we can improvise here.”

He laughs, and we both fall on the bed in a heap, limbs and clothes flying as we find our rhythm, uninhibited by the empty house and the daunting possibility of what the future might hold for us.

I fall asleep with the sounds of Clay’s moans still ringing in my ears and his warmth pressed tight against me, the promise of it forever.

When I wake up the next morning, Clay is nowhere to be seen. I prop myself up and listen closely for sounds of him downstairs.

Before I can get up to investigate, the door opens quietly and Clay peers in, holding a tray with breakfast on it.

“Good morning,” I say croakily, rubbing my face to get the last of the sleep out of it. “What’s this?”

“Breakfast. I know it’s technically another Christmas festival day and you’ll be busy soon, but I thought we could

have breakfast in bed for a moment of peace and quiet before that.” He places the tray on my nightstand and takes a plate of toast off it before climbing over me to sit next to me. “I spoke to your mom this morning, and we’ll meet them at the gazebo for lunch.”

I cock my head and study him. “You spoke to my mom?”

He’s not looking at me. He’s too busy picking the crust off his toast. “Mm... I was curious when we were getting Aiden back.”

I grin and sit up properly to get my breakfast. “You have plans for the morning?”

Clay glances at me and raises his eyebrows. “I do, but it’s not what you’re thinking.” I pout, and he brushes his hands over his plate before lying down. I instantly abandon breakfast and lie down with him. “I’m serious. I need a plan for the idea of moving here. Of this being...you know, *real*.”

I pause in surprise before tucking him in close and kissing him slowly. “A plan,” I murmur. “I know. You stay here, like this, forever. Plan done.” I kiss him again as he chuckles.

“While that sounds *excellent*, at the very least I’ll need to call my *job* and tell them that I’ve decided to stay in a bed in New Hampshire forever.”

“I’m sure they’ll get the hint. Besides, you can make phone calls from bed.”

Clay laughs again and pushes on me to get me off him before he sits up.

“What *are* you going to do about your job?” I ask.

He takes a bite of his toast and chews it thoughtfully. “Um. I saw some interest in having a news hub for a few of the local towns. There has been some discussion around the station of having someone run it locally. I’ve...been considering trying to get it running out of Redhaven. We’ve got the equipment here.”

“And you have the knowledge.”

“Right,” he whispers. “*But*...if Redhaven is trying to push out all of its people, maybe that’s not the best idea. I’m sure I can get a job at most regional news stations wherever we move to.”

He doesn’t meet my eye, but I know what he’s saying without words. He wants my permission to do whatever he wants with the information about the mayor. He wants my trust that everything is going to work out.

Clay changes the subject. “Other than my job, I’ll have to pack up my apartment, but sadly enough, moving out of the city I’ve lived my entire life is not going to be difficult. Almost hysterically easy. I could tell no one that I’ve moved, and no one would notice.”

I smile sadly. “If it’s any consolation, I noticed you were missing very quickly last night.” I suddenly reach out and tug him close, curling my knee over his hip. He grins and settles in next to me. This feels so normal. It feels *real*. “Do you really think you can save the Maple?”

“Yes,” he whispers. “And everything that goes with it.”

I study the determination in his face and nod. “Okay. Do what you need to do. It’s not like we have anything left to lose here.”

Clay cups my face and kisses me solidly.

He keeps me preoccupied enough that it’s nearly lunchtime before I’ve managed to finish my breakfast.

His hand hangs loosely in mine as we walk slowly through the throng of people at the festival. He’s already told me that he’ll be going to the station to check over the footage after lunch to make sure there isn’t anything last minute they’ll need to get, but this is already more than I thought I’d get him for, so I’m not going to complain.

The relaxing morning and the knowledge that Clay is going to be staying with me has put me in a good mood, and I don’t find myself tensing up as soon as I see my family. Clay greets them warmly, and before too long, we’re sitting at the diner, all engrossed in our own conversations.

I clear my throat and interrupt Clay’s conversation with my dad. “Actually, there’s something we’d like to discuss.” Even Clay looks confused, and I chuckle. “I’ve asked Clay to stay with me. In whatever way that means.” I look at him and grin as his fingers find my knee under the table.

Aiden looks between Clay and me quickly. “What do you mean?”

I smile nervously and focus on him. “It...means that, uh, if you *want*, Aiden, we might try to make things more permanent. That maybe we could be...”

“A family,” Clay finishes.

Aiden’s eyes widen. “R-Really? You, Uncle Dylan, and me?”

I nod. “If you wanted tha—”

“Yes! You’re staying, Clay? Here in Redhaven? This is *so* cool.” He throws himself out of his chair and topples in between my chair and Clay’s, wrapping us up in an excited hug. He then sits back in his chair and smiles happily. “Isn’t this great, Grammy? Are you going to get *married*, Uncle Dylan? Wait, is Clay now Uncle Clay?”

Clay bursts into laughter and answers the questions for me as I notice Mom and Dad don’t look as excited as I thought they would about the announcement. Isn’t this what they wanted for me?

I clear my throat and look at Clay, who seems to understand with just one look at my face. “Aiden, you want to come with me? I have to check the footage from yesterday at the station.”

“Ooh, okay!”

Clay squeezes my shoulder gently as he leaves, Aiden following him chatting excitedly about the future. I wait until they’re out of sight before turning to Mom and Dad.

“This is wonderful news, kiddo,” Dad says with a calm smile. “Clay’s a wonderful man.”

“Dad...”

Mom chuckles softly and pats my hand as it rests next to my plate. “Should you have told Aiden so soon?”

I relax and chuckle. “What do you think is going to happen?”

“Nothing, sweetheart. I just am scared of him being pushed around so much. What’s going to happen if something happens to you and Clay?” She takes a sip of her coffee as she waits for her question to sink in. “It’s a little over a week until Christmas. We’re going to have to sign the papers to sell the place soon. Have you thought about where you’re going to live?”

I lean forward in renewed interest. “Hold off for as long as you possibly can on signing the documents. I mean it. Clay seems to have a plan and thinks he can save the town.”

Even Dad looks dubious, and he’s usually relaxed about things like this.

“Can you trust me? We just need a bit more time.”

Mom sighs and purses her lips. “We’ll do what we can. They’re breathing down our necks as it is.”

I smile weakly and hope like hell that Clay actually knows what he’s doing.

Chapter Twenty-Three

CLAY

I flex my fingers and breathe out nervously. Sitting across from me, Nolan audibly gulps.

“Okay, are you ready for this?” I say, my finger hovering above the mouse. “Once I send this report...”

“I’m ready.”

It’s been two full days of working out the best way around this story. I’ve already filed an official FBI report, called the local police, and it’s now down to the story. The FBI has to go through too much red tape to be useful yet, the local police aren’t going to do anything, and every day that goes by, the more Tom Bradley thinks he’s getting away with it. Boy, is he about to learn that he isn’t.

Nolan leans over me and uses my finger to click the button, officially sending the report back to my bosses in Atlanta.

We both lean back, Nolan’s hand still on mine. “It’s done,” he says quietly.

“We’ve still got a lot to do. This might only be the beginning.”

“At the very least, Redhaven could do with the exposure.”

I chuckle and move away from him, stretching my shoulders and looking out the window of the TV station. It’s snowing again, a delicate flurry that almost looks soft in the dark night. “Hey, um, I don’t think I’ve told you, but I’m thinking of staying. Here. In Redhaven.” I turn to look at him and smile. “Depending on what happens with the mayor, of course. Maybe there won’t still *be* a Redhaven.”

A soft look comes over Nolan’s face. “Yeah? It’ll be nice to have you here.”

“What can I say? Redhaven’s charm has finally worked on me.”

He rolls his eyes. “I don’t think it was Redhaven, Clay,” he mutters. “Either way, we may be small, but we are mighty.”

His sentence sparks something in my head, and I purse my lips as I concentrate for a second. “Wait a second...” I turn to face him. “How big *is* Redhaven? Population numbers.”

Nolan shrugs. “A couple thousand, maybe? It depends on what you call Redhaven. There are a few families on the border. Tom doesn’t count himself in the Redhaven population because he lives out of it.”

I let a slow smile spread across my face. “I think I know why he’s getting people to leave.”

“Because of our population size?”

I find a list of our neighboring towns and cities. “He missed out on votes at the election, right?”

“Yes?”

“When will Redhaven be too small to not need a mayor anymore and he can set his sights on a position in a place with higher population numbers?”

Nolan catches on and his mouth drops open. “Wait, he’s trying to get Redhaven’s population numbers to *drop* so that he can run for the Senate?”

I shrug and chuckle. “I don’t really know, but that certainly seems like it. Redhaven’s town council meetings would move to probably...” I run my finger down the list of cities to find the one with the biggest population size and tap it a few times. “Too much of a coincidence?”

Nolan drops back in his chair. “I hate this man. Remind me to send back the *World’s Best Dad* mug I bought him for Christmas.”

I grin, and we sit in silence until we get the notification sound that someone has received the story back in Atlanta.

When it finally dings, we both jump.

I scan the e-mail in response, but it’s just our receptionist telling me that it’s been sent on to Joclyn and Hugh to read in the morning. We’ve got time.

“Home time.” I stretch my shoulders again and start to gather my things. “Get some sleep, Nolan. We might have a big day ahead of us tomorrow. Hopefully it involves an arrest

of some sort. If anything happens overnight, I'll let you know. If we can get any sort of footage here in Redhaven, it'll be perfect."

"On it, boss."

I pause with my hand on the door handle. "Hey, I know you're going to go back to school in the spring, but...I'm thinking of trying to work here out of Redhaven. If you ever need a job, talk to me first."

Nolan smiles wide. "Okay."

When I get home, Dylan is standing in the kitchen, watching the door nervously. "Is it done?"

"All sent off, all received. It's anyone's guess what happens now."

Dylan hands me a glass of wine over the counter and taps his own glass against mine. "Good luck, babe."

I chuckle. "Where's Aiden?"

"Upstairs. He *should* be getting ready for bed, but I doubt he is."

"I'll go say hey."

I take the stairs two at a time, and I'm surprised to find Aiden lying in bed, reading a book. For someone who's normally a walking ball of energy, it's nice to see him comfortable and calm.

"Hey, buddy. What're you reading?"

He holds up the cover of the book before looking back at the page in front of him, and I get the hint. I pat him on the head.

“Good night.”

“Night, Uncle Clay.”

I grin and make my way back downstairs. Before I can make it to the bottom, my phone rings with Hugh’s contact. I frown and answer it.

“Hello?”

“Is this big?” he asks without saying hello. “It seems big.”

