

CRANBERRY
CORNER



Sweetly

PIPER COOK

EVERLY

Cranberry Corner

By Piper Cook

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EVERLY

Short and Steamy Grumpy Sunshine Small Town Friends to Lovers Instalove Romance

*When a blast of icy air blows into town, can the tiniest flicker
of flame thaw their broken hearts?*

Everly

I've wanted to be a television news anchor since childhood.
But small towns offer limited opportunities in broadcasting.
After graduation, I hightailed it out of my hometown to the big
city without a glance over my shoulder.

I've worked my butt off at the network, patiently waiting for
my big break. This year, I get it. Sort of. The station's holiday
anchor goes on bed rest, so the boss assigns me to take her
place covering the holiday festivities in the most Christmassy
town in the state.

Ironic I get my big break in the one place I escaped. Cranberry
Corner. Home of ugly sweater parties, cookie swaps, and
Burke Mackenzie.

I'm a fool for thinking he could ever love me.

Burke

Small town life isn't glamorous, but quiet, laidback living suits
me to a tee. We take our time soaking in the sunshine,
snowflakes, and sleigh rides around here. And no one does
Christmas big like we do.

When a major television network decides to shine a spotlight
on the town's holiday festivities, the mayor enlists me to give
the grand tour.

Showing visitors around the area is my specialty and getting
Cranberry Corner in the spotlight is a sure way to increase

tourism traffic.

But when I stride through the diner door to meet the network's
journalist, things get icier than the North Pole.

Everly Watson's the last person I expect to see perched at the
counter. I've spent a thousand nights without her, and from the
look of her icy glare, there'll be a thousand more.

It'll take a miracle to thaw her heart.

Warning: When this protective tour guide falls in love, he'll
go the distance to win the woman who steals his heart. If you
love Christmas miracles, cinnamon roll heroes, curvy women,
and sticky sweet steamy romance, then you'll love Everly and
Burke.

*If you're a hopeless romantic at heart and love steamy, short,
holiday love stories, Cranberry Corner is the place for you.
Guaranteed HEA with no cliffhangers.*

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HOME SWEET HOME

CHAPTER 1

Everly

“Thanks for the lift.” I pay the only rideshare driver within a twenty-mile radius of Cranberry Corner an excessive ride fare fee. It’s easier to get a taxi in the city and less expensive than rideshare companies. Taxi drivers in the city don’t usually belt out *Photograph* by Nickelback on repeat for twenty-five minutes either.

Keep working on that high note.

“Do you think I have a chance at the talent show audition?” The young man throws his arm over the back of the front seat while I gather my things. He’s as young and fresh-faced as I was at his age. “Mom says I’m a natural, but she has to say that.”

It isn’t fair to crush his enthusiasm. I was full of big dreams and hoped to see this little town in the rearview mirror one day, too. I made it out. So can he.

“It takes hard work, talent, and a dash of luck to make it big.” I bolster his confidence and keep my opinion of his singing to myself.

“I can do that.” He nods his head enthusiastically.

I struggle to pull the hard shell Betsey Johnson carry-on suitcase from the backseat. It’s heavy and stuffed to maximum capacity. It’s a good thing I didn’t check it at the airport. The rest of my luggage landed in another time zone. There’s no telling when it’ll arrive. Someone from the camera crew can pick it up for me when they get here in a few days.

I pause before closing the door on my driver’s dream. “I hear love songs and ballads are talent show favorites. I bet you could pull off Counting Crows’ version of ‘Big Yellow Taxi.’”

“Taxi. I get it.” He chuckles as he waves me off.

My ride pulls away from the curb, spraying slushy snow onto the sidewalk. I dodge the spray and take in the familiar surroundings. Downtown Cranberry Corner hasn't changed much in the years I've been away. New names on old shop doors, fresh coats of paint, and more lights than Times Square brighten the sidewalks.

I brush a few specks of snow from my red leather pumps before entering the cafe. A few people glance up, interrupting their conversations to stare. I'm used to all eyes on me when I'm on air anchoring a desk or filming street interviews, but the dynamic here is different. My confidence wavers as an uncomfortable sense of imposter syndrome prickles up my spine.

I'm a duck out of water, wading through a sea of denim and flannel in my pencil skirt and high heels. I don't fit in. Never have. Never will.

“Too big for our britches.”

I shake off the voice of the past and make my way to the counter with my pink floral luggage in tow.

Neon pink vinyl booths line the wall. A group of men sprawl across three square retro tables in the middle of the room, sipping coffee as they regale each other with stories from the past. Women chatter in the corner, picking fries from a red basket lined with checkered paper.

There's nothing noteworthy about the place other than it's trapped in time. It's busy but not bustling. There's no sense of urgency to eat and go. It appears low on staff, short on sophistication, and full of hometown holiday pride. I take a seat on a shiny pink bar stool.

I've worked my butt off at the broadcast company, climbing the ranks to junior anchor. I've checked every box necessary to reach my career goals. My boss and colleagues trust me to deliver the news and entertain viewers with interesting content. But setting foot in my hometown strips me

of all that accomplishment. Here, I'm ordinary Everly, the girl who dreams too big and thinks too much of herself.

"How's the view up there on your high horse?"

The taunting words of the past sting white-hot, blistering my belly with frustration, dread, and an overwhelming sense of urgency to get the story and get out of town as fast as possible. I shouldn't have come early to scope things out ahead of the crew.

What was I thinking? What am I looking for that I don't already know?

If I'd kept my mouth shut about the most Christmassy town I grew up in during a brainstorming session, the network would be on location elsewhere. How could I know our holiday anchor would need bedrest in the days leading up to Christmas? Or that my boss would handpick me to take her place? It's my big break with the holiday broadcast airing nationally.

There's nothing wrong with having big dreams and aspiring to be more than an insignificant blip on someone's radar. My aspirations are bigger than this town and its ugly sweater parties, cookie swaps, and especially Burke Mackenzie. I'm a fool for thinking he could ever love me for who I am.

Burke

Snow dots the afternoon sky, cocooning downtown in a magical blanket of white fluff. Everything glistens and sparkles as if it's been scrubbed clean. I close the office door behind me and enjoy a few minutes of peace as I soak in the outdoor chill. There's nothing quite like the aroma of woodburning fireplaces on a wintry afternoon. But there's no time to ruminate and wax poetic about the weather.

I pull my coat collar over my neck and make my way to the cafe down the street. I intended to take the next few days off before Christmas and spend time with family, but Mayor Stanton called in a favor.

A national television network wants to spotlight Cranberry Corner as the hottest holiday destination spot this side of the Canadian border. That's huge for our small town and my tour guide business. An influx of visitors means more revenue for the town, more money in the pockets of local merchants, and maybe a handful of visitors will settle down here and keep the place thriving.

I'll miss spending time with Kent and Quinn when they arrive, but they'll understand. They love Christmas in Cranberry Corner as much as I do. Our parents never cared much for the cold or holiday hoopla, but once my brother, sister, and I caught the holiday bug, we couldn't get enough of it.

My parents retired and moved away a few years back. They'd rather soak up the sun with margaritas and mai tais than sip egg nog and hot toddies. I'm happy they're following their bliss, spending their golden years traveling and seeing the world. I might like to do that one day, but my place is here for now.

Small-town life isn't glamorous, but there's a certain charm about it that suits me to a tee. It's quiet, and nothing's hurried here. We take our time soaking in the sunshine, snowflakes, and sleigh rides. People are friendly, and the great outdoors is only a few steps away. We have mountains and rental cabins in one direction, lakes and boating in another. But Cranberry Corner's primary appeal is winter and how we celebrate the holidays.

Every house, street corner, and park bench are decorated to the nines with lights, baubles, and holiday cheer. When Christmas Eve rolls around, the entire town quiets to a peaceful halt. Businesses close, friends and family gather, and merriment ensues.

I stroll past Treasured Past and its award-winning display window. Gillian and Eileen outdo themselves every year. Eileen polishes a silver reindeer centerpiece on the perfectly set holiday table in the window. She glances up as I pass, waving to me with her polishing cloth. I pull my hand from my pocket and wave.

“Hey, Burke.” Sebastian Jenkins exits Brain Freeze, next door to Treasured Past. He wears a telling grin. It’s been plastered across his face for weeks now. I’m not the only one who’s noticed the path he’s worn between his chocolate shop and Sophie’s creamery. “Are you joining us for Christmas? Mom’s been cooking and baking up a storm for a week now.”

“If I can make it. Kent and Quinn are on their way in, and I’ve got a tour group to show around.” The Jenkins’ are as much family to Kent, Quinn, and me as our own parents. We’ve spent more Christmases with them than I can count. I nod toward the ice cream shop and grin. “You bringing someone this year?”

His smile widens. The man’s got it bad for Sophie. Can’t blame him.

“I haven’t asked her yet.” He pulls a gloved hand from his pocket and crosses his fingers. “Hoping she’ll say yes.”

Sebastian hurries along the sidewalk and cuts across the square to Fudgeballs chocolate shop. I’ve no doubt there’s a *yes* in Sebastian and Sophie’s future. I’m betting it’s more than *yes* to a dinner invitation. The two are inseparable.

I’m happy for them and their budding relationship. Envious, too. I’ve accomplished a lot, but sharing life’s ups and downs with someone would be nice. The holidays make me nostalgic for old times and the memories it holds. But I’m not a man who likes living in the past. I’ve learned I can’t move forward if I’m constantly looking behind me at what I should have done differently.

Like, hold on to the one woman who put a smile on my face and a spring in my step like Sebastian’s. But she had bigger dreams than this little town could fulfill. When opportunity knocked on her door, I had to let her go. She’d have stayed if I’d asked. I read it in her eyes.

