

first

# Noelle

HOLIDAY