I chuckle and finish the walk downstairs to my laptop on the breakfast bar. Dylan is nowhere to be seen, so I sit at my laptop and focus on the phone call with Hugh. I’m surprised at the small ache in my chest at hearing his voice again. “It’s big, Hugh. This guy has cheated his way through millions of dollars over a six-year period. It’s got bribery, it’s got embezzlement, it’s got a paternity scandal. This is big.”

“You went for a *Christmas festival*, and you come out with a political and personal con artist story?”

“I’m just that good.” I sigh as he hesitates. “I know he called you. What did he say? He’s been trying to get under my skin for a while now. He *knows* I’m the one running this story. I’ve pretended it’s all for the Christmas festival, but I’ve got more on him than he knows.”

Hugh hums. “He didn’t really say anything. Asked about you. Asked for your credentials and for my recommendation,

which I found suspicious.”

“He called my dad as well. He was looking for dirt. I’m sure you didn’t give him any.”

“Nah. Not intentionally anyway.” He clears his throat. “How soon can you get back here? That festival is over now, isn’t it? I thought you’d be on the first flight out. I want you running this story, Clay.”

I smile weakly and stare at the dark kitchen. “I, uh...was thinking of staying here for a bit. Until...I don’t know, after Christmas at least. It might be good to have someone on—”

“Clay,” Hugh warns. “You said yourself, this is a big story.”

“I know.”

“So, get your ass back to Atlanta and *run it*, okay? I’ll give it to Joclyn if you don’t want it. This is everything you’ve been pestering me about for years!”

I give a sigh of resignation. I’ll go back, head this story, pack up my apartment, and move back. Right before Christmas will be tough, but I’ll do it. “I’ve got a few pieces for the Christmas festival, and then I’ll be back. I can probably even make it tomorrow. Give me time to make it back before Christmas.”

“Fuck the Christmas festival, Clay. Leave it to someone else to do. Plane. Your ass. Now.”

He hangs up the phone before I can say anything, and I slowly bring my phone away from my ear. I don’t feel like I

can leave Dylan and Aiden on such short notice. I don't want to leave Nolan to fend for himself for what could happen.

"Who was that?" comes Dylan's voice from behind me, and I jump to see him coming out of the laundry. He looks skeptical, and I know he knows exactly who was on my phone call.

"Uh, Hugh. He wants me to head this story, which is...kind of a big deal."

"Yeah." He folds his arms. "That's back in Atlanta?"

I nod slowly.

"For how long?"

"I'm...not sure. I'll leave as soon as I can, probably. I'll be back in time for Christmas. I thought I could make Hugh wait for a while longer or at least let me do it from here, but he wants me back in Atlanta for now. Once this blows over, I'll be back here permanently."

He smiles. "Okay."

"We knew I'd have to go back to Atlanta—"

"It's fine, Clay."

"I know it's quick, but maybe you could come too? We could get some Christmas shopping done—"

He chuckles and tilts my face up to kiss me gently. "I think I'll need to stay here and hold down the fort if you are trying to *get the mayor arrested*. You know Redhaven. They'll find me before anyone else."

“You really need to stop being so useful.”

He grins but is interrupted from saying anything by me getting a text from Nolan.

Nolan: *ARREST. NOW.*

I’m out of my seat in an instant. “Tom’s getting arrested. I’ll be—”

Dylan waves me off. “Go, go.”

I grab my laptop and am out the door in an instant.

When I get to Tom’s address, Nolan is sitting on the front of his car out on the street, camera in hand and a satisfied smirk on his face. There are several cars in the driveway, including two patrol cars, but everything looks considerably less dramatic than I’d hoped. It’s quiet, cold, and underwhelming.

I hop up to sit next to Nolan. “What’s happening?”

“The black car is with the FBI, I think. The two other cars over there are with the US Secret Service. The cops are from somewhere local, but I’ve never seen them before, so they’re not from Redhaven. I *think* that truck over there is my dad’s lawyer, but I could be wrong.”

We sit in silence, staring at the quiet house in front of us.

Nolan suddenly breaks it. “Do you think I’ll get in trouble for getting those documents?”

“You had a key?”

“No. The receptionist let me in. I said I had something to give my dad.”

I slowly turn to look at him before grinning. “And that worked?”

“Apparently.” He sighs and studies the house. “I don’t even think Dad knows I took them. He doesn’t think I can do anything, let alone find evidence of his crimes.”

I pat his shoulder gently. “He said you were a teenager when he tried to intimidate me the other day. It made me realize that my dad might not know that I’m alive, but I turned out okay.”

Nolan frowns. “That is *not* a help—”

I laugh. “I’m saying that you’re going to be okay, Nolan. Having parents who make mistakes doesn’t mean that you’re not going to have a life you love. It’s true for you, me, Aiden... There’s nothing stopping us.”

The front door of the house opens, and Nolan quickly gets the camera up. I’m expecting something exciting to happen, but it doesn’t. Tom calmly gets into a car, waving a cheerful goodbye to his wife and his young son standing on the porch. My heart goes out to the young boy, and I know Nolan is feeling the same way. Tom waits until the boy has gone back inside, before turning to notice us sitting on the car. He somehow manages to get the police surrounding him to let him come over to us. The power this man has. I roll my eyes.

“Mr. Bradley,” I say icily. “How’s your night? Is there anything you’d like to add to my—”

Before either Nolan or I can act, he's wrenched the camera out of Nolan's hands and throws it on the ground. The police rush over as Tom's hands grip at the front of my jacket. "That was a mistake," he hisses in my ear. "You'll see."

The police grab him off me and haul him back to the car. Nolan sighs and dusts off his camera. He nods his head to the window of the house, and my heart breaks when I see the son.

"He'll be okay," Nolan whispers. "He'll join our group of men who had to teach themselves, right?"

"Yeah," I whisper.

We sit for a while longer, long after the cars have gone and the lights in the house are switched off. I don't want to imagine what's going on in there right now. I want to think that the wife had no idea what was going on, that she's as innocent as the young boy at her side, but I have a feeling she isn't.

I take a deep breath. "I have to go back to Atlanta tomorrow. I won't be long. I don't know what's going to happen here, but now that there's been an arrest, we might—"

"I can handle it here."

"I'll come back the second you can't, okay?"

Nolan jumps off the car. "Stop trying to steal my limelight, Clay."

I laugh and make it back to my car. "I'll see you soon. While I'm away, I'll need you to do what Redhaven does best."

“Prepare for Christmas?”

“No...*gossip*. Let’s spread the word. You said it earlier; Redhaven is small but mighty. We need the public on this one.”

Nolan nods once. “*Not* a problem. Trust me.”

Chapter Twenty-Four

DYLAN

Clay is up bright and early the next morning, packing to go back to Atlanta. I can't help but feel strange as he disappears into his own mind in preparation to leave. Our bubble has already burst, earlier than I thought it would have. I'd expected I'd feel like this when he went back after Christmas, but I thought I had *time*. Time for us to settle into what this is and what it could be. Him going back to Atlanta so soon feels like the foundation under our feet could fall apart at any minute.

It's the distant, unapologetic Clay that I first met, and I hate that I have to see it after the weeks we've spent together.

"Mom says the sink in your old room at the Maple is leaking again," I say with a yawn as I force myself to get out of bed. I hate that I'm noticing that Clay is packing everything—clothes, documents, the items he bought at the festival. Even *my* jacket is thrown in as if it's his now. "I'm going to go look at it in preparation of the Maple actually being open for

business. I'm still not holding out too much hope. I'll be back to drop you at the airport"

He smiles kindly. "I'll have to take the rental car back anyway. I'll drive myself."

I pout, realizing how little time Clay and I have before he goes, then.

"Oh, while you're over at the Maple, can you see if there's a little brown notebook? It's about..." He measures the approximate size with his hands. "I think I might have left it there when I moved over here."

Obviously Clay doesn't feel the same way. I grunt in approval and make it downstairs. Aiden isn't up yet, but I imagine it's only a matter of time. I imagine he'll be up when I get back. It's going to be weird it being just Aiden and me again after the last few weeks of us being a little family.

I trudge over the snow to the Maple to find Mom talking quietly to Evelyn, an elderly woman who only comes to Redhaven for the Christmas season. She says her grandkids live here, but I've never seen her with anyone. She mostly hovers around the Maple until January.

"Morning, Evelyn," I say, trying to decipher the glint in Mom's eyes.

"Morning, Dylan. Merry Christmas." She nods at me and leaves me alone with Mom.

"There's some *juicy* gossip hovering around this morning that I think you might know more about," Mom says as I make

a break for the staircase.

“I’m just here as a handyman.”

Mom chases me up the stairs. “*Dylan*. Is this what Clay was working on? When you said you had a plan? Was it this?”

I chuckle and scan the room for Clay’s book but can’t see anything on first inspection. “You actually haven’t said anything.”

“Ooh, Dylan. I’m struggling to believe any of it right now. All I know is that Tom was arrested last night by the *FBI*.”

“News to me.”

Mom growls as I inspect the sink. “Fine. I’ll go talk to Clay.”

“Do that. He’s on a plane back to Atlanta soon.”

That stops her. “Why?”

I smile and shrug. “I’m not sure. Something about being asked to report on a big story that involves the mayor of a small Christmas town being exposed for embezzlement and tax evasion and being arrested by the FBI.” I hold my hands up as Mom’s mouth drops open. “I’m serious when I say I don’t know much. That’s about all I do know. There’s bribery involved somewhere, but Clay didn’t tell me too much about it. I think he’s nervous about getting me in trouble in some way.”

Mom almost power walks out of the room, and I’m left alone. As I bend down to look at the sink, I spot the thin

notebook Clay wanted, having fallen down the back of the nightstand, only a corner of it sticking out. I pluck it out and go to place it on the bed to remember to take it with me, when something makes me flick through the pages. My fingers stop on a page that has my name on it.

I feel my spirits drop the more I read. It's pages of little handwritten notes, some in a sort of shorthand, others my full name written out. There are comments on Rachel, Aiden, my ex, details on Aiden's father—some that I didn't even know was possible to find out.

I can't stop the overwhelming pain to drop over me as I snap the book shut and walk out of the house, not seeing anyone who might have been in my path.

He's not coming back.

It makes sense. The pain in his voice last night when Hugh told him to go. How passionately he made love to me last night. The packing of his entire wardrobe. This was always pretend.

Mom and Aiden are downstairs of the guest house, Clay still walking around packing things into the suitcase he's moved downstairs.

Mom looks at my face in alarm. "Dylan? What's wrong?"

Clay looks up in concern, but I hold the notebook up and instead look to Mom. My voice sounds weak to my ears. "I need to speak to Clay. Alone."