But Everly Watson needed wings more than I needed breath. And I selfishly needed to ease the pain of watching her go.

ICY RECEPTION

CHAPTER 2

Burke

The cafe's neon open sign blinks in the window. I reach for the door handle, eager to escape the cold. Chuckling voices and laughter spill out onto the sidewalk as I open the door. I stomp snow from my boots before hurrying in, unaware of the chilly reception that awaits.

The hubbub of men's voices talking over one another echoes over the otherwise quiet restaurant. The group of regulars make their early afternoon sojourn here for lunch and camaraderie. Familiarity and routine are the foundation of small-town life.

I catch a familiar scent of perfume that BLTs, fries, and burgers can't mask. My skin prickles beneath the layers of textured waffle knit and thermal flannel shirts. My stomach falters before the freefall overtakes me as soon as I spot the sexiest pair of legs I've ever seen.

Her red leather heels showcase petite ankles and curvy legs. A snug black skirt skims her curves, highlighting every detail of her hips and ass. Long blonde hair cascades down her back, a stark contrast to her silky black blouse.

My fingers tingle, itching to lace through her hair and skim over her pale skin. I tighten my fingers into a fist inside my pockets, pumping and releasing until the tingling subsides. I know her legs, her shape, her scent. It's all uniquely her. The woman who makes my heart beat erratically. The woman who haunts my dreams, leaving me hard and wanting in the middle of the night.

A black and white wheeled suitcase with bright pink flowers stands guard on the floor beside her. A wall warding off seat poachers who make the mistake of taking a seat close to her. Her spine straightens as she squares her shoulders. She

slowly turns her head in my direction. My breath stalls. When I catch sight of her baby blues and pink pout, my heart crashes against my chest, ripping the remaining wind from my lungs.

Everly Watson

We stare at each other for an interminable time, our eyes locked as the past replays in fast forward. Her pouty lips turn downward as her brows pinch together. She remembers everything as clearly as I do. A stabbing pain shoots through my gut as I stride toward her, intent on taking the seat she's claimed as no man's land.

"Don't even think of sitting here, Burke Mackenzie." She slaps a hand on the stool as I grab it. Her death stare wounds me with a thousand knives, each slicing through the pound of flesh and apologies I owe her. "This seat's reserved."

I pause, partially miffed. *Is she with someone? A male someone?* I sidestep her, cutting behind her back to the seat to her left. She twirls on the bar stool, following my movement. Her bottom lip dips, and her scowl deepens. I'm vaguely aware of the eyes staring our way.

"Looks like this one's available." I smirk, taking satisfaction in her ire, though the pain in my heart and gut remains unsettled.

"What are you doing here, Burke?" Everly cuts to the chase. She glances over her shoulder toward the door, heightening my awareness that she's indeed waiting for someone.

"I could ask you the same. You haven't been home for Christmas in..." Too long. She hasn't been home to see her family or friends since she landed that job in New York with the... "You're here for a story."

Everly

"I am. If you will kindly move along so I can finish my business here, I'd appreciate it."

I twirl the stool away from him, hiding the flush of heat creeping up my neck. My heart rockets to the moon and back before sinking low in my belly. This town's full of heartache, humiliation, and bad memories. There's no room for distraction, even if distraction wears a wicked sexy smile and smells like campfire and sandalwood.

Burke roots himself stubbornly to the stool by my side. The unrest in my belly grows with each ticking second. If he's trying to get a rise out of me, he's doing a good job. But years of live TV and uncooperative interview personalities have taught me to keep my irritation in check. Wear a smile and keep everything business as usual. I will not allow Burke to rile me.

"If you're waiting for your holiday tour guide to walk through that door, you missed his grand entrance."

"What do you know about..." I jerk my head to attention and pin him with an icy glare. Rattled and riled, mission accomplished. "You're not..."

He nods his head, and I cringe. I'd still find him attractive if he weren't so damn smug with his devilish grin. Sexy even. But I'm older, wiser, and unwilling to fall for his wily ways. If anything, he's bolstering my confidence. I'm a professional. We're way past young naivety.

"Wanderlust Tours at your service." Burke pulls a business card from his pocket with two fingers and waves it between us. "Mayor Stanton said you'd have a crew with you. They running late?"

He scrutinizes me, cataloging my imperfections and flaws for later use. My skin blisters beneath his gaze. Sweat beads at the nape of my neck. Don't fall for the bait. He can only hurt me again if I let him.

"I came out early to reacquaint myself with the lay of the land." I snatch the end of the card, but he doesn't release it.

We play a game of tug-o-war, neither refusing to budge. His eyes twinkle as he chuckles. I fluster but keep my irritation in check.

“I don’t imagine much has changed around here. It won’t take long to catch up on cookie swaps, ugly sweater contests, and all the quaint holiday activities.” I wobble backward when he jerks on the business card and abruptly lets it go. I right myself on the seat, pleased I got a rise out of him this time. “It isn’t all glitz and glam like New York at Christmastime, but at least I’ll be back home in time for the ball drop in Times Square.”

I up the ante, hoping to ruffle him, but get no joy from my inference of Cranberry Corner’s insignificance. It’s a beautiful place, brimming with holiday spirit. *Why can’t I admit it instead of picking at old scabs?*

FAMILY FIRST

CHAPTER 3

Burke

Everly might prefer the twinkle of New York, but I'll be damned if I allow her to paint Cranberry Corner as some backwoods insignificant little town to her viewers. People are more than neighbors around here. They're family. She can't say that about her hoity-toity glittery city.

"You're halo's tarnished, darlin'. You've forgotten your roots and the good people of this town." My jaw tightens in exasperation. "Your network wants the grand tour, and I'm not about to let them down."

I slide off the bar stool, perturbed by her swanky attitude. She's changed since I last saw her. She isn't the sweet, young, gregarious girl I once knew. The Everly I knew championed the underdog, relished summer hayrides, and was the first to don an elf hat with her last bite of Thanksgiving pie. She had spirit and spunk. I don't know what's changed her, but I'll infuse some good old-fashioned holiday spirit into her if it kills us both.

"There's no time like the present." She slips her phone into her pocket and slides off the stool. She teeters on high heels, standing her ground with unwavering conviction. "Let's get started, shall we? The sooner we get going, the sooner I'll be out of your hair and back home."

She turns to retrieve the lightweight jacket draped over her suitcase handle. Her black skirt stretches across her backside, hugging the heavy swell of her perfect heart-shaped ass. My groin twitches as a razor-sharp pang shoots through my chest. One way or another, Everly gets under my skin.

It doesn't matter if we're laughing and having fun or arguing about something stupid. She's always been the one person who makes me feel alive inside. I was careless with her

before, but now I'm cautious. She's always been the spark to my flame, and today's no different.

"Well?" She grabs the handle of her suitcase, ticking a long red fingernail along the polished metal.

She's miffed. I don't give a rat's ass if it's at me, her assignment, or the world. She needs a lesson in hometown manners, and I don't mind teaching her.

"You haven't been home to see your parents yet, have you?"

"I don't see how that's any business of yours." She juts her chin in defiance.

"We're not going anywhere until you do. It's Christmas, for pity's sake. How long has it been since you've been home?"

What is she avoiding here? Is it me or something else?

She pulls thin, black leather gloves from her designer jacket. "My personal life is none of your business, Burke. You made sure of that a long time ago. Let's not pretend things are any different now."

"Go home, Everly. I'll pick you up in the morning." I run a hand over the back of my neck, regretting saying yes to the mayor's request. I take a few steps toward the door. "And dress appropriately. Something warm with snow boots. For someone who remembers how things were around here, you sure have forgotten a lot."

She rolls up behind me with her suitcase in tow. "Aren't you going to give me a lift? I don't have a car."

I'm partially amused, and though I'd love to give her a ride, she needs a lesson in manners.

"But you do have a phone. Call your dad, Everly."

I exit the cafe without looking back, the same as I did one regrettable night long ago. Only this time, it isn't to give her wings. It's a reminder of why Christmas in Cranberry Corner's such a big deal. That all starts with family and a trip down memory lane.

Everly

My parents' house hasn't changed much since I've been away. Light strands span the length of the eaves in a crooked attempt at a straight line. It isn't like my apartment building in New York. The light crew has crisp holiday light lines down to a science.

"It's so good to see you." Mom crushes me in a soul-shattering hug. My heart pinches as my body molds to hers. She's thinner with more wrinkles, but her smile's as bright as the stars. "If we'd known you were coming..."

She trails off, then brings me in for another long, soulful hug. I've missed this more than I thought. Work keeps me busy. There's little time to think about home when I'm always under multiple deadlines.

"Everything's perfect, Mom. It smells wonderful." I move toward the kitchen, following the heavenly scent of cinnamon, orange, and cranberry. "Are you baking Christmas scones?"

My mouth waters as I recall Mom's melt-in-your-mouth cranberry scones. They were always a special treat she'd whip up for Thanksgiving and Christmas. She wouldn't make them any other time of year, claiming they wouldn't be a special treat anymore if she did.

"It isn't Christmas without them." Her cheery eyes brighten, and the wrinkles appear less like age and more like happiness.

A lump catches in my throat, and a pesky sting behind my eyes causes me to blink.

"How long are you here for?" Dad takes my coat and hangs it in the foyer closet with his.

"Until Christmas, but I'm working, so I don't know how much I'll be around during the day." My heart thumps erratically as my gut twists into knots. "The network's doing a series of Christmas segments featuring Cranberry Corner. They've hired Wanderlust Tours to show the crew and me around."

“You’re in excellent hands with Burke. So much has changed since you were here last. He knows all the ins and outs of the county.” Dad’s voice trails off as he carries my bag upstairs to my old childhood room.

My attention flits to the kitchen, summoned by the oven timer.

What does Burke know anyway? He’s just another moseying flannel shirt with a big truck and hiking boots. And chiseled jaw, cute tight ass, biceps, and...

I wrench my fingers into knots. I’m overwhelmed by the familiar comforts of my parents’ home. The house is as warm and cozy as I remember. A small fire crackles in the corner fireplace. The tree sparkles and shimmers with handmade ornaments hung with care. The room glows, filling me with warmth and a bit of sadness. I’ve missed this...the fullness in my chest.

NOSTALGIA

CHAPTER 4

Everly

I want to stay snuggled under the covers with the comforter pulled up to my chin, but obey the tinkling alarm and haul my butt out of bed. Aromas of bacon, eggs, biscuits, and country gravy waft upstairs, urging me to scrub my face and scrap my morning makeup regime.

My available clothing leaves something to be desired for sluffing through the snow. I pull on leggings, a long-sleeved shirt, and lightweight dress socks. I turn up a pair of old sneakers in the closet and a long-forgotten scarf with my high school's name embroidered on it.

We're not filming anything today since the crew isn't in yet, so why not go au natural? I dot on undereye cream, a healthy dose of moisturizer, and dab my lashes with mascara. I take a step back and scrutinize myself in the full-length mirror attached to the closet door.

My fresh face and ensemble bring back memories of Friday night football games, hay rides, and front yard flag football with friends. *Burke* and friends.

Don't let a little nostalgia break you, Everly.

I grimace. This is no longer my life. I've moved on to bigger and better things. I'm not built for slow. I'll be back home in the concrete jungle in a few days.

I give my reflection a pep talk, reminding myself why I love the city more than Cranberry Corner. Every one of those reasons comes back to one thing or one person. *Burke Mackenzie*. I don't have a single memory in this town without him in it. New York is the only place I can lose myself in the noise and forget him.

I grab a cardigan from my bag and trot down the stairs, my mouth watering as I anticipate sinking my teeth into one of Mom's homemade breakfasts.

"Burke called. He'll be here in ten minutes." Mom fills a plate with food and hands it to me. "Juice is on the table. Best hurry and eat. Put some meat on your bones."

I'm used to breakfast on the run, but it's usually a bagel or muffin and a tall latte with my name scribbled on the side of the cardboard cup. This is not a breakfast one shovels down quickly. It's meant to be savored, enjoyed, and eaten slowly over a cup of Dad's rich dark roast coffee.

I break off a bite of buttery homemade biscuit, which melts in my mouth like a fluffy cloud.

"This is so good, Mom." I manage the words between bites.

The doorbell rings, and I've only seconds left with this plate of deliciousness. I stuff a bite of egg and bacon in my mouth and break off another piece of biscuit before bossy pants, Burke, has a chance to ruin breakfast.

"She's all ready for you. Everly, Burke's here." Dad calls from the foyer. His voice carries throughout the small downstairs as I grab one more bite and wash it down with a hard swallow of orange juice. "I'll grab her coat."

I step into the foyer, still trying to swallow the orange juice knot, when I catch sight of Burke. He's decked head to toe in off-the-rack winter gear, looking like a million bucks from the multiple layers of thermal and flannel to his thick denim-clad thighs. The jeans don't begin to cover his burgeoning masculinity. My lady parts weep in appreciation, scoffing at the pep talk I gave myself earlier. Fine. So, I can look, but that doesn't mean I have to budge on my principles.

Burke Mackenzie is the devil, the evil that can tear my heart apart. His sexy grin and ruthless good looks will not sway my opinion of him. Nope. Not even a little.

His eyes rake over my mismatched outfit. It's more suited to watching movies or roaming city sidewalks incognito on

bad hair days than tromping through snow. I straighten my spine, waiting for the sarcastic dig he'll throw.

“You clean up nice.”

He tips back on his heels with his hands in his pockets. My eyes shift straight to the bulge enclosed behind his zipper. My eyes pop back to his, and a flash of heat flickers in his eyes.

Dad fishes my coat from the closet, unaware of the simmering heat sizzling beneath the surface. *Is it me, or did I see desire in Burke's gaze?*

“Let your mother know when you'll be home.” Dad helps me with my coat. “She'll warm up leftovers for you.”

“Thanks, Dad.” I lift from my toes to kiss his cheek and wrap my arms around his broad shoulders. “I won't be late.”

Burke and I step onto the porch into the chilly morning air. My breath freezes in airy clouds. I pull my coat around my shoulders and wrap the long dangly end of my scarf around my neck.

“Geez, Everly. Is this all you brought for cold and snow?”

My heart sinks. The heat I saw in Burke's eyes was merely a reflection of the fire in mine.

Burke

Everly's face glows without all the television makeup. It's good to see her dressed in comfortable clothes, but she won't last fifteen minutes in the cold dressed like that. No matter how icy the reception between us, I can't let her freeze.

I open the truck door for her and offer a hand to help her up, but she declines.

“I haven't forgotten how to get in a truck.” Her pouty lip quivers as she steps on the running board and hops in. “I've got it—”

I slam the door shut behind her, irritated she's still throwing me the cold shoulder. I tromp around the truck bed

and slide in behind the wheel. We head out of the neighborhood to an adjoining one.

“Where are we going exactly?” She eyes the snow-covered scenery. Her knuckle knocks against the foggy glass. “Wasn’t that an empty lot in high school?”

“Yep. A lot of things have changed since you’ve been gone.” I keep my eyes forward, intent on avoiding distraction. Her vanilla floral scent’s already more distraction than I need. “We’re making a pitstop at my place.”

“Your place? Why?”

“Because you need something warmer to wear,” I growl in irritation. “Don’t worry. I’m not on a mission to kidnap the television network’s precious anchor.”

She shoots me her classic blue-eyed icy stare, then crosses her arms defiantly. She’s not in the city anymore. This is my element. As much as I’d like to spank her off the high horse she’s sitting on, I want her to have fun and remember she’s part of this town’s spirit no matter how far she runs.

We drive the few minutes to my house, and I pull into the driveway. I open the driver’s side door and exit the truck, but she doesn’t budge. I round the front of the truck and catch her staring into nothingness, glassy-eyed and lost in thought.

“You coming?” I open her door, pulling her from her silence.

“Uh, yeah. Distracted is all.”

I offer my hand to help her down, and she surprises me when she takes it. No sideways glance, no eye roll, no sass.

“Thanks.”

She slips her hand in mine, and spine-tingling warmth shoots the length of my arm. Her fingertips could use a bit of heat, but otherwise, she’s soft and forgiving with her touch.

“Watch out for slick spots.”

I’m reluctant to release her hand when she slides off the seat. We’re toe-to-toe, but this time she’s petite without the

high heels. Her bright eyes are doe-like in the morning sun. The pools of blue sparkle against the white winter wonderland that surrounds us. She shivers, reminding me of my mission.

“Let’s get you warm.”

I release her hand, and she stuffs her hands into her jacket pockets. We hurry to the front door and duck inside.

“You’ve done wonders with the place.” She snickers, and I don’t mind the sassy barb.

When Mom and Dad retired and sold the place to me, I did little to change things. The house is much like it was in my teenage years, minus a few odds-and-ends pieces of furniture they took with them in the move.

“It’s not New York chic, but it’s home.” I throw my keys on the side table and head down the hall. “C’mon.”

Everly follows dutifully. Her sneakers squeak against the wood floor behind me. I pause to flip the light on, and she plows into my back. I tense as her pillowy breasts smash against my back, and her fingertips slide over my waist.

“Oh, sorry. Wasn’t paying attention.” She pulls away as I turn to face her. Her cheeks flush pale pink. “This hallway is like a walk down memory lane.”

My dick twitches. I’d remember leading her to my bedroom. If our goals had aligned in the past, I would’ve led her down this path a long time ago. But things don’t always work out the way we’d like them to. She followed her dream, and I followed mine without her in it.

“Sleepovers.” She hesitates, flustered. “With Quinn and Cady. Remember?”

I chuckle. I do remember. Their girlish giggles kept me awake at night, but not because they were too loud. It was knowing sheetrock and studs were the only things separating me from the girl who made my heart race. A girl full of aspirations I couldn’t compete with. She’s as out of reach now as she was then.

“You were a rowdy bunch, hard to ignore, that’s for sure. Let’s get you out of those city-slicker clothes and into proper winter duds.”

I pull her inside my bedroom and rifle through drawers for warmer clothing. I leave a stack of thick sweatshirts and flannel on the bed and shut the door behind me. My dick throbs. Everly Watson’s half-naked in my bedroom, and there’s not a damn thing I can do about it but stew and distract my dick with mathematical equations.

OLD STOMPING GROUNDS

CHAPTER 5

Everly

The oversized sweatshirt smells like burke. I nuzzle my nose into the neck and breathe deeply, savoring the brief moment of bliss. I've missed the familiarity of my surroundings. This house and the memories it holds sting my heart. How long has it been since I reached out to old friends? I've had my head in the clouds for so long, I've forgotten how much I love the simple things, like Burke's shirt, Mom's breakfast, or a simple ride through town.

I grab my scarf from the bed and wrap it around my neck, trapping my curls beneath the knitted threads. Burke waits for me in the living room. His hulking mass takes up a large portion of the sofa we piled on to watch movies as kids. My heart pinches as happy memories come flooding back.