"But—"

“*Now, Aiden.*”

Mom stares at me for several too-long seconds before bundling Aiden into his snow jacket and coaxing him out into the yard. She manages a quick squeeze of Clay’s arm on the way past, but I choose to ignore it.

Clay frowns and holds his hand out. “There it is. What’s your problem?”

I move the book away from him and open it to the page about my family and me. “The Red Maple. In serious need of work. In serious need of a change of ownership.”

He rolls his eyes and starts to say something, but I interrupt him to read something else.

“Rachel Turner equals nightmare.” I glance at him, but he’s glaring at me. “There’s some dates here. Rach’s death, Aiden’s birthday.”

“They were the initial notes I took that led me to the mayor story, Dylan. Don’t get in your head about it. I wrote them before I knew you properly.”

I hold it up. “Then how come you have my ex’s name and number? You didn’t know his name until recently.”

Clay stares at me before chuckling and shaking his head. “That’s the name of the contractor listed for Tom Bradley’s little sneaky ‘Fuck Redhaven’ mission, Dylan. I did not know he was your ex when I wrote that. I didn’t even put two and two together until just then. *That* guy, Oliver, along with three other members of the same firm, claimed the hospital re-build

was going to cost three hundred thousand dollars *over* what it did and then repurposed that money into Tom Bradley's private funds."

He folds his arms as my mouth drops open in pure shock. "Absolutely not," I whisper. "No. Oliver would never—"

"Aiden's guardianship was a convenient out, Dylan. He was arrested in Chicago eight months ago for trying to do the same thing to a private citizen and pocket the money himself. They hadn't yet traced it back to Tom, but *I* did. In fact, Oliver's arrest made it easier for me to connect the dots."

I can't comprehend the words that are coming out of his mouth. It's a hurt that is so familiar, happening all over again. It's almost physical in its intensity. "Can I see the Christmas festival report? Before you fuck off to Atlanta? I want to make sure you haven't made us all out to be weak, feeble, and *helpless*, like you've made it seem in these notes."

Gone is the anger from Clay's expression, and hurt has replaced it. "I'm coming back," he says softly. "I want to—"

"Are you? This is what you wanted, Clay. This is your big break! You got the revenge story you've been *dreaming* of. Why would you come back to this?" I look at the notebook in my hand and recite from the page "—absolute dump of a town in the middle of fucking nowhere? So, can I please have a look at what you've got for the story before you leave forever?"

Heartbreak bursts over his expression, and he takes a step back. "Wait," he whispers. "Are you..." He pauses, his eyes watering. "Are you breaking up with me? Over something I

wrote when I first got here and didn't know you? I admit, I was harsh on Redhaven, and I thought I was going to leave the second I could, but I didn't actually *want* to."

I throw him the notebook. "I don't believe you," I snap. "I have a sneaking suspicion that you knew right from the beginning that there was something with Tom, because there's no way you'd just *happen* across something this large. Was it Nolan? Did he invite you here under the guise of the Christmas festival? I guess that's why you didn't fuck him."

Clay's face freezes before morphing into a completely hardened neutral expression. "You can believe what you want to believe, Dylan. I still have a flight to catch in the hopes that I can save this town." He shoves the notebook in the suitcase and zips it up. "I'll call you when I land. We can talk about this calmly."

"Don't."

The anger returns, and he spins to face me, a scowl on his face. "Are you *seriously* doing this right now? You're ending this?" I'm surprised at the errant tear that breaks through his control. He's still angry, I can see that, and the tears seem to make him angrier. "Why the *fuck* would you lead me on, Dylan? If you were so suspicious of my motives coming here, why didn't you say something earlier? Why did you ask me to stay?" He brushes the tears off and grabs at his suitcase, his anger making his movements jolty. There's a feeling in the pit of my stomach that tells me I'm wrong about this, but I don't know how to undo what I've already done.

“Clay...”

“Fuck off, Dylan.” He pushes past me, his suitcase hitting me in the leg as I don’t move. “Fuck, I should have *known*. I’m such an idiot. I never learn apparently. Everyone’s out for themselves. No one gives a shit. Good to fucking know.”

“No, I—”

He slams the door, and I’m suddenly faced with what just happened.

“Oh fuck,” I whisper. I feel stuck to the spot, unable to chase him to undo what just happened. I hear his car start, and it’s when the sound disappears that I suddenly break. Mom was right; I should never have told Aiden that Clay was moving here.

Because he was never going to. There was always going to be something.

I manage to lift my feet, and I make it to the breakfast bar, my whole body so tired of *fighting*. I thought I had found the man who was going to change it all for me, but I’ve fucked it up. Again.

The door opens slowly, and Mom stands there. I can’t look at her, but I know she’s there.

I don’t remember the last time I cried, let alone in front of Mom, but I can’t hold back the tears.

Mom sighs sadly. “Oh, honey.”

“Should have listened to you,” I mumble, and she walks to my side, wrapping her arms around my shoulders. That’s all it takes for me to crumble. “I don’t know what to do,” I sob.

She rests her chin on the top of my head. “Neither do I, sweetheart. But we’re going to have to think of something.”

I close my eyes and try not to think about what I’m supposed to tell Aiden.

Chapter Twenty-Five

CLAY

The whole thing feels like a nightmare. I convinced myself that when I woke up, I was going to be curled up alongside Dylan in the cozy bed in The Red Maple's guesthouse.

When I do wake up, however, it's the pilot telling us that we're coming into land in Atlanta and to put our seat belts on. It all washes over me again, and I try to brace myself against the ache in my chest as it intensifies. I can't believe I was stupid enough to even entertain the possibility of moving to a different state for a man. I should have known better.

The cab driver asks me where to, and I look down at my outfit before giving the driver my address. I'm dressed for Redhaven weather, not Atlanta weather.

My apartment is cold, empty, and so far from the kitschy décor of most of Redhaven that I find myself grimacing as I walk through my apartment. I dump my suitcase in the small lounge before forcing myself to walk to my bedroom and

change my clothes. The sooner I can get my head focused on work, the better.

I get a pair of skinny jeans, a sensible white button-up, and my regular blazer. It's almost half the amount of effort I would have normally done, but I don't care. I want to get to work and figure out what to do next.

As I'm about to leave, I spot my suitcase in the lounge and switch my blazer with Dylan's jacket that I stole from him the first time we met. Something in me must have sensed that Dylan was never going to *actually* let me stay, and I packed everything to take back with me. I realize with a pang that I left my ornament from the Christmas festival there, and it's a pain that threatens to break through my carefully barricaded heart. I spot the candle I bought at the festival but don't dare open the bag it's wrapped in. That smell will leave me a weeping mess on the floor.

I take a deep breath, raise my chin, and stroll as confidently as I know how out of my apartment.

My confidence lasts as long as it can on the commute to the station, but the familiar journey is heavier than a weight on my shoulders.

I'm back here again. The same thing. Day in. Day out. I'm thirty years old and not a single prospect on the horizon.

The receptionist gives me her usual smile, the junior reporters move out of my way with a small nod of acknowledgement, my feet follow the same trail I've always walked.

The only difference is that Joclyn actually looks *excited* to see me. I ignore her as she opens her mouth and walk to Hugh's office.

"I'm here," I say, interrupting him from a meeting with a man I've never seen before and couldn't care less about. "I'll be at my desk."

I leave before he can respond and sit gingerly at my desk, my hope at having my mind off things diminishing rapidly by the second. All it is doing is reminding me that I nearly got to leave.

Joclyn leans over my desk and grins. "You're back! You're looking a little pale there. I don't know *how* you—"

"Was there something you needed?" I ask bluntly. "I have work to do, and unless something has changed in the few weeks I was away, so do *you*."

She frowns. "What happened to you?" She gets a message on her phone, and she's distracted for half a second. "Cute jacket. Is it vintage?"

I look down at Dylan's jacket before trying to stop myself from breaking out into embarrassing tears in the middle of my workplace. "No," I whisper. "Just some guy's closet in the middle of New Hampshire."

Joclyn is already bored, and she walks back to her desk, leaving me to breathe out slowly and wonder if maybe I should just go home, drink a bottle of wine to myself, and get

every image of what my future could have looked like out of my head.

I'm saved from having to do that by Hugh gesturing me into his office.

He rubs his hands and grins. "Sit down, babe. We've got a lot to get through. I'm glad you're here so quickly. The way you sounded on the phone, I thought it was going to be a few days."

I manage a weak smile. "I made it. That's the main thing."

He blinks at me for a few seconds before folding his hands on his desk. "Is everything okay, Clay?"

"Yes," I say firmly. I clear my throat and try my damn hardest to put a normal smile on my face. "If you, uh, just tell me what to do, I'll do it. I've got...um, I've got a few clips of the mayor and some things around home, which we might be able to use. I'll send them to—"

Hugh smirks before looking down at the documents on his desk. "Got a little bit too comfortable there, did you? Don't worry, we'll acclimate you again before long." He winks at me, but I find I can't raise so much as a smile in response.

I point to his desk. "The mayor story? Can we get back on track?"

"Oh. Yes. Right, of course." Hugh studies me strangely before finally getting down to the task at hand.

Thankfully enough, Hugh gives me enough work to keep me busy for the whole day. Nolan's texted me a couple of

times to tell me that most of the town is now well aware of what's happened, and I got him to film some clips of the reactions to the news from members of the community. We might not use them, but they're there anyway.

It's dark out, the office empty, but I look through all the clips that Nolan has sent me, letting my homesickness eat me alive.

I hear footsteps on the carpet behind me, but I don't turn around. It's only Joclyn.

"I think some of us are meeting at a bar for a little Christmas celebration," she says softly. "You're welcome to join us. You missed the Christmas party, after all. Billy from Editorial got drunk and revealed that he's a stripper on the weekend. You would have loved it."

I stare at my keyboard and shake my head. "I want to get this done before we go live tomorrow. And I don't like Christmas."

She chuckles. "Oh, come on. You looked like you were enjoying Christmas on your Instagram. Wasn't the little town you went to a *Christmas* town?"

"Yes. And all it did was remind me why I hate Christmas. All the fucking hype, the expectations... It's a holiday *designed* to make everyone look like a fucking hero, but in reality, everyone is as lost and confused and *sad* as everyone else. There are men like Tom Bradley who steal money from the community they are supposed to be helping, and there are men like Schneider who embezzle millions of dollars from

small businesses, and there are men who will do whatever the hell they want regardless of who is standing in their way.”

Joclyn is blank-faced during my little rant. “So?”

I lean back in my chair. “I’ve made a mistake. Reporting on this mayor. I never should have done it. I should have done the fucking Christmas festival report and then got on with my life.”

“You’re *helping*—”

“He has a *family*, Joss. An eight-year-old son. An eight-year-old son who had to watch his dad get taken away in the middle of the night .”

Joclyn chuckles. “And what would you do differently? You grew up with your dad around, right? *That’s* why you so desperately wanted the Schneider story, isn’t it? You wanted to get revenge? Doesn’t taste as good as you thought it would, does it? This fucked-up mayor has an eight-year-old son. So what? If the mayor was thinking so much about his kids, he wouldn’t have done what he did.” She gets in my face. “We’re reporters, Clayton. We take the bad people and shove their decisions right back into their faces. We show them what they’ve done. We show *everyone*.” She flips her hair over her shoulder. “Now, are you in for Christmas drinks or not?”

“*No*.”

“Good. You’re being a real downer. I don’t know where this ‘moral high ground’ side of you has come from, but it’s fucking annoying. You’re not a reporter because you want to

do good in this world. You're a reporter because you want to prove something." She raises her eyebrows. "So go out and fucking prove it already."

I watch her walk away and realize she's right. I wait until she's completely swallowed by the darkness of the building before getting back to work.

Chapter Twenty-Six

DYLAN

Everything about this break-up feels *wrong*. When Oliver left, there was so much more to think about. There had been Rachel's death to recover from, Aiden to look after.

Now, I have to lie in my loneliness and wait for this storm to pass over.

I stare up at my bedroom ceiling, wanting to stay here in bed and do absolutely nothing, thinking of all the ways I fucked up, but there are things to do. I decided not to tell Aiden yet, so I have to put a calm face on and attack the day.

When I get downstairs, Aiden is already putting his snow jacket on.

"Where are you going?"

"The Maple. Something's happening. Look." He pulls the curtains open farther, and sure enough, there are a lot of people hanging around the door of the Maple. I frown and abandon the idea of coffee, agreeing to investigate with Aiden.

We start tromping through the snow, Aiden excited about what's happening ahead. "Hey, Uncle Dylan?"

"Mm?"

"Can I call Uncle Clay today? I want to talk to him."

I look down at him, the pang in my heart aching more than before. "Um. He's, uh, pretty busy back in Atlanta. Maybe."

"But you said you got to talk to him. Last night."

I give him a weak smile and am saved from responding by arriving at the crowd of people. I gesture Aiden towards the back door, and we try to find my parents. I spot my mom behind the desk, trying desperately to answer questions from everyone. Dad rushes through with an armful of logs for the fire.

"Dad. What's going on?"

"The story broke," he says. "We haven't seen it yet, but the phone has been going crazy, and people have arrived looking for a place to stay. I don't know what's happening. We definitely don't have room for this many people."

Before I can say anything, I get a call from Rosie. There are two missed calls already on my phone from Robert and Debbie, and I look down at Aiden. "Okay. Aiden, stay here and help Poppy with whatever he needs. I'm going to have to go help out around the rest of town. I think everyone's just as slammed."

Dad waves me away and gives Aiden a job right away.

When I get to Main Street, I spot Nolan, his camera in hand, filming the bustling street. It looks like the Christmas festival all over again. “Nolan.”

He glances at me before continuing what he was doing.

“What happened?”

“What do you mean?” he says slowly, concentrating on his camera. “This was expected.”

“By *who*? Because it certainly wasn’t expected by the rest of town.”

Nolan stops filming and turns to look at me. “This is *good*, Dylan. This is saving Redhaven.”

“We’re running out of supplies. It’s doing more damage than good at this point!”

Nolan chuckles. “It’ll be over by evening. It’ll put Redhaven on the map, give exposure to the areas we need, and everyone will go back to their respective cities. Don’t panic. Clay predicted it.”

Much to my surprise, it *does*. By lunchtime, only half the amount of people are here, and there are only the few who managed to secure a room still here by sunset.

The residents of the Maple who were here first for their annual trip to Redhaven aren’t too pleased with the interruption, but Mom and Dad have managed to keep them happy.

By night though, everyone is exhausted and the regular members of the town gather at Janice's diner. We've all brought food with us, as Janice is close to the end of her supplies for the day.

"So soon after the festival wiped us out," Rosie says, sitting heavily on a chair and wiping her brow. "Next time we have a national scandal on our hands, we need to time it better."

Everyone chuckles wearily.

"I haven't even seen the report," Mom says with a yawn. "He did good though?"

Janice nods at the TV on the wall. "Dyl, be a dear and figure out how to get the report on there, will you? It should be on YouTube by now, right?"

I don't bother to go into detail on how the internet works, and once I've done as requested, we all sit in silence as it starts.

The first thing I notice is that Clay is wearing my old jacket. He talks seriously into the camera about Tom Bradley, but there's something missing from his demeanor. He just looks... *sad*.

Mom must notice it too, as she reaches over and puts a hand on my arm, squeezing gently.

There are clips throughout his report—the Christmas festival, setting up, turning the lights on at Gingerbread Lane, and then a dark video of Tom's arrest.

Debbie sighs, but it's not sad like I thought it would be, given the circumstances. It's almost...proud?

"That's our Clay," Janice says with a grin. "Such a nice guy." She points over to the wall with the winners of the Christmas raffle, but I can't bring myself to look at the smiling face of the man whose heart I destroyed.

Rosie regards me. "You know, I thought he was going to be trouble when I first saw the two of you together, Dyl, but I have to admit, he convinced me." She gives me a nod of approval, and I try to smile. I'm not sure I succeed though.

"Would you look at that?" Robert says dryly. "Rosie knows how to say she was wrong? I must be dreaming."

"You will be forever dreaming if you don't shut your mouth, Robbie."

I chuckle and try to tune out the others, dwelling on my own misery, but no one will let me.

"When's he coming home?" Debbie asks me, and I shrug weakly.

"I'm not sure," I mumble.

"Well, tell him I have something for him to say thank you for helping me out so much. I've completely sold out of all my mistletoe! I don't know *what* I'm going to do next year."

I see the look of excitement Mom and her friends get on their faces, but I smile the first genuine smile of the day. "I'm sure we can get you some more. I don't think it'll be a problem at all."

Mom shoots me daggers, but I grin and lean back in my chair.

I get a text message from Dad as our little tired group starts to disperse.

Dad: *I have made a grave error in judgment and assumed you had already told Aiden that Clay wasn't coming back. He is upset and angry to a point I've never seen before.*

I breathe out slowly and show Mom the text.

“Oh, *Joel*,” she mutters under her breath, rolling her eyes. She smiles at our remaining company. “We have to go. There’s a situation back at home.”

I drive Mom home, and she looks over at me almost as soon as her door is shut. “When are you going to go get Clay back?”

“I’m not,” I mumble. “I can’t. Not now. I’ve fucked things up too much.”

“I mean, you were an idiot, sure, but I am almost positive that Clay is missing you just as much as you are him.”

I look over at her and sigh. “He’s not going to want me back. If he’s going to see me again, it’s to tell me how stupid I was.”

We pull into the drive of the Maple, and I brace myself for what is happening on the other side of the door. There’s a house full of guests, and I can’t imagine Aiden will be quiet about his frustrations.

“He has a right to be upset, Dylan,” Mom says softly.

“I know. It’s going to fucking hurt. That’s all.”

Mom pats me on the knee, and I reluctantly get out. Inside, Aiden is sitting on the sofa, his arms folded, his cheeks streaked with tears, and his expression deadly.

Dad turns to face me and winces. “I’m sorry,” he whispers. “I really didn’t think—”

I hold my hand up. “It’s fine, Dad. Aiden—”

Aiden leaps up and flings himself at me, throwing his arms at me in a sudden attack. “*I hate you. I hate you.*”

“Aiden! That’s enough!” Mom says in horror. “We don’t hate any—”

“You told me that we were going to be together!” Aiden yells, tears starting again. I manage to grab at his arms to stop him from hitting me, but he’s surprisingly strong. “We were a family, and you made Clay leave.”

“I’m sorry,” I whisper, trying to keep my own emotions at bay. “I’m sorry, Aiden, I am. It wasn’t anything to do with you. I promise. Clay and I... We had a fight, and he went back to Atlanta—”

He yanks himself away from me and glares at me before stomping furiously through the house towards where he sleeps when he stays here. I watch him leave with a sinking heart.

“I think you need to give him some time,” Dad whispers. “I’m sorry, Dyl. I honestly thought he knew.”

I manage a weak smile and sit on the couch. How can something so good fall apart so easily?

“For the first time in my life, I felt *comfortable*,” I say to no one in particular. “Like maybe I had something. Then I blew it.”

Mom hums. “I don’t think you’ve blown it, sweetheart.” She exchanges a glance with Dad for a few seconds before walking over to her desk and riffling through a drawer. She comes back with an envelope. “Here.”

I take it slowly and open it to find a plane ticket to Atlanta. “Mom, I—”

“You *can*. Go talk to him. Go see if there’s something you can salvage. Maybe if Aiden sees you trying, it’ll make a difference. Or at least go and let *him* talk to Aiden.”

Dad clears his throat. “Aiden told me that he’s never going to speak to you again.” He manages a grimace. “And that...he wants me to call Cherie and tell her that he’ll go live with her.”

“What?” I whisper.

“Think about it, Dylan. He knows what’s going on. He knows that Clay said if he’s not here, neither is Aiden,” Mom says.

“That was...” I look at the plane ticket in my hand and rub my forehead. “I don’t think I have much of a choice, right? I feel like I’m going to lose out either way, but at least I can make it dramatic.”

Mom sighs. “Look, I don’t know Clay very well, that’s obvious, but I know *you*. And I know that you wouldn’t have been so quick to invite him to stay with you for Christmas—for *after*—if you didn’t feel in your heart that it was a right move.”

“I still—”

She holds her hand up. “I know. But I’ve seen the way you and Clay have *worked* together over these last few weeks, and I am sure that he is just as devastated by this break-up as you are. He was about to give up everything so he could be with you, and you ran him out of town.”

I stare at the ticket for a long time before taking a deep breath. “Shouldn’t I stay here with Aiden? I feel like I’ll make things worse.”

Mom thinks about her answer for a while before giving me a soft smile. “I think, right now, you need to think about yourself. We’ve got Aiden covered. Go to Atlanta.”

I stare at her, too scared to say what’s on my lips. “I don’t want to lose him,” I breathe.

“You won’t.”

I get up and realize I don’t know who I was talking about.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

CLAY

“Clayton? A word?”

I jump out of my reverie and turn to face Hugh as he gestures into his office. I give him a tight smile and follow him.

“What’s up?”

He motions for me to shut the door, and I sit across from him with a sigh.