Things weren't always strained between Burke and me. We were young and innocent, traipsing through our school years. My friends and I spent so much time laughing and playing together. We were closer than family. But the days of flag football, wrestling matches, pillow fights, and movie nights huddled beneath blankets are long gone.

"Thanks for the clothes." I nuzzle the sweatshirt around my chin, breathing in another dizzying whiff of him. "They smell like you."

"Yeah? The look suits you." His eyes light on mine and soften. A warm smile perches on his lips, and my heart swoons, tickling and teasing temptation from my body's core. He rises from the sofa, a massive mountain of a man. He clutches a pair of thick woolen socks in one hand and picks up a pair of insulated rubber rain boots with the other. "This isn't real winter gear, but they'll keep your feet dry. The socks will help. You can put them on in the truck."

He fidgets nervously, in a hurry to shuffle us out the door. I've never seen Burke rattled like this before. He's always sure of himself, unwavering in his ability to read a situation and speak his mind. But today, he's different, which leaves me unnerved, too.

He ushers me out the door and steers me to the truck with his hand on my lower back. My body softens beneath his touch as if all the cares of the world have been lifted. This isn't the homecoming I imagined it'd be. It's better, humbling in a way.

We take the old highway to the outskirts of town, then follow a short, paved road toward the old Winslow tree farm.

"This used to be gravel."

The stretch of road is flanked by rustic wooden farm fencing topped with blobs of snow. The landscape beyond the fencing is dotted with rows of Douglas-fir trees for as far as the eye can see.

"Sure did." Burke presses on the gas, briefly revving the engine. He glances my way, grinning like his teenage self. The grin that made me fall in...

My heart pinches again, reminding me of the empty ache that nags at me in the darkest moments. The pain pushes me forward, so I don't look back.

But good memories flood back, too. All our friends piled into the cab and backseat of Burke's truck. The crunch of rocks beneath tires as he gunned the engine, causing Quinn, Cady, and me to shriek with laughter. The exhilaration of freedom, friendship, and being lit with the love of the outdoors.

"The tree farm's bigger than I remember."

"Bet you don't have this in the city." He's teasing, but he's right. I haven't been to a tree farm since the last Christmas I was home. The Christmas I threw myself at Burke, and he walked away.

I lower the window and breathe in the chilly air filled with the scent of pine. If I close my eyes, I can almost taste the

peppermint hot chocolate and sugar cookies Mrs. Winslow made for farm guests.

“The Winslow’s started seeding more ground years ago. The trees from that expansion are only now coming of age for market.” Burke pulls into a large parking lot filled with cars. “It takes six to ten years for a tree to grow to height, depending on if it’s planted from seed or root cuttings.”

“You know a lot about Christmas trees.” Burke’s always loved the outdoors. It’s no wonder he started a tour guide business. “Ever tried growing one?”

“That’s better left to the professionals. I’ll stick with what I know.” He turns off the engine and releases the lock on his seatbelt.

“And what is it you know, Burke Mackenzie?” I tease playfully, a sense of belonging settling in my soul.

“I know Cranberry Corner like the back of my hand. I know Christmas.” He leans toward me, eyes twinkling like a child on Christmas Day. He lifts my chin with his long, sturdy finger. My insides tickle and twist, and my heart rate multiplies. “And I know you, Everly Watson. You love winter, the holidays, and tradition.”

And you, I want to say, but swallow the words, knowing that love is unrequited.

Burke

I shouldn’t touch Everly. When I do, I only want more of what I can’t have. It’s delusional to think jogging her memory of all the good times past will bring her back to Cranberry Corner. Or that helping her fall back in love with our fair town will make her fall in love with me. I blew that chance a long time ago.

But the heart doesn’t rationalize time the way the brain does. It still wants what it wants and beats to its own dream.

I pay the entrance fee and steer Everly to the sizeable outdoor map. The farm’s grown beyond Christmas trees since

Everly's last visit. It's a holiday destination hot spot with activities for every season.

"What would you like to explore first?" I tuck my hands into my back pockets for warmth and to dissuade them from touching her again. I step behind her and peer over her shoulder as others join us in crowding around the map.

Her light perfume permeates the air around her, and I drink it in like a man dying of thirst. I've missed her smile, her laugh, and the distinct scent of her fruity shampoo and cherry lip gloss.

Children crowd around our feet, nibbling frosted sugar cookies and cocoa. Everly steps back, making room for two little girls bundled head to toe in puffy winter gear. Her back bumps into my chest, and I lean into her, crowding her space so there's no longer room to breathe between us. My heart lunges forward, thundering against my chest, attempting to lay claim to the woman I've no business wanting.

Everly shifts and leans her head against my collarbone. Her head turns slightly. She speaks so softly the words are barely a whisper. "You're the expert." Her feathery lashes flutter as her eyes filter from mine, then lower to my lips. "You decide where we start."

I remove my hand from my back pocket, then reach around her to point to a spot on the map. She leans with me, and I slide my other hand over her hip, holding us both steady. It's a ruse to encase her in my arms and nuzzle against her hair.

"Let's start where the magic begins." I draw a circle around Santa's Headquarters before dropping my hand to her shoulder. "Photo op with Santa and his elves. You can sit on his knee and tell him what you want for Christmas."

"I'm not sitting on Santa's lap, Burke." She rolls her head to look at me.

My lips graze the soft skin at her temple. My pulse ticks against my throat, and a burst of heat bubbles inside me. "Then you can sit on mine and tell me everything you want."

It's a can of worms I shouldn't open, but the buzz building in my veins doesn't quiet the naughty thoughts swirling in my head.

She stills. Her lips part, and a squeaky "oh" escapes. I pull her closer at the hip, and my manhood swells inappropriately in the family-friendly environment.

"Careful what you wish for." Her eyes betray the curiosity hidden beneath the surface.

"Careful is overrated."

She flusters as children's laughter peals through the snowy air. "We should go where it's busy, where the families want to be. That's what the crew will film."

I lean forward, cradling her to me as I reach for another area on the map. "Santa's Workshop? It sounds family friendly and safe."

SANTA'S WORKSHOP

CHAPTER 6

Everly

Burke shouldn't have worried so much about me catching cold in the elements. I'm a hot mess with his body pressed close to mine. We were like this in high school. Tempting fate when we touched. A stolen glance here, a brush against his body there, and tickle fights that left me winded and panting for more.

I always want more from Burke. More time, more touching, more everything. But there's always been something between us that creates distance.

"C'mon. Let's go." I pull away from the heat of his body and grab his hand. It isn't wise to attach myself to him, but at least the connection isn't as intimate as my body pressed against the length of his. I need a distraction so I can focus on work instead of Burke's chiseled chin and thick thighs.

We trek through the snow to Santa's outdoor workshop. It's bustling with activity. There's so much to do. Wreath making stations with fresh cut fir branches, baubles and balls to fill with fake snow, and everything Christmassy imaginable to paint, stuff, and hot glue. It's perfect for the show's holiday segment.

"You need a wreath for your front door." I don't recall many decorations inside Burke's house, only twinkling lights trimming the eaves. "And maybe a garland for your mantel."

"I meant to get some decorations up. Kent and Quinn were supposed to be home for the holidays, but plans changed."

I pluck a circular metal frame from the wall, gauging its size for creating a front door wreath. It'll be something fun to do that requires me to keep my hands and body away from Burke's.

“What changed?” I spy a bin of greenery, wire, and checkered ribbon for a bow.

“Work and weather.” He keeps up with me as he fingers beads and pinecones.

“You’d be with them if it weren’t for me.” My stomach flops. I ruined Burke’s Christmas years ago, and now I’m responsible for ruining this one. I lay the metal wreath and trimmings on a work table, abandoning the craft.

His eyes flash to mine, reading the disappointment in my voice. “It’s not like that at all. I’m happy to be here. I’m happy you’re here, Everly.” He rests his hand on mine, tucking the tips of his fingers into my palm. “Quinn’s flight canceled due to weather. Kent’s staying at the Jenkins’. You know how much he loves spending Christmas with them. I’ll catch up with him soon enough.”

“You don’t need to babysit me, Burke. You should be with family.”

“*You* are family.” He jostles my shoulder with his. “At least, I’ve always felt like you were part of my family. We didn’t grow up breaking bones and making mischief together being strangers.”

The familiar pang that niggles at me, pinches my heart. I’m an imposter at work *and* in my relationships. Burke and I are far from strangers but no more than friends. He made that clear forever ago. I should keep the reminder close to my heart and remember why I left this town.

“You’re right,” I concede. “Let’s get this wreath together, so your house doesn’t look like the neighborhood grinch lives there.”

We toil with the wreath and make a few tree ornaments for my parents and the Jenkins’. One of Santa’s elves rings up our purchases and wraps them for delivery to the guest center, leaving us hands-free to explore more of the farm.

“What’s it like in New York?” Burke shoves his hands into his pockets. I loop my arm through his as we wade through the snow to the bakery. “Do you like it there?”

“I love it. The noise, the people, being on the go. It’s exhilarating.” I squeeze his arm, snuggling close to keep warm. His muscles tense, so I back off, but he grasps my arm with his palm and pulls me closer. “It’s everything I’ve ever wanted.”

“Everything?”

Not even close to everything, but I can’t, *won’t* rip the bandage off that old wound.

Burke

I don’t believe her. She wanted *me* once. I thought it was noble to set her free and give her wings. It would have been selfish to hold her back. But now that she’s here, I’m fighting the urge to beg her to stay.

We’re both too stubborn to speak the truth.

“New York has everything a person could want. It’s called The City That Never Sleeps for a reason.” Her voice flattens as she prattles on about landmarks, musicals, and tangible things. “Shopping, five-star dining, street food, museums.”