Hugh folds his hands across his desk and smiles. “You did a fantastic job with this Bradley story.”

“Thanks.”

He frowns before recovering and sliding a document over the desk. “I want you to run the interview for the Schneider embezzlement assignment.” He leans back in his seat and grins wide. “Your attitude to your work has improved *a lot* since you got back from Vermont—”

“New Hampshire.”

“Whatever. Since you came back, I’ve *finally* been able to see the serious journalist side of you that I’ve been wanting to see.” He reaches over the desk and pats my knee. I move it away and sit up properly, out of his reach.

“Thanks for the oppo—”

“Great! I’ve still got Joclyn running the story, but we’re getting a limited interview with him, and I think you’re the man for the job.” He looks at his computer for a moment before looking at the closed door. “*So*, why don’t we go to Morelli’s tonight? Celebrate?”

I don’t say anything in response, yet he somehow still takes my silence as an agreement. I sit forward and sigh. “Hugh...I don’t think I’m going to accept the Schneider interview. In fact, I know I’m not.”

Hugh’s mouth actually drops open, and he freezes in complete surprise. “I... I’m... *What?* Clay, this is the *Schneider* story. As in...the one you’d begged me for *months* to give you.”

“I know,” I say calmly. “I heard you the first time.”

He scratches his chin. “Is it because Joclyn is still on the story too? I can *maybe* try and—”

“You should give the whole story to her,” I say vaguely. “She’ll do it well. I’d trust her.”

Hugh looks at me like he thinks I might be having a stroke. “What *happened* back in New Hampshire, Clay? You get a knock to the head or something?”

I exhale a laugh, the same laugh that Dylan does. It must have rubbed off on me. It still pangs deep in my chest. “No, worse. I met someone. I met a whole community of someones. And now I’m trying to get accustomed again to being the person who will chase anything that might give me the smallest hint of praise.” I look at my feet, wearing the boots Dylan bought me. They’re not necessary in Atlanta, but I woke up this morning needing a reminder of how much I’ve changed in a month. It’s Christmas Day in three days, and I’m dreading its arrival.

I get up, leaving Hugh speechless. With my hand on the handle to his office, I realize something I should have realized months ago. I turn to look at him.

“I quit, Hugh.”

I think he might have another heart attack, but I leave before he can say anything.

I sit at my desk, my hands shaking with what I just said. If I don’t have this job, what do I have? This job was my only lifesaver.

My desk phone rings, and I contemplate not answering it. It’s not my job anymore, is it? I sigh and pick it up.

“Hello?”

“Is this Clay Miller?”

My senses are on high alert, but there’s no one around who is paying attention to me. The voice is unfamiliar, male, and

sounds young. It's obviously disguised in some way as well.
"Mm... Who is this?"

"You're the reporter who did the story on that mayor from Redhaven, New Hampshire, right?"

"Look, I'm not going to—"

"I work for someone like that guy," the man interrupts. "I have a similar story that needs to be reported on. It just can't come from me."

I raise my eyebrows and hunch over, giving the call my full attention. "Okay, I'm listening."

We end up talking for close to an hour, and I'm intrigued by the end of it. He won't give me his name, but I discover the man he's talking about is a priest of a large congregation and is siphoning money from grieving families to fund his porn and sex addiction.

There's a spark beneath my skin for the first time since I first heard about Tom Bradley, and I chase it hungrily.

I pull my bag up on my desk to rummage around the bottom of it to find a USB that had once held the Christmas festival notes on it, but my fingers brush against something cold and metallic on the bottom. I frown and pull it out.

Aiden's locket.

It must have fallen into the bag. I stare at it, the pain of losing the little family I had created overwhelming me all over again.

I never got to say goodbye to Aiden. I'd got him to trust me, and then I left without a look back.

I check the time, and my hand hovers over my phone. Dylan would be doing jobs around Redhaven. He wouldn't be at the Maple. I don't want to speak to Carole or Joel either, so I drop my hand back on the desk and stare at the locket.

I'll have to send it back to him. It's not fair for me to keep something so personal.

My phone rings, making me jump.

"This is Clay," I mumble, not bothering with pleasantries.

"Hey! I did get the right number! You haven't been answering my calls."

I chuckle weakly. "Hi, Nolan." Even *Nolan* is making me homesick for a place that doesn't want me. That is more depressing than anything.

"How's Atlanta? Things went exactly as planned here. I'm not sure if you got my e-mail or not..."

"I did. I just haven't had the time to respond to it yet. Sorry." *Or the ability to without feeling like my heart is going to break into fifteen thousand pieces all over again.*

"Dylan said you were super busy. I didn't really believe it." He chuckles before there's a commotion on the other end of the phone. "Oh sorry, Clay, Rosie is—"

The phone sounds like it's dropped before Rosie's voice sounds through. "Clayton. You owe me a good bottle of

whiskey after the stunt you pulled. A heads up would be nice next time.”

I chuckle. “I’m sorry. It was going to be better to leave everyone in the dark. It was only Nolan and me who knew everything. D-Dylan didn’t even know the full extent of it.”

“I *knew* something was up with Tom. He kept joking that he should get free drinks.” She snorts. “The bastard was screwing me over, and he thinks *he* should get free drinks?”

I smile and relax in my chair, hit with the feeling of contentment that I always get when in the presence of people who *get* me. I look around the office, and I’m hit with how little this feels like the real me. I’ve spent my life trying to be someone I’m not. I think back to the note Debbie had given Dylan. *It’s time to stop letting other people dictate your future.*

“Is Debbie nearby?” I ask Rosie suddenly.

“Debbie? Uh...yes. Surprisingly.”

“Can you put her on for a sec?”

When Debbie comes on the phone, she sounds like it’s a call she expected. “Hello, Mr. Miller.”

“Can I ask you a question that will stay between us?”

“Of course, sweetheart. But can I predict what the answer is?”

I chuckle. “Okay. Go on.”

She lowers her voice. “I’ve known Dylan since he was born. I’ve watched him grow, watched him mature, watched him

have his heart broken in a way that should have never happened.”

“That’s not answering my question.”

“Let me finish. I watched him with you, Clay. There’s a lightness there that he’s never had with anyone else. But because there’s light, there’s always dark that follows. I don’t know you, but I know that you have a heart that’s open and eager. You take too much of the dark on your shoulders without letting in the light.”

I can’t speak for the lump in my throat, and I sink lower in my chair to hide the moisture in my eyes.

Debbie continues. “*When* you get back to Redhaven, Clay, there will always be a community that loves you and needs your love back.” She drops her voice even lower, and I have to strain to hear her. “And if how Dylan is acting since you’ve gone, you’ll be back very soon. I don’t know what happened, but I know you’re both miserable.”

“Incredibly,” I whisper, trying to avoid sobbing into the phone line.

Debbie exhales a laugh. “I’ll see you when you come home, Clay.”

She hangs up, and I try to subtly wipe the tears off my face without anyone knowing. It doesn’t work. Hugh is standing in his office doorway watching me.

He moves to sit on the corner of my desk as I take a deep breath and open Nolan’s e-mail. He’s sent me the link to the

Christmas festival files and another few photos of life around Redhaven for the last couple of weeks. I can't bring myself to open it.

"Was there something you needed, Hugh?" I ask tightly. "I'm in the process of finalizing everything before I go so that I don't have to ever step foot in this building again. Don't worry."

"You're...serious, then? About quitting? Come on, Clay, you're the best we've got."

"No, I'm not. If I'm the best you've got, you wouldn't have sent me to New Hampshire for two weeks with the lame excuse of covering a Christmas festival."

Hugh sighs. "I admit, I handled it poorly. I shouldn't have sent you away. But..." He looks around us and leans closer. "You're not quitting because of me, are you? We can figure something out. I didn't think you *cared* all that much."

"I didn't," I snap. "Because, as it turns out, I didn't actually like you that much."

Hugh gives a tight smile to a junior reporter walking past and staring at us in interest, but I ignore them.

"I'm quitting because I need to do better with my life. I need to do something that's *not* here, the same thing over and over again and putting my heart on the line each time. I'm not quitting because of you. I'm quitting because of *me*."

There's a surprising lightness to my chest when I say it out loud.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

DYLAN

Aiden hasn't said a single word to me since he told me he hated me, and I'm surprisingly finding his silence hard to bear.

He's sitting at the breakfast bar, eating cereal and glaring at every step I make. I take a deep breath and force a smile. "I'm...uh, going to Atlanta today. I'm going to talk to Clay. I don't think I'll be gone long, but Grammy is going to stay here with you tonight in case I'm away for longer."

Aiden sets his jaw and doesn't respond.

I sigh. "Aiden, I know it's hard to understand, but it was never a—"

His glare deepens and he stands up angrily. "I like Clay because he doesn't talk to me like I don't know anything."

"What?" I whisper.

"*Stop* talking to me like I'm an idiot, Uncle Dylan. I *know* that you and Clay had a fight. I *know* that Mom was mean to you. I *know* that your boyfriend left because of me." Tears

well up in his eyes. “But you always talk to me like I’m a baby. *Clay* didn’t do that. Clay made you happy, and you stopped frowning whenever you saw me.”

“Oh, Aiden, no, it was—”

“And I know you said that if Clay wasn’t here, I won’t be either.”

My face falls, and I rush across the kitchen towards him. “Aiden. I want you. With me. It took me time to figure out how to...well, how to *do* this, but I think I’m working on it! I’m trying to get better. Something you will actually understand better when you’re older is how foreign and unusual this whole situation was to adjust to. That should *never* have fallen on your shoulders.” I drop my shoulders and sit on the edge of the sofa. He spins on his chair to face me. “You’re right. God, I don’t know how to do any of this without Clay. He made it so much easier to bear.”

“Are you going to Atlanta to get him to come home?”

There’s a challenge in his expression that makes me think he thinks I’m lying. “Yeah. I am. I have a plane ticket right here.” I hold it up before gulping. “Aiden, what’s going to happen if I can’t get him to come back?”

He lifts his chin. “You will. And if you can’t, *I’ll* call him.” He spins back on his chair. “I’m still mad at you.”

“I’m going to Atlanta *right* before Christmas. Do you think you should be mad at me? Think of the gifts I could buy you.”

He doesn’t look at me. “A puppy?”

“Absolutely not.”

He grunts, and I check the time, realizing I’m late.

“I have to go. Be safe, okay? I’ll make sure you’re okay when I land.”

He doesn’t say anything, but I notice the hopeful glance at me as I leave the house.

The flight to Atlanta is uneventful, but the second I’m in a cab heading for the news station, my nerves seem to triple. Clay hasn’t shown any signs that he wants me to talk to him again, other than wearing my jacket on the broadcast. I can’t claim that as him wanting to talk to me, but I’m here, so I can’t back out now.

A glamorous woman behind a desk looks up at me and nods in acknowledgement when I arrive. “You must be here for the New Hampshire segment? One moment. I’ll get someone to come get you—”

“Oh, er... I don’t... I’m really just looking for Clayton Miller, if you know him.”

She raises a delicate eyebrow. “I think it’s going through Joclyn Singer now, but...” She waves her hand and puts a phone to her ear.

“I really just need to see Clay. I’ve never—”

I’m interrupted by large glass doors opening and the receptionist gesturing me through. “Joclyn will meet you on the other side.”

I purse my lips and walk through, deciding that I can get the same information from Joclyn.

A trim woman with golden-blond hair long down her back looks over me with a quizzical expression. “Can I help you?”

“I don’t know. I’m looking for Clay Miller.” I nod my head toward the way I came. “*She* was little to no help and sent me here instead.”

Joclyn nods slowly. “I’m sorry, but Clay quit. Earlier this morning. I’m taking over any details of the New Hampshire story from here on.”

“Great. Good for you. My reason for needing to see Clay has very little to do with Redhaven and is more personal. Do you have his address or something? This is the only place he listed.”

Joclyn stares at me slowly for a moment before folding her arms and smiling. “Are *you* the reason he’s been a miserable mess since he came back?”

I stare at her. “Probably. Unless he met up with a different idiot on the way between here and Redhaven.”

She chuckles. “I sadly don’t have his address. We’ve never been particularly close. Hugh might have it though. You’d have to ask him.”

I wince. “There’s not *anyone* else?”

She laughs. “Clay doesn’t easily make friends. But...stay here. I’ll go ask Hugh so you don’t have to.”

I watch her walk confidently towards a closed door at the end of the room, and I gaze around the place while I wait. There's an empty cubicle next to Joclyn's, and I run my fingers over the sign on the wall. *Clayton Miller – Senior Reporter.*

“We'll have to remove that when we know for certain he's not coming back” comes a voice from in front of me, and I look up to see a balding middle-aged man wearing a too-small shirt. Well, that's Hugh, then. Joclyn looks as smug as she can be, and I give them both a tight smile.

I take ahold of the edge of the sign and rip it off the wall. “There. Glad I could help. I know Clay. He ain't coming back.” I place it slowly on the desk.

Hugh licks his lips. “Would you like to come—”

“I just need Clay's address. When his stay at my family's bed and breakfast was organized, it was only this address that was listed.”

“Yes, well, I can't exactly hand out personal information like that, can I?” He gives me a bland smile. “I can call him ___”

It dawns on me. “*You* don't have his address, do you?” I whistle. “*Wow*. No wonder he was looking for any excuse to get away from here.”

Hugh scowls. “I'm definitely not giving it to you now.”

This was not the bit that I thought was going to be difficult. I close my eyes and lean my palms on the edge of Clay's

cubicle. “Okay. Look, I need to apologize to him. That’s why I’m here. I...left things in a bad way, and *fuck*, do I regret it. I want him back. I mean, you get it, don’t you? There’s a fire in him that no one else has.”

Hugh looks uncomfortable at my speech, so I try to push it further.

“I’ve never met anyone like him, and I know you’re going to say that it’s because I’m from a small town, but *trust me*, I’ve met my share of people.” I close my eyes and take a deep breath. “I just want him to know that I love him before he finds a man who doesn’t take him for granted, which you and I *know* we both did.”

Joclyn looks like she’s thoroughly enjoying this, and Hugh is getting more and more red in the face. “I don’t know what you’re implying,” Hugh says with a stony smile. “But I still can’t give out his address.” He makes it seem the following words are painful to say. “Because...you are right... I don’t know what it is without looking it up on the system.”

Joclyn laughs. “Oh God, Hugh.”

“What?! He always came to my house! I’m always closer to the office than he is.”

“You think,” Joclyn says with a smirk. “You actually have no idea.”

Hugh blushes a deep red, and he turns to walk back into his office.

Joclyn flicks her hair over her shoulders. “I’ve never pretended to care for Clay, so don’t look at me like that. I would be the last person Clay gives his address to.” She looks me up and down and purses her lips. “But good for Clay.”

“Good for me.”

“Mm...” She checks to see where Hugh is before giving me a small smile and lowering her voice. “You’re a better fit for him. Sure, he’s irritating and a pain in my ass most of the time, but...” She shrugs. “Maybe he’s not like that with people that love him.”

I soften. “He’s not. You’re not going to see it now, but I wish you had the opportunity to see him as I do. Another life, maybe.”

“God, I hope not. One life with him was enough.”

Hugh comes out of the office, a little piece of paper in his hand. “Here. This is the one we have on file. He might have moved—”

“He hasn’t.” I pocket the card, before turning towards the door. “Thank you.”

Hugh clears his throat. “Tell him I said—”

“No,” I say firmly. “Everything you could have told him, you should have by now. I’m going to notice he’s not around, I’m not going to make the same mistake twice, and I’m going to keep him with me instead of pushing him away. I’m going to know his address, at least.” I smile. “I’m going to prove to

him that he's alive and he's loved because no one in his life prior has done that."

"You don't know me."

"I don't have to. I know *him*."

I give him a dramatic two-fingered salute and turn back to the door.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

CLAY

I'm nearly home when I discover that I don't have my apartment keys with me. I must have left them at the office, despite making sure I had everything with me. I drop my head back on the seat and groan loudly. “*Fuck* my life.” I'd made too big of a deal of walking out of the station. I never seem to learn—burning bridges *never works out*. I lean forward to the driver and get him to take me back.

The secretary on our floor smirks at me. “Mr. Miller. I thought I wasn't going to see you again because you're so much better than us and have a fabulous life now.”

“First of all, I didn't say *any* of that. Second of all, fuck you. I left my keys behind.”

She holds them up with an evil smile. “You mean these? Sorry. They have to go to security.”

“What the hell type of rule is that?”

“We don't know who owns them. They could be anyone's. We just need to make sure that—”

I lunge for them and manage to take them out of her hand.
“*Thank you.*”

Out the corner of my eye, I spot Joclyn standing there watching, her back straight and a tight smile on her face. I glance farther into the room and spot Hugh looking uncomfortable and Dylan standing near him. I look back at the receptionist before turning completely in surprise.

Dylan.

“Dylan?” I whisper, my eyes wide in shock. “What are you doing here? Is everything... Is Aiden okay? What’s wrong?”

He gives me a small smile and steps closer, ignoring Hugh and Joclyn completely. “Aiden’s fine. Well, he’s currently giving me the silent treatment and refuses to have anything to do with me after I neglected to tell him what happened with us, but physically fine.” He takes another step closer, and I study him. *God*, I’ve missed looking at him. It’s only been a couple of days since I last saw him, but I’m reminded all over again that I’m well and truly in love with this man. “I, um... I’m here for all *sorts* of reasons. Reasons that start with I’m sorry, I made a huge mistake, and end with me telling you that I love you and want you to come back.”

There’s a lump in my throat that I can’t move. I’m not convinced I’m awake. “This is...not really happening, is it?”

He does his exhaled laugh, and I feel like I’m home again. He reaches out and takes my hand. “I know I was an idiot, Clay. I was trying so hard to believe that everything was real that I convinced myself it wasn’t.” He looks at our joined

hands and smiles weakly. “I know you probably don’t want anything to do with me, but I had to come here and see for myself.” He grimaces and manages to make eye contact. “*And* I don’t think Aiden will forgive me if I don’t try. He, um, he says if I don’t get you back, then he’s moving to live with Cherie.”

I smile and squeeze his hand gently. “I’ve been trying to figure out a way to call you.”

“It’s called a *phone*, babe.” He chuckles at me before seeming to remember that we have an audience. He turns back to me, suddenly nervous. “So, uh...what do you say? You want to come back? I just heard you quit your job.”

I give him a small smile before nodding. “If I come back, it’s real. Not until Christmas, not until New Year’s or your birthday... It’s real.”

He licks his lips and nods. “How about we have something to prove it?”

He takes something out of his jacket pocket, and my mouth drops open in pure surprise as he bends on one knee, opening the ring box. “What?” I squeak.

“Clay...I’ve waited my whole life to find someone who needs me just as much as I need them. Someone willing to move across the country and fights for what he believes in. I’ve waited my whole life for *you*, Clay. Will you make this real with me and marry me?”

I can’t stop beaming and I nod, unable to speak.

“Good,” Dylan says, standing up and helping place the ring on my finger. It’s a simple band with diamonds embedded in the silver, but I’ve suddenly never seen anything so perfect. “If you’d said no, the whole town of Redhaven would have revolted.”

I barely listen to a word he says. I study the ring for half a second before dragging his lips onto mine. “I love you,” I breathe against his lips. He’s back in my arms again, and everything is right with the world.

“I love you too,” he whispers. He squeezes me tight. “Fuck, I missed you.”

I wrap my arms around his neck and bury my face in his warm skin. He smells like the candle I never let myself light from the festival. “You have no idea how much I missed you,” I mumble. I lean back and run my nose down his, lowering my voice. “Now that I have my keys, can we go back to my apartment where we don’t have witnesses?” I lean closer to his ear. “I have a *lot* of things I want to do to you.”

His voice ghosts at my ear. “I hadn’t anticipated witnesses for any of it. *Please*, let’s get out of here.”

I turn to throw a glance at Hugh and Joclyn. Joclyn’s mouth is ajar in surprise, and Hugh is staring at me, red in the face. I lace my fingers with Dylan’s and smile at them. “I’m still quitting. I’d been going to quit anyway. It was always the plan to move to Redhaven permanently.”

Joclyn can’t seem to form words. She’s glancing between Dylan and me with the same stunned expression she’s had

since I arrived.

I look at Hugh. “I was serious about giving Joss the Schneider interview. She’ll do great.”

Before they can say anything, I make sure I have my keys in my pocket and tug Dylan’s hand to get him to leave the room.

“You know, I’d hoped to never meet Hugh,” Dylan whispers as we make it out to the cool air. “Didn’t have the desire to learn what came before me.”

“I didn’t want you to meet either.” I squeeze his hand as we wait for the cab. “I can’t believe you’re here. And that we’re *engaged*? I wouldn’t have thought that was a thought in your head.” He chuckles as I move to look at the ring again. “It’s so pretty,” I whisper. “This is *real*, right? Like, I’m not going to wake up tomorrow and it’s all been a big misunderstanding?”