We reach the bakery, and she ducks inside as I hold the door. Cinnamon, sugar, and chocolate permeate the air. The bakery’s new since Everly left, but the sugar cookies and cocoa are a long-standing tradition at the farm.

“You don’t have this in New York.” I squeeze her to my side as we join the line to order. She can’t deny the comfort of familiarity and tradition.

“We have bakeries, Burke.” She frowns, failing to get my point.

“Not this one. No one does cookies and cocoa like the Winslow’s.”

“I’ll grant you that.” She rests her head on my shoulder, melancholy seeping into her voice. “This place is full of memories.”

Not a winter went by that we didn't pile into my truck and head here for pure Christmas comfort. The farm's always been a magical time during the holidays. It's more than a destination. It's an experience. Even more so now that the Winslow's added seasonal attractions.

But it's never been the same since Everly left.

We grab our mugs of cocoa and cookies and head to the topping bar. I'm a minimalist and add whipped cream. Everly piles hers with mini marshmallows, whipped cream, caramel topping, and toffee bits. I've always admired the fact Everly's never been apologetic about indulging in what she loves, including food and decadent desserts.

It makes sense she'd be just as unapologetic about her life decisions, including leaving Cranberry Corner and me behind. I was out of line teasing her for aspiring to something bigger than what's here. I was out of line, but my ego and fear of losing her got in the way of basic human decency.

We find our table and shed our scarves and jackets while we snack.

"Do you remember the year of the blizzard when you and Quinn talked me into driving out here, insisting Christmas wouldn't be the same if Santa didn't have cookies for Christmas Eve?"

"That was kind of the best Christmas Eve ever." She breaks off a piece of cookie and pops it into her mouth, followed by a sip of cocoa. Whipped cream clings to her upper lip, and I sit fixated as the tip of her tongue swipes it away. "You were so mad when the truck got stuck. One of the Winslow boys had to help dig us out."

"And you and Quinn ate all of the cookies before midnight." I chuckle at the memory.

"We shared." She wads up her napkin and tosses it across the table at me.

Her playful pout amuses me, but it doesn't hide the sadness she's keeping from me.

SKATING ON THIN ICE

CHAPTER 7

Everly

We toss our trash and slip outside into the chilly late afternoon. The snow falls thicker than before, but we trudge on to explore more.

“What about people?” Burke asks without context to clue me in on his thoughts.

“People? What about people?”

“Do you have people in New York?”

“Don’t be ridiculous.” I tighten my grip on Burke’s arm and snicker. “More people live in New York City than this entire state.”

He steps in front of me, halting my stride. His hands brush over my shoulders as he holds me rapt with his hooded eyes. His rosy cheeks and plump lips draw me in, so close and inviting. My insides bubble and fizz, ready to pop like a champagne cork.

Is this it? Will he finally kiss me and put me out of my misery?

“I don’t care about how many people live there, Ev. I care about you.” His eyes sharpen. “Do you have friends, people who care about you like I do? Someone to laugh with and go to museums and art galleries?”

I blink rapidly, hiding the disappointment and stab of sadness that wrenches around my heart. No matter how far I run, I’ll never have what I left behind here. I’ll never have Burke or lifelong friends with memories stretching back to childhood.

“My work schedule doesn’t leave much time for friends or lovers.” My heart beats feverishly in my chest. I flush hot with

embarrassment. I've alienated myself in an effort to heal my heart and I've failed miserably. "I've been busy climbing the ladder, you know. If I can nail this assignment, I'll finally get my big break with a spot on a national desk."

"And then what?"

"I don't know." I'll keep running, hiding my broken heart. I blink back tears, fear halting the words I desperately want to say.

I love you. I've always loved you.

Laughter and music fill the uncomfortable silence between us. I can't stand here, vulnerable and raw. I've got to move. Move beyond exposing myself to the man who didn't want me. The man I can't stop wanting.

My attention wanders over Burke's shoulder. Anywhere but his laser-focused eyes.

People gather in the distance, laughing with music and movement. The welcome distraction gives me time to calm my heart and reclaim a lighter tempo to our conversation. I step to the side, and Burke drops his hands from my shoulders. I grab his hand, urging him to follow, hoping to drop this line of questions.

We trudge through the thick white fluff, dodging wayward snowballs as little ones play in the snow.

"Now, this is something we do have in the city."

I eye the giant pond with its thick sheet of ice. Dozens of people spin and glide over the glassy expanse. A few stragglers struggle to keep standing, but they'll get there. It takes patience and a partner.

"Technically, you don't have a rink like this in the city." Burke shoves his hands into his coat pockets and grumps. "This is Mother Nature's doing."

"Fine." I tug on his sleeve, urging him to follow me. "Ready for me to spin circles around you?"

He's reluctant, but I pout him out and win a circle around the lake for my efforts. We rent skates and take to the ice. It's

been years since I've been on the ice, but it comes back to me like second nature. Burke's not as agile.

"I don't know about this, Everly." He wobbles and grabs my arm.

He's a good sport. I shouldn't snicker, but it's good to see him out of his comfort zone for a change today.

"Hold my hands." I reach out as I glide backward, and he grabs the lifeline I offer. His chilly fingertips slide over the back of my hands and dip under the ribbed wristband of the heavy sweatshirt I've borrowed. I shiver as he clutches my wrists, and though he's holding on for dear life, his touch is tender and gentle against my skin.

"River" by Sarah McLachlan trickles through the overhead speakers, slow and floaty. Like the song, I wish I had a river to skate away on and take Burke with me.

Burke struggles with his skates, knees locked, and eyes on his feet.

"Look at me." He lifts his gaze, and a sudden attack of nerves grabs my vocal cords. I shiver again, gazing deep into his dark, soft eyes. "Keep your eyes on mine. I've got you."

He steadies himself, and I pull him closer, leaning forward to keep us upright. He glides with me as I pull us both along the ice. We make two complete circles around the pond before he gets the hang of it. He grins, and my heart skips a beat, wishing I could lock this moment in time.

He loosens his grip on my wrists and begins tracing lazy circles with his thumbs as we circle the pond. The commotion around us fades. The only thing I can focus on is Burke, his eyes, and the way he touches me. My chest tightens and breathing becomes difficult. I want more. Always more. I tuck my elbows to my sides, tugging him closer.

Frozen breath hangs between us like all the unspoken words we dare not say. Burke's solid jaw tightens as his gaze becomes more intense. Snow clings to his hair and lashes. His brows knit together, pinched, riddled with turmoil. A shiver skirts up my spine, and I shudder.

“You cold?” His thumbs stall on the tender spots he’s so thoroughly tended to.

I shake my head, unwilling to admit that I am. If we leave the ice, I’ll no longer have him in my grasp. I’ll hold onto him until frostbite settles in. He’s all I want. All I ever wanted. I can’t let him go.

He releases my wrists and cold envelops the vacated spot. I fist my fingers into his coat sleeves, unwilling to relinquish my hold. He unzips his coat and holds it open despite my death grip.

“Don’t be stubborn, Ev.” He lowers his voice to a murmur. It melts over me, commanding yet tender. “Keep me warm.”

Burke

She burrows into my chest, and I fold my coat around her. Her arms snake around my back, entwining me in her embrace. She’s all I’ve ever wanted. I’ve longed for her touch for so long. I’m not sure I’ll survive without her when she leaves.

I widen my stance, accommodating her legs between mine. She clings to me as her body shudders. We share more than body heat. The silence between us speaks volumes about what we’ve hidden from each other.

We stand huddled together, motionless on the ice as skaters circle us, enjoying the last snowy bits of daylight. Strands of twinkling lights flicker above, crisscrossing the frozen pond with a magical aura.

I stroke her blonde waves, weaving my fingers through her curls. She tips her chin up. Her glassy eyes water and shine. I press my lips to her forehead as my heart seizes. I can’t give her up again.

“Please don’t cry, Ev.” Her tears rip my heart to shreds. She breaks down every wall and blockage I’ve thrown between us to keep her dreams alive.

“I’m sorry.” She lowers her gaze to my chest and wipes her tears away. “I didn’t mean to...” She frowns. “We should get off the ice.”

She jerks away, and I lose my footing. I pull her close, protecting her body as my foot leaves the ice. My ass hits first. Her legs buckle, and she lands on top of me with a knee just shy of my groin. I groan as she yelps.

I roll so my shoulder buffers the fall instead of my back. Her arms stretch over my head as she tumbles, and I’m buried nose-deep in her soft cleavage, smothered by her ample breasts.

FALLING HARD

CHAPTER 8

Everly

The fall knocks the wind out of me. I lie dazed on top of Burke with my fingertips frozen as I clutch the ice beneath us. He rocks his head back and forth, nuzzling my breasts. His hands grip my ass as he rolls to his side, carrying me with him.

“You okay? Anything broken, bruised?” He hovers over me, cradling his arm between me and the ice.

“Only my pride.” Our legs tangle awkwardly, and it’s all I can do to keep from rubbing myself against his body. His lips hover close to mine, breathing life into my lungs, tickling my senses with his warmth. Onlookers skate nearby, and I’m acutely aware of the scene we’ve caused and the heat bubbling at my core. “We should get off the ice.”

“Right. Yes.” Burke plants his knees on either side of me, straddling my legs. He pushes against the ice to upright himself and offers his hand to help me to my feet. “Steady.”

He wraps an arm around my waist as we make our way to the pond’s edge. This is going to hurt tomorrow. My body and my heart.

“I think I’ve had enough for today. Take me home?” The more time I spend with Burke, the more difficult it is for me to hold myself together. I can’t breathe with him so close.

“Sure.”