Dylan laughs as the cab pulls up and he eagerly nudges me to get in so I can say my address. “I had thought about it when I asked you to stay. I was going to ask you on Christmas Day somehow. I didn’t know how I was going to, but it was what I’d thought of.”

“Wow.”

“And no one else knows, by the way. I haven’t mentioned it to anyone. I was...waiting to see your reaction to seeing me again, just in case you wanted nothing to do with me and said I should go to hell.”

I bite my lip as I look him over. “Fuck, I can’t wait till I get you home,” I whisper so the driver doesn’t overhear. “It’s so

weird seeing you in my world for a change.”

Dylan smiles. “Speaking of your world, what are you doing for a job now? Is there anything stopping you from moving to Redhaven?”

“Just my apartment. Then I’m good. I’ll probably organize something while I’m here now.” I settle into my seat, my distraction at what we’re going to do when we get to my apartment making it hard to focus on his questions. “I got an e-mail the other day from Bob Carter.”

“Who?”

“He’s a—and I say this loosely—a reporter from Haven, New Hampshire.”

Dylan nods in understanding.

“He wants to retire. I’d e-mailed him when I was planning on moving to Redhaven the first time about the possibility of combining several news sources into one and broadcasting it from a hub. Bob saw the report on the mayor and has insisted I take up the job.”

“It’ll be nice to have you close by and *safe*.”

I twist my lips. “Yeah... That’s the *other* job offer I have.” I say enough about the priest and the investigative job I was offered without giving away too much, but I can tell by Dylan’s expression that he hates the idea.

“That’s...so dangerous, Clay. You have no idea what you’re getting into.”

“I haven’t agreed to do it yet. I said I’ll think about it. But I feel really good about what I did with the mayor story, and I think I want to take it on too.” I wave my hand as my apartment building is in sight. “I’m going to focus on Redhaven’s news for a while and see what comes out of it. I’ll need more security if I decide to go down the investigative route.”

Dylan leans over to kiss me slowly. “Please do not get yourself killed by sex-crazed, maniac priests, okay?”

“I’ll do my best.”

I get out of the cab and lead the way up to my apartment door.

“This is your apartment?” Dylan says, looking around us with a screwed-up nose. “Now I know why you were so surprised to see mine.”

“Be glad you didn’t decide to move here instead.”

I can barely get the door open when Dylan pushes me in, pressing me against the wall and his tongue in my mouth. His hands roam all over my skin, and I moan at the intensity of the moment. I want him as close as he can get, reminding my brain that he’s here again.

He suddenly pulls away from me. “Fuck, I don’t know whether I want to take my time or ravage you where we stand.”

I smirk and pull his shirt over his head. “I say you ravage me somewhere more comfortable than my front hall. We’ve

got forever, right? We can take our time later.” He gives me a soft smile as I loop my finger into his jeans and tug him roughly towards me. “I’m not in the mood to take my time, babe. I want you, and I’ve wanted you since I first laid my eyes on you however many weeks ago.”

I grin as he grasps my hips and spins me so that I’m leading the way into the apartment. We go tumbling over the edge of the sofa before he slowly kisses me as if he’s trying to learn all there is about my lips again.

He groans and trails his mouth onto my neck, his hips gently rocking against mine. “God, I can’t wait to spend forever kissing your skin.” He nuzzles against the spot beneath my ear that always makes me shiver, and I feel the breath of his laugh. “I hope you always do that. It’s fucking hot.”

He’s torturing me with his slow movements, and I’ve had enough. I twist until I’m on top of him. “I thought I told you I’m not in the mood to take my time. There’s not nearly enough ravaging happening.”

Dylan smirks and kicks his jeans off the rest of the way, resting his arms above his head. “Go on, then.”

I slide off the sofa and grin. “You bought me pretty jewelry. You can have whatever you wish.”

“That easy? What will I get when I buy you a house?”

“You’ll have to wait and see,” I murmur before stopping all talking and getting down to the task at hand.

Chapter Thirty

DYLAN

I blink one eye open before closing it again as quickly as I can.

“Saw that!” Clay says triumphantly. “Time to get up! It’s Christmas Day!”

I groan and pull him in tight. We flew back from Atlanta yesterday, which means it’s been over twelve hours of trying to stop Clay from telling everyone we’re engaged. Only Mom, Dad, and Aiden know that my sudden trip to Georgia had been a rescue mission, but they don’t even know yet that Clay is *already* starting to plan our wedding.

“We have to get up. Aiden will be up soon if he’s not already, and your parents will be here to start breakfast.”

I pout. “*You* are my gift, and I want to admire it for a little bit longer, thank you very much.”

He presses his lips to my temple. “How about you admire me from a distance while I start cooking breakfast?”

I chuckle and let him go. “I love you.”

“I love you too.” He leans down and kisses me slowly before looking in the closet for something to wear. He pouts and pulls his engagement ring off, carefully putting it in the pocket of his skinny jeans. “I won’t have to take that off after today.”

“Looking forward to it. Oh, I bought something for you. For this very moment, actually.” I sit up and pull a plastic bag out from under the bed.

He studies it with narrowed eyes before snorting. “You bought the balls sweater.”

“I bought the *ho ho ho* one. I said if you were staying with me for Christmas, you had to wear it.”

He climbs onto my lap and grins, wrapping his arms around my neck. “I’ll wear it *if* you take it off me later.”

“Deal,” I murmur. The sound of the front door downstairs interrupts us as I try to make it so Santa isn’t the only one who comes on Christmas morning. I groan loudly. “I can’t wait.”

Clay grins and disappears, enthusiastically greeting my parents downstairs. I flop back on the bed for a moment before there’s a gentle knock at the open door. I look over to see Aiden.

“Merry Christmas, Uncle Dylan.”

“Merry Christmas, buddy. Have a good sleep? Santa didn’t wake you, did he?”

Aiden rolls his eyes. “I *know* Santa isn’t real.” He climbs to sit on the bed as I get up to try to figure out what to wear.

“Uncle Dylan?” he says softly.

“Mm?”

“I’m sorry. For saying that I hated you.”

I turn to look at him, and I’m surprised at the guilty look on his face.

“I don’t hate you.”

“It’s okay, bud.” I chuckle and sit next to him, giving him my full attention. “You were hurt and…” I smile sadly. “I’m sorry too. I should have told you what was happening and not left you out.”

He nods seriously. “I like to know what’s going on.”

I look at the door before pursing my lips. “Alright, you want to know a big secret?”

He sits up straight and nods quickly.

“Clay and I are getting married.”

His mouth drops open before he squeals loud enough that I hear noises of concern from the breakfast making crew. “Really?”

“Really,” I say with a chuckle. “And, uh, once we’re married, Aiden, we were *hoping*, if you wanted it, of course, to look at adopting you officially.”

Aiden goes silent, and I think he doesn’t want that. I spot Clay leaning against the doorway, and when Aiden looks at him too, I realize he’s trying not to cry. “You really want me like that?”

Clay moves forward, wrapping him up in his arms. “Of course, Aiden,” he says, sitting next to him. The three of us. The family I didn’t think I’d ever have.

Mom calls up from the bottom of the staircase. “You boys coming down for breakfast or what? If you don’t hurry, we’ll feed all this to our guests.”

I chuckle and turn to Aiden. “We’re telling Grammy and Poppy that we’re engaged when we do gifts. Can you keep it a secret until then?”

He pretends to zip up his lips and throw away the key before bouncing out of the room.

Clay holds out his hand for me to take, and we head downstairs. “There’s no way he’s waiting until gifts,” Clay murmurs, and I squeeze his hand.

He’s right. It’s when we’re clearing the table after breakfast. To be fair, we *are* slowly moving into the living room to do gifts, but it’s still not the way we had been planning on announcing it.

Mom looks curiously at Clay and me. “We haven’t really spoken since you two got back. What are your plans now?”

“Actually, that’s something I was going to talk about.”

Mom frowns.

“I’m going to have to quit as your handyman.”

“What? *Why?*”

“Um, I’ve been considering getting a new job?” I hadn’t even broached this with Clay yet, and he frowns at me. “I was...thinking that, since the position of mayor has opened up... I think I might run for the job.”

The whole room is shocked into silence. “You’re...going to...” Clay’s lips morph into a grin. “Dylan! That’s *great!* You’d be fantastic. I swear to God, if I have to investigate you too...”

I laugh. “I’ll be on my best behavior, don’t worry. You were right, Clay. I have a lot of thoughts about this town, so I want to see if I can do something that actually *helps* Redhaven, not depleting it of money, resources, and a community.”

Mom shakes her head in wonder. “I think that’s a great idea! You will be perfect for the role, and I know people will vote for you. And the Maple is saved, thanks to Clay, so I guess we don’t have to worry about finding somewhere else to live.”

I smile. “We’ve actually been looking at places. It’ll be nicer to have somewhere that’s ours. It means you two can move in here and open up more rooms in the main house.”

Aiden folds over the arm of the chair. “Can I decorate my room when we get a new house?”

“Sure, buddy.”

Clay walks into the room after clearing the last of the dishes. “You can choose a paint color, if you like.”

Aiden grins at the thought before following a different train of thought. “Will I call you Uncle Dylan when you get

married? Or will you be Dad?"

Dad chuckles at the line of questioning, but Aiden throws his hands over his mouth. "Oh my gosh," he mumbles. "I wasn't supposed to *say* that!" He flops into the sofa. "*Dang* it."

Mom frowns. "What? What weren't you supposed to say?"

Aiden slowly looks up at us as Clay chuckles. I draw my arm around Clay's shoulders. "Mom, Dad... We were planning on telling you in a while, but Clay and I are getting married."

Mom stares at us in shock for a moment. "You're not really."

"We are. In the summer probably." Clay takes his engagement ring out of his pocket and slides it back on his finger, where it should be.

Both Mom and Dad break out into large grins. "Oh, Dylan, that's *great* news!" Mom wraps me up in a hug as Dad congratulates Clay. "I'm proud of you, sweetheart," she whispers in my ear. "You've found someone who looks at you like you deserve. Hold on to that."

"I will," I murmur.

Aiden gets bored of our congratulations and directs our attention to the pile of gifts under our tree. We'd had to add another suitcase back from Atlanta to fit all the new things we'd bought, but Clay had stubbornly said that he was going to spoil Aiden this year and there wasn't anything I could do to stop it.

“This one first, Aids...” Clay says, handing him a small, wrapped box. It fits in the palm of Clay’s hand, and even I have no idea what it is. “It’s not really a gift, as it’s actually yours, but...”

Aiden gasps as he pulls out Rach’s old locket. “You found it?”

“Yeah. It must have fallen into my work bag while we were out. I found it the other day.” He smiles. “Open it.”

Inside is the little picture of Rach, Mom, and Dad on one side, but now, on the other, there is a tiny portrait of Clay and me.

“I thought you might want the whole family together.” Clay chuckles and hands Mom and Dad a gift. It’s a photo of all of us taken at the lighting ceremony of Gingerbread Lane. Mom and Dad are standing next to me, their arms around each other, as Clay, Aiden, and I are huddled together too. “Nolan took it. He sent it to me when I was alone in Atlanta, and I couldn’t look at it.”

“Clay, this is beautiful. Thank you, my dear.” Mom leans over and gives him a hug.

As gifts start being exchanged, I step back from everyone and look at the mistletoe hanging above our kitchen doorway. Clay joins me when he notices the lack of my voice.

“You’re too pretty to be under some mistletoe and not be kissing someone.”

“Then come over here and do the honors.”

I wrap my arms around his waist and smile. “I love you.”

“I love you too.” He surveys the scene in the living room before grimacing. “We’re going to have to tell the town about our engagement *soon*. We’ve just told one of the biggest gossips and an eight-year-old who doesn’t know how to keep his mouth shut.”

“Mm... Let them say it.” I lean back. “Actually, wait, I want to see Nolan’s face when he hears.”

Clay slaps me lightly on the chest. “Be *nice* to him, Dyl. He’s gone through a lot. *But*, word on the street is that he’s gone and found himself someone too.”

I grin and kiss him slowly. “Looks like Redhaven has rubbed off on you, Mr. Miller. You’re as big a gossip as the rest of them.”

He shrugs and stands on his tiptoes to bring our mouths to the same height. “What can I say? I’m going to be a Turner. I think it’s a requirement.”

I chuckle and kiss him slowly before dragging him back to the living room. “Come on, Mr. Turner-to-be. We’ve got a life to live.”

The End.

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Toby

My best friend—my family in almost every sense of the word—died. My heart aches for losing him.

The hurt I felt was momentarily lifted by the anger that surged inside me at hearing his half-brother's lies.

I knew of him, but very little. What I did know was how insignificant he was in Damon's life. Yet here he is, a thorn in my side.

The bastard infuriates me, so why am I attracted to him?

Mac

Part of me was glad he was dead. He robbed me of who I am, and when compared to each other, he was always the favored one.

After all this time, I was sick of the bull crap.

I need to know what made *him* so special—so perfect in our father's eyes. I need to know everything he was hiding.

Come to find out, his loyal friend—one who I was quickly becoming attached to—plays more of a role than I thought.

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Chapter One

Toby

Rain soaks through my suit and pools in my shoes. Of course, it's raining as my best friend is lowered into the ground. I focus on something so trivial, so I have some hope of getting through this funeral.

Damon is dead. He's in pieces in the box in front of me; the old car he refused to replace had obliterated him into something almost unrecognizable.

Refusing to think about the enormity of the situation, I look around the cemetery and ignore the rain dripping down my neck, the long strands of my hair plastered to the side of my face.

There are only a few familiar faces around me. Evan Lowry, the police officer first on the scene, is standing off to the side in full uniform, looking awkward. He probably doesn't want to attend the funeral of someone who was in several gory pieces the last time he'd seen him.

My heart flutters as I see Landon Collins standing next to several old women I've never seen before in my life. Landon gives me a sad smile and I eat it up. Sure, Damon is dead, but the man I am almost certain is the love of my life has just smiled at me and I grab onto that with both hands.

However, my attention is taken by a pair of bright blue eyes and an outrageously loud pink shirt. I don't know the man, but

there's something strangely familiar about him. He's leaning against another grave, his arms crossed.

His eyes meet mine and he gives me a flirty smile. Something bristles down my spine at his presence, but I can't think of what it is. Yes, he's handsome with that lovely pale skin and the rain making that garish pink shirt stick to a well-built frame, but he's at my best friend's funeral and looks like he'd rather be anywhere else.

One of Damon's other friends, Malcolm, someone I had very little to do with prior to Damon's death, squares his shoulders as he too notices the other man.

"I'm surprised he's here," Mal mumbles to me under his breath.

"Who is he?" God, that widow's peak is going to kill me. I look back over at Landon to try to remind my brain and body that *he* is the man I want, not the disrespecting stranger.

"Mac," Malcolm breathes.

"Who?"

"Mac McCarthy."

That's the familiarity. He's Damon's brother. Well, half-brother. The one he hasn't spoken to in years. Damon had barely mentioned him in all the time we'd been friends, but I had known he was there.

I sneak a peek back at Mac, but he's now studying something on his phone and biting the nail on his thumb. He has painted nails, although they're all scratched down to

messy blobs of paint. It adds to his scruffy look, which I both hate and love at the same time.

I watch as a sigh travels through him and he looks at his watch, much to my horrified amazement. His brother has just died at the age of twenty-eight and he's bored? The very concept infuriates me. He catches my eye and gives me a large grin.

I shove down any ill-advised sexual feelings I might have considered and glare at him, turning back to the service.

The wake is held at the local church and I'm surprised to see Mac there too. Surely he was too bored to make it to the wake.

"Toby," a voice behind me says and I spin to see Evan, his face taut and lined with pain. What does mine look like? Can people tell that I am too numb to feel anything?

He does something that could be a smile if the circumstances allowed it. "I was going to say good afternoon, but I suppose it's not a good one, is it?"

"No." I can't even muster up the hint of a smile. "Hello, all the same. Thanks for coming. It would have meant something to Damon." As I say it, I'm not entirely sure that's the case.

I don't remember a time we'd ever hung out with him in any sort of non-professional sense. Damon tried to make it a habit to stay away from the police. It didn't work so well for him in the end, judging by the sea of black suits and somber faces.

Apart from that one bright spot of pink that seems to be constantly on the edge of my peripheral vision.

Mac is standing with one hand in his leather jacket pocket and the other swinging a beer bottle casually in his fingers. He's talking to a few old people and I hate the smile instantly as it appears on his face. One of the women places her hand on his arm.

"I'm so sorry for your loss, dear. It's devastating to lose a brother. So young."

"Too young." Mac gives her a sad smile. "I just wish Damon would had have the chance to surf one last time. We had a trip planned to California in the summer." He looks off into the distance and closes his eyes as if he is bracing himself against the now canceled future plans.

"Oh, poor dear," another lady squeezes Mac's arm. "You should still take that trip. Make it a memorial trip."

"I don't know if I should." He gives a steadying breath, shrugging. "It was his dream, not mine."

I take a deep breath and decide to get some fresh air.

It's stopped raining at least, and I sit on the back steps of the church, staring out at the muddy old cemetery. The stones are covered in moss and dirt, and I think about the one just placed in the ground in the new cemetery.

Is someone going to make sure it stays nice? Is someone going to remember that Damon McCarthy died at the age of twenty-eight in a car accident?

I gulp and make my way to the bathrooms. The church is being renovated—thankfully—and there’s not a whole lot of room in the small hallway that leads to the single male bathroom.

There are all sorts of construction equipment that feel out of place to the mood of the church. It’s a reminder that tomorrow, we’re all going back to our normal lives. I have to go back to the apartment Damon and I had shared without him. I’ll have to get up tomorrow and he still won’t be here.

I help an old man with a walker get through the small gap from the bathroom and, as I’m about to walk through it myself, I find myself nose to nose with the pink shirt-wearing asshole.

“Excuse me,” I say tightly.

“I was here first,” his voice drips with smooth teasing. “How about you move?”

I roll my eyes. “We’ll move together, shall we? Get this over with quickly so you can go back to making up lies about Damon?”

Mac reaches out and places both of his hands on my waist. I’m so startled by the movement that I don’t notice him pull me towards him and try to quickly switch our places.

Not only does it not work, it makes us more stuck with my arm trapped next to a whole lot of paraphernalia that includes an angry-looking table saw.

Mac is pushed back against the wall, his hips pushed out by a large array of paint cans, our waists pressed against each other. Whatever curiosity I might have about what Damon's brother was packing, it is pressed right up against me.

"Can you move?" I snap.

"Er, actually, no. I can't." He goes to try and shift his leg, but one of the paint cans topples precariously and I quickly lean forward to stop it from falling. As I do, something stabs me in the leg and I slowly bring my face up to Mac's, now significantly closer to me with our new position.

"Oops," he grins.

"Yes, you *dickhead*. We both need to shuffle that way and we'll be able to get out." I point towards the bathroom, but he isn't looking at anywhere but my face, so I could have pointed up and he wouldn't have noticed.

"What's your name?"

I bite back a string of curse words. "You would know that if you knew Damon. Now, let's go? I just had to bury my best friend and *this* is not how I want to spend his funeral."

"Why not? We can make out if you want. Make it worth it."

If it was anyone else, I might have taken them up on their offer.

But it is Damon's brother, and the familiarity of the sparkle in his eyes and the smirk at the corner of his lips is enough to hurt. I pretend the thought isn't intriguing, hoping my body

listens, seeing as we're connected at the pelvis, and scowl my hardest.

He chuckles and tries to stand up properly, making me lose my balance. I cling to his shirt in hopes that I'm not going to join Damon in an early grave.

"Oh, calm down," Mac says with a roll of his eyes. "You're not going to die. It's a table saw that won't start even if you wish it to. You'll get a scratch but that's about it."

I let go of his shirt and narrow my eyes at him. "Stupid shirt to wear to a funeral."

"It's Damon's favorite color."

"It absolutely is not. He detests pink."

Like what he did with me, I swing both my arms around him and shuffle the both of us out towards the bathrooms, making sure the paint cans are still standing. As soon as the coast is clear, I drop my arms and walk away.

"What was his favorite color then?" Mac calls out.

"Green."

As I continue towards the bathroom, I feel the lump in my throat tighten at the use of past tense when talking about Damon. I also know, with severe and alarming clarity, that I don't have a single clue what Damon's favorite color is.

"See ya round, Toby," Mac says as I turn at the last minute to see if he's still there. He grins at me.

I don't respond.

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Toby

This wasn't how I wanted things to pan out. I loved him, and I wanted a better story for us. I wish the incident at graduation never happened.

Now, everyone has seen of me — one I wish they hadn't — and so I ran.

At least I can have comfort in the knowledge my best friend will support me.

Daniel

I chased after him. I don't remember making the decision, but my feet just led me to be near him, to comfort him.

I'm just as scared though — I don't want anyone to know I'm the other person in the photo. I don't want people to know I am gay.

My plan in life is to follow in the status quo, to be liked and being outed now would ruin everything. I need to protect my reputation and yet, I need to protect my lover's naivety.

There's no other choice but to follow through with the instructions of my lover's best friend, or as how I see him: my blackmailer.

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