We return our skates and pick up the wreath and ornaments we made before trekking to the parking lot. Darkness settles on the farm as the silence weighs heavy between us.

Burke stows our packages in the truck bed compartment, then helps me into the passenger side. My body’s sore, but not as sore as the ache in my heart.

“Ev?” Burke rests his foot on the running board as I reach for the seatbelt.

He rests his hand on my knee, then slowly trails up my thigh. His darkened eyes hold me rapt with their heat and pain. His hand skirts across my legs to my hip. The weight and warmth of his arm rests across my thighs, anchoring me to the seat.

I glide my fingertip across the sharp edge of his jaw and thumb the swell of his cheek. His lashes flutter closed as he exhales a heavy breath. He’s unguarded and raw as he leans into my palm. His features soften, and for a moment, he’s mine.

His broad fingers clutch my hip, dragging me closer to him, closer to the seat’s edge. I cradle his jaw in my palm and nudge him closer. He tips up on the running board, hovering above me, large and powerful, yet entirely at my mercy.

“I can’t be this close to you and not kiss you.” His heavy lids open dizzily slow. My cheeks flush hot as he presses his forehead to mine. “I need you, Ev.”

Our heated breath mingles, heavy and hot. I tip my chin and brush my lips tentatively across his. He draws my lip in with his tongue, suckling and nibbling. My breath hitches as he draws me in, soft and agonizingly slow. I want to taste every inch of him, but he holds me to his lips and tongue, teasing my senses until I’m out of my mind with desire.

His broad hand slips under my sweatshirt to my tummy. He skirts across my skin, feather soft. My center weeps for him, wanting, needing more than a simple touch.

“I’m sorry I ever hurt you, Ev,” he murmurs against my lips as he nibbles. “All I’ve ever wanted is for you to be happy.”

I nod, unable to speak but willing to do anything to keep his mouth and hands on my body. His hand trails up my side, then grazes the heavy swell of my breast. His thumb traces the curve, teasing my nipple to a hardened pebble with the mere promise of more to come.

The dull ache between my legs clouds my thinking. My heart thuds against my chest, beating out a bruising rhythm. I squirm in my seat, unable to find relief, unable to explore him.

His lips trail my jaw, dotting biting kisses to my neck. His teeth rake over my earlobe as he draws my breast from my bra. He draws a lazy circle around my pearled bud, increasing the pressure between my legs.

I whimper my pleasure and swallow the heavy knot that's pounded its way into my throat. He pinches my nipple, and I moan against his shoulder. I snake my hands inside his jacket and claw at his shirt.

We're lost in each other, oblivious to our surroundings. The heat we generate wards off the cold night air. But we both freeze when laughter and footsteps near the truck, breaking the silence.

Burke releases my nipple and shields me from the passersby. He straightens my shirt and smooths my hair as I stare in stunned silence. He's ruffled with wild, dark eyes. He pulls away, but I keep his shirt fisted in my hand.

"Please don't push me away again." I'll beg him if I have to. I have no shame where he's concerned.

"Let's get out of here." He lands one more passionate kiss on my lips, and I grab at him hungrily. I need him more than my next breath. He pulls away from the kiss and hovers over my lips. "I promise to do right by you, Ev. Trust me."

I nod obediently, trapped in his gaze, unable to breathe.

He withdraws from the cab and steps off the running board. The door snaps shut abruptly, jarring me to attention. He cuts across the front of the truck while raking his fingers through his thick hair. His brow wrinkles with worry or regret. Neither one a good sign, but I have his promise. *I do trust him.*

Burke

Everly's quiet and too far away in the passenger seat. I reach for her leg, and she takes my hand, lacing her fingers

through mine. She cradles our entwined fingers with her free hand and stares at them. I grip the wheel and keep my eyes on the road, eager to get home as quickly as possible.

I pull into the driveway, and Everly unbuckles before I've thrown the truck in park. She grabs for the door handle, but I pull her back.

“Whoa, there. Wait for me.” A sheepish grin spreads across her face. I chuckle under my breath and hop out of the cab.

I open her door, and she scoots to the edge of the seat. She slinks down my body, heightening my senses with the friction. My manhood presses against her belly, thickening in anticipation. I kiss her, hungry for her taste and the touch of her skin. We knock into a planted pot and a porch column before slamming into the door. She's as greedy as I am, with her hands tugging at my jacket and inching up my shirt.

The house is dark, illuminated only by the moon and twinkling lights from the eaves. We're a flurry of hands and legs clawing and tearing at clothes as we make a hasty retreat to the bedroom.

She slips her leggings over her hips, revealing a scrap of black lace. I yank the leggings down her legs and walk her backward to the bed. Her knees hit the mattress, and she bounces backward. I sink to my knees, wasting no time with grand gestures and foreplay. She leans back on her elbows, watching me wide-eyed. She sinks her teeth into her bottom lip when I rub my palm over her mound.

My finger skims over the lace as I trace a path between her folds. The lace sticks to her wetness. I'm heady with her scent, eager to taste her and get my fill.

I slide the fabric down her legs, exposing her pretty pink pussy. She's wet and hot, ripe for the taking. I dot her mound with whisper-soft kisses as she squirms beneath me. I slide my tongue between her folds, tasting the nectar my body craves. She moans her appreciation while fisting my hair.

I lap at her greedily, swirling the tip of my tongue around the tiny bundle of nerves cresting her folds. She squeaks her pleasure, lifting her hips to grind into me. I suckle and lick, drinking her in. She takes in a sharp breath as she writhes and moans. She shudders and squirms as her body releases the energy building inside, and I sip every ounce of pleasure she gives me.

She collapses on the bed. I shed my remaining clothes and climb over her limp, satisfied body. Her lashes flutter open, lazy and sleepy. She reaches for me, but I grab her wrist, pinning it to the bed.

“Lie still. Let me love you, Ev.”

I part her legs and settle into the comfortable space between them. My cock twitches, smearing pre-cum along her inner thigh. I fist my cock, giving it a hard squeeze and pump, then guide the tip to her slick center. I scoop my hand under her ass, lifting her hips as I slide inside her with one healthy thrust.

She bucks under me, moaning as she meets my thrust. Her eyes widen as I pull out and slam into her body, again and again, taking what I need from her and giving her everything I have to offer.

Her pussy clenches as she comes hard around my cock. Her face contorts while she rides out her pleasure. My arms shake as I buckle and give way to my own release. My soul shatters into a million pieces as she comes undone with me.

HOMETOWN PRIDE

CHAPTER 9

Everly

We spend the next two days making up for lost time while tiptoeing around the elephant in the room. Burke has his place here, and I'm firmly rooted in New York with my job. We need to keep our clothes on and have a serious conversation, but it's more fun to rip each other's clothing off.

I'm anxious, with doubt gnawing at my gut. I've got what I've always wanted, but as usual, I want more. Maybe I can't be satisfied. Maybe I aspire to have too much. Maybe this is enough for Burke, a fling to get me out of his system.

The film crew arrives before Christmas with my lost luggage in tow. Work cuts short the nagging thoughts swirling in my head, but it doesn't solve what's between Burke and me. I can't do anything about us for now, so I focus on the job and block shots for the film crew.

The network assigned two crew members to film with me. Jerry's our sound guy, and Tim's our camera guy. Neither is happy to be here.

"Damn, Everly. Did you have to pick a location so remote?" Jerry grumbles as we tromp through the snow toward the rows of fresh Christmas trees. "How far are we lugging equipment?"

"I want a shot surrounded by the trees." I sling a backpack over my shoulder, carrying my share of the weight. "What's Christmas without a tree?"

"Easier." Tim slides the zinger in with a huff. "You think we can get this done in a day? The wife wants me back in time for Christmas Eve. We visit the Rockefeller Tree every year. I don't want to miss it."

“Now *that’s* a tree,” Jerry shoots back. “These trees are pathetically scrawny.”

“The older, larger trees are just beyond this area.” Burke glares. “If you want to hike a little further.”

I snicker quietly, keeping the giggle in check. I don’t want to annoy the troops more than they already are.

“The Rockefeller Tree is quite exceptional.” I glance over my shoulder at Burke. “Ever seen it?”

“Nope.” Burke’s not in his usual chipper mood either.

We set up the equipment in an area with fresh snow that hasn’t been trampled. It took some doing to find the perfect spot with ideally shaped trees. Jerry and Tim continue grumbling, quieting only when the camera rolls, and then starting back in on everything that’s wrong with our location and Cranberry Corner in general. They wear on Burke’s patience, but he keeps his temper in check.

We break down the equipment and hike back to the hubbub of activity. Tim gets slammed by a stray snowball. The kid apologizes, but that doesn’t stop Tim from complaining.

“That wouldn’t have happened in New York. The Department of Sanitation’s Johnny-on-the-spot with snow removal.” Tim brushes snow from his collar. “Lucky the equipment bags are waterproof.”

“Does this place have coffee? Something drinkable?” Jerry grouses as we near the bakery.

“Coffee and the best sugar cookies you’ll ever sink your teeth into.” I point to a location away from the bakery door but within view of the camera. “We’ll take a break after we get this shot.”

It takes several tries to deliver my monologue without interruption. I interview visitors to the farm as they leave the bakery with boxed goods and steaming hot chocolate. We wrap the segment and pack up the equipment, then head inside to warm up and grab a bite to eat.

Once inside, Jerry and Tim trade barbs and rate every morsel on their plate, comparing and contrasting them with some of New York City's finest bakeries.

“Okay, fine, I admit Balthazar's is the pinnacle of bakeries, but they've got Mark Tasker running the dessert program. I love Mrs. Winslow's sugar cookies, but one hasn't lived until they've had Balthazar's thin puff-pastry frangipane tarts.” I groan, thinking about them. “I'm making Balthazar's a priority when I get back.”

Burke stews quietly in his chair as Tim picks apart the too weak, too pale, too acidic cup of coffee. I break off a bite of cookie, and it tastes a little flat compared to New York's delicacies. I push the cookie aside for a sip of cocoa with all the trimmings.

“If we hurry and finish here, we can get back quicker than you can say small town, USA.” Jerry scoots his chair back from the table. The metal legs scrape along the floor, sending a nail-biting shiver up my spine. “I'm pretty sure we have better chairs back home, too.”

“At least we have better manners.” Burke snatches his coffee from the table and scoots his chair out with an equally high-pitched screech across the floor. He shoots me an irritated look. “Let me know when you're ready to go. I'll be around.”

He tromps out of the bakery, and my heart sinks. We need to talk.

Burke

I won't jeopardize Everly's job and reputation by calling her film crew out. But I'll be damned if I sit by quietly while they rip Cranberry Corner to shreds. We're not out to win any glamour awards here. We're hardworking folks who live and breathe as a community, not some glitzy, sparkly city where everything's rated on a star system.

Stirring the pot with Everly was a mistake, clear and simple. She's too bright a star to stay here. Always was.

Shining is one of her gifts and the one thing I can't compete with.

Everly and her crew wrap for the day. I drop Jerry and Tim off at the hotel with barely a word spoken between any of us. But as soon as the door closes and they turn their backs to the truck, Everly's temper hits me where I live and breathe.

"I'm heading back with the crew before Christmas Eve." Her tone's as sharp as it was earlier in the week when I found her sitting in the cafe with her designer heels and suitcase.

My gut wrenches, but it's for the best. I'll only get more attached the longer she sticks around. "What about your parents and Christmas?" It galls me that she won't at least stick around for them.

"They'll understand." She stares out the window, avoiding any chance at eye contact. "They know how hard it is for me here."

I take a hard right into a parking lot and slam on the brakes. Everly's the only person on the planet I want to bend over my knee one minute and cradle in my arms the next.

"Help me understand, Ev. Why is it so difficult for you here?" My voice shakes as I fight the urge to yell or beg, anything it takes to keep her or drive her away for good so I can reclaim my heart and soul. "Is the spotlight not big enough for you?"

"Don't be cruel. There's nothing wrong with following a dream." She pins me with her piercing blue eyes. "And don't say I'm too big for my britches or on a high horse. I've worked hard to get where I am."

"And where's that, Ev? You're doing remote work in a city hundreds of miles away. You've separated yourself from family and friends. For what? Fancy pastries, miles of cement, and a tree flown in from God knows where?" I grip the steering wheel to buffer the pain swelling in my heart. "You used to love it here. You went on camera and told your fans this is the most Christmassy place on earth, but you haven't been home to celebrate a single time since you left."

“You broke my heart. I couldn’t stay knowing you didn’t want me, wouldn’t fight to keep me here. What about me isn’t good enough for you?”

My heart sinks to a new low as her eyes well with tears.

“I can’t stay and let you break me again. I won’t recover a second time.”

“I didn’t want part of you, Ev.” I loosen my grip on the wheel and soften my tone. “I needed all of you.”

“But you pushed me away. Told me to follow my silly dreams.”

“I’m a selfish man, Ev, but I couldn’t ask you to choose. I’m not so naive to think I’m bigger than your dreams.” She humbles me with her strength to follow her heart. I couldn’t do it back then. I sure as heck can’t do it now. “I still need you, Ev, but I can’t ask you to choose and stay.”

“Ask me,” she snaps with renewed fire in her eyes. “New York has everything I need, but what I want is right here. *Here, Burke.*”

“You can’t give up your dream.”

“*I’m* not giving up. *You* are.” Tears blister red streaks down her face, smearing the made-for-TV makeup. “I had little girl dreams of being on TV, but the day you moved to Cranberry Corner, my dream became larger than life. You’ve always been my biggest dream, but you treat me with kid gloves. I’m not a little girl anymore, Burke. If you can’t ask for what you want, I guess I’m not important enough to be in your life.”

I’m stunned by her accusation and admission, processing how wrong I got things. She stares back at me, eyes locked to mine, waiting, but the words don’t come. I’m frozen, unable to process the years we’ve lost. My chest aches as my lungs constrict.

She growls her irritation and snatches her backpack from the floor before popping the door open and stepping into the snowy parking lot. She slams the door with enough force to jolt me from my idiotic stupor.

I fling the door open and sprint from the cab.

“Ev, wait. Don’t go. Please don’t go.” She stops in her tracks and slowly turns to face me. Tears stream down her cheeks. I fall to my knees. “I’m asking. I’m begging. Please, Ev. I love you. Please stay.”

She drops her bag and runs the short distance to me. She falls to her knees and throws her arms around me. I fall backward as we tumble together into the cold, wet snow.

“I love you, Burke Mackenzie.” She dots my lips, cheeks, and forehead with kisses. She pulls away with mascara-stained cheeks, grinning ear to ear.

“I finally get the girl of my dreams.” My heart pinches, a stinging reminder of what I could have easily lost.

“I’ve always been yours, my love.”

COOKIES FOR SANTA

CHAPTER 10

Everly

The crew and I shoot a few location spots around town. The big tree downtown, the Festival of Lights winner's window, and a few neighborhoods outfitted eaves to sidewalk with holiday decor. Cranberry Corner's big tree isn't as lavish as the one at Rockefeller Center, but it's steeped with tradition all the same. It's perfect and lovely, just like Cranberry Corner.

Jerry and Tim catch an early flight, happy to leave the quiet for the bustling noise of the city. Small towns aren't for everyone. Once upon a time, I didn't think it was right for me either. But coming home has put things into perspective. I don't have to choose one place over another. I can have the best of both worlds.

Snow falls heavily tonight, perfect for Christmas Eve. I set the table for four while Mom puts the finishing touches on dinner. Dad and Burke carry in more wood for the fire. My childhood home has never felt so warm and cozy as it does tonight. The three people I love most are under one roof. A peaceful hum falls over me as I soak in my family.

We gather around the table, and my parents regale Burke with stories of Christmases past before he and his family moved to town.

“The first Christmas Everly became aware of Santa, she attended a party at a friend's house. Cady Jenkins, I believe. They hired an elf who gave each child a small something or other.”

I nod and smirk, knowing exactly where this is headed. “A red velvet bag with a silver Santa token.”

Mom nods. “Everly talked about Santa for the rest of the day, under the impression that was it. We tried to explain that

Santa would still come in the night, but she was too young to grasp there was more.”

Dad chuckles as he leans back in his chair with arms crossed. “She insisted she didn’t need to leave cookies for Santa because he already came.” Dad pats his belly. “But Santa-ing is hard work. I needed those cookies, so I convinced her if she left Santa cookies and milk, he’d visit.”

“I didn’t believe him.” I squeeze Dad’s shoulder. “But I helped Mom bake cookies and left them out, so Dad would believe.”

“That’s so you.” Burke laughs, enjoying the storytelling. “I have a feeling this has something to do with your obsession with sugar cookies at Christmas.”

“Guilty as charged,” I admit.

“Christmas morning, Everly woke while we were in the kitchen prepping breakfast. She shrieked, ‘He came! He really came. Santa was here.’” Mom places her hand on her chest as she tells the story. “We hurried to the living room to find her standing on the bottom step still excited. Then suddenly, her smile fell, and her eyes grew as big as saucers. She looked at us and whispered, ‘He ate the cookies. Santa found us.’ It’s the moment she first believed in the magic of Christmas. We leave cookies for Santa every year. It’s tradition.” Mom reaches for my hand. “Even the ones you were away. Santa’s cookies brought you back to us this year.”

“Oh, Mom.” I scoot my chair back and wrap my arms around her shoulders. “I’ve missed you,” I whisper as I choke back tears.

She pats the back of my head. I’m so grateful for everything this year.

Burke

After dinner, Everly preps a plate of cookies for Santa. She sneaks a bite of sugar cookie and dabs crumbs from the corners of her mouth. We say our goodbyes for the night, promising to be back bright and early in the morning.

We stop at the Jenkins' home to say hello. Kent's spent the week with them since I've been busy with Everly and the camera crew. Tonight's the first opportunity we've had to connect.

"Thanks for coming with me."

"Thank you for asking me. I wouldn't miss this for the world." She squeezes my hand, and her smile lights up my world.

"I wish Quinn could have made it." Maybe next year.

Everly and I walk hand in hand to the front door. The Christmas tree sparkles in the big window. Christmas carols filter through the open glass door. It's festive and gay, like all the Christmases I remember spending in the Jenkins' home.

Everly cradles a box of sugar cookies in her free hand, ready to sprinkle her special Christmas magic on my family. I give her a quick kiss before we head into the happy chaos. The Jenkins' are as much my family as blood.

One day, I hope Everly will be part of my family, too.

RING IN THE NEW YEAR

EPILOGUE

Everly

“...four...three...two...one!”

The ball drops at midnight in Times Square and three things happen simultaneously. The crowd roars to life louder than before. Fireworks boom overhead, sending flares of color streaking across the night sky. And Burke swoops me into his arms, crushing me to his chest. Of the three, my favorite is ringing in the new year in Burke’s arms with his lips on mine.

“Happy New Year, Ev.”

“Happy New Year, my love.” I cradle his cheeks in my hands and kiss him again, so grateful he’s here for one of the most spectacular events of the season.

The network secured tickets to Bar 54’s annual rooftop New Year’s Eve Gala. We’re dressed to impress in full Black Tie attire. I’ve never seen Burke in formal dress before. He cleans up nice, but I’m partial to his thermal tees and long sleeve flannel button-downs.

“It’s quite the show.” He spins me in his arms, crisscrossing mine over my waist and securing my back to his chest.

“I’m glad you came to see it.” We watch the array of colors bursting overhead, and a peaceful calm settles in my bones.

Watching the ball drop live with the Chrysler Building and lower Manhattan in full view at one of New York City’s swankiest bars is a once-in-a-lifetime experience. It’s likely the last time we’ll experience it in person. But there are plenty of new years full of new beginnings to ring in with the man I love.

The holiday anchor's still on doctor-ordered bedrest for the duration of her pregnancy. She's taking six months' leave once the baby's born, so she'll likely be out for the next nine months. I gave the network my formal resignation, but they countered with an offer I couldn't refuse.

The powers that be loved the remote work I did so much they offered me a one-year trial job. It requires a bit of travel, but I'll be able to relocate back home to Cranberry Corner. It'll be an adjustment, but I can't wait to reconnect with my family and friends. More importantly, Burke and I can build the future we've both dreamed of.

A Bar 54 waitstaff member weaves through the crowd with a tray of champagne. Burke releases my arms and takes two glasses. He circles his arm with mine with champagne flutes raised.

"What do you wish for in the new year, Ev?"

"New beginnings, new chapters, new stories. We'll write the next chapter together." I clink my glass with his, and we sip carefully. "Your turn. What's your wish for the new year?"

"I'm hoping we can *ring* in the new year twice." A broad grin spreads across his beautiful face. His eyes twinkle in the sparkling lights. I fall more in love with him every second we're together.

"I think we'd need plane tickets for that," I muse.

"I've got just the thing."

He relieves me of my champagne and rests the glasses on a nearby table. The champagne bubbles dance in my belly, fizzing and tickling. He reaches into his pocket and pulls out a small envelope. I can't wait to find out where we're going.

I'm not expecting the trip of a lifetime, but Burke rewards me with exactly that. He kneels on the terrace floor and takes my trembling hand. I blink back stinging tears as a hush falls over the crowd around us.

"I've always known you're the only one for me. You breathe life into my world with your smile and kindness, your warm heart and saucy tongue. You deserve all the happiness

this world has to offer. I'd love to experience all of it with you. Will you marry me, Everly Watson?"

A tiny squeaked yes finds its voice. I nod so fiercely, a bobby pin falls loose from my updo. Burke's smile widens. He shakes the envelope's contents into his hand and holds up the delicate gemmed ring.

"I had to make sure you'd say yes before seeing the ring." He chuckles as he slips the ring on my finger. "It's small, but I couldn't wait to ask—"

"It's perfect, Burke." My lip trembles. "*You're* perfect."

"I love you, Ev."

"I love you."

He kisses me sweetly, and for the second time tonight, we ring in a new beginning with cheers, fireworks, and Burke's lips on mine.

Read more about Burke's brother, Kent, and Everly's childhood friend, Cady Jenkins in **CADY**:

<https://www.authorpipercook.com/book-links/cady>

Read more about Jenkins brothers:

Drake, and Hope in **GINGERBREAD and the GUY NEXT DOOR**: <https://www.authorpipercook.com/book-links/gingerbread-and-the-guy-next-door>

Sebastian, and Sophie in **OH FUDGE**:

<https://www.authorpipercook.com/book-links/oh-fudge>

Cranberry Corner is packed full of holiday antics and love matches. Meet all the women and men of **Cranberry Corner**, beginning with Parker: <https://geni.us/CranberryCornerSeries>

Check back for more holiday antics in **Cranberry Corner** when the series resumes in 2023. We'll discover more about Burke's sister, Quinn, and more from the Winslow brothers and their magical holiday farm.

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Gingerbread and the Guy Next Door

Curvy Girl Short & Steamy Small-Town Humorous Holiday Romance

She's a hot mess in the kitchen and in her personal life. He's the guy next door with a reputation. Can they bake up a little holiday magic or is she just his cookie of the week?

Hope

My life's a mess. But things are starting to look up when my catering business finally gets local recognition.

When my oven overheats in the middle of baking cookies for the annual gingerbread house decorating contest, the smokin' hot guy next door offers to help with my goodies.

Drake is a steamy cup of hot cocoa and I'd love to dip my cookie in his cream.

But can I trust my heart to a guy to a notorious reputation and bachelorhood emblazoned across his chest?

Drake

Voted Cranberry Corner's most eligible bachelor is an honor, but it's not who I aspire to be.

Full disclosure: I'm tired of serial dating and one night stands. I want the deluxe relationship package with all the sprinkles and cream filling.

Problem is I've found the red-headed woman of my dreams, but she thinks I'm nothing more than a smooth talking player.

Hope is a curvy swirl of cinnamon and sugar and I'd love to taste her candied ginger center.

Can I convince her I'm ready for a happily ever after, but only
with her?

Warning: When this smooth-talking playboy tumbles head
over heels in love with our sweet as sin curvy baker, he'll do
whatever it takes to win her heart. If you love cinnamon roll
alphas, curvy women, and sticky sweet steamy romance, then
you'll love Hope and Drake.

*If you're a hopeful romantic at heart and love steamy, short,
small-town, swoony romances, then Cranberry Corner is the
place for you. Don your mittens and prepare for a cookie
dough fight that'll give you all the warm, toasty feels.
Guaranteed HEA with no cliffhangers.*

Chapter 1

Hope

I'm running late as usual. If it were any other night of the week, I'd be curled up on my couch in comfy pajamas with a bowl of popcorn. But tonight, Cranberry Corner's City Council announces bid winners for all the significant holiday events. I entered Hot Mess Catering's bid into the candidate pool to bake cookies for the annual gingerbread house decorating contest. It's an enormous task to undertake, but I'll have the entire bakery to myself with Sage gone on holiday.

If I get the bid, that is.

Sage and I share a commercial kitchen. She owns Dessert First, and I'm Hot Mess Catering. The name suits my life to a tee. No matter how hard I try to stay organized, something always happens to turn everything on its head. It would have made more sense for Sage to bid for the holiday baking events, but she and Zane, my brother, are spending Christmas skiing in the Swiss Alps.

I find a parking spot and hurry across the chilly parking lot. The old movie house is the only space large enough for town meetings. When I reach the sign-in table, Parker Knowles has a badge, meeting materials, and my assigned seat number ready for me. Parker's the most organized person I know. Better than any electronic filing system. She knows the exact location of every book and magazine at the Nerdy Bookworm.

"I'm late," I wince, juggling my purse and the materials she hands me.

"They're only a few minutes into the meeting." She offers a cheerful smile, then winks like we're sharing secrets. "It's your lucky day. You missed Mayor Stanton's introduction. He goes on forever."

She drags out that last word, and I snicker, recalling his long speeches. I've been to more than one ribbon-cutting ceremony in the previous year to know how he drones on.

“Thanks.” I take a quick peek at my seating assignment and hurry into the meeting. The theater is dark with a holiday slide presentation playing on the big screen. The aisle’s numbers are backlit, making it easy to find my row. My seat is three rows from the front, middle aisle, two seats in. At least I’ll only have to drag my ass across one person to get to my seat.

“Excuse me.”

I touch the arm of the gentleman sitting in the aisle seat and feel like I’ve been zapped by a lightning bolt. That’s a lot of static electricity for a walk down the aisle. I recognize him as soon as he glances up at me with a cocky grin plastered across his face.

It’s my serial dating next-door neighbor, Drake Jenkins, with a penchant for tall blondes, not curvy redheads like me.

Drake

I stand so Hope can shimmy past me to her seat. I’d much rather pull her onto my lap, but that would only elicit stares and get me a slap in the face and possible handcuffs. The theater is dark, but there’s no hiding the curves of her delectable body. When her curvy ass brushes against my crotch, it’s all I can do to keep my hands to myself.

Hope moved in next door a few months ago. She was friendly at first, waving when we’d pass in the driveway. She even brought me cookies and potpies that were leftover from a few of her catering gigs. It’s calloused of me, but I’m so jaded I figured Hope had an agenda. Snag a date and have lifetime bragging rights with the town playboy. Yeah, my ego’s been overinflated, and it finally burst. I’m a man like any other, and sometimes I need to be hit over the head with a frying pan to appreciate what’s staring me in the face.

But now she’s avoiding me. When we bump into each other, she hurries the conversation like she’s trying to make a quick getaway. That’s when this whole bachelor thing started weighing on me. It doesn’t matter if I busy myself with dates. My life is headed for a dead-end, and all I have to show for it is this lousy bachelor title.

I'm thirty-six and the most eligible bachelor in Cranberry Corner. At least that's what I'm told. It's why I'm here tonight instead of throwing back beers with the guys. I don't know who votes for these things, but I'm beginning to think karma has a hand in it. I've played the field and broken hearts that didn't deserve to be hurt, but I was honest from the start with every woman who fell in love and then wept when I wasn't ready for "I do."

But now I *am* ready and can't shake the love 'em and leave 'em reputation. One-night stands don't appeal to me anymore. I want the real deal. The deluxe relationship package with all the bells and whistles. I want someone who can love me, faults and all. Someone who wants to settle down, have kids and live out our lives until we're old, gray, and I'm still chasing her through the house with my walker or cane. I want real love. Lasting love. And I want it now before I'm too old to play catch with my son or make my daughter's prom date squirm under my watchful eye.

It's an extensive wish list, but it's Christmas, and I'm hoping for some old-fashioned holiday magic.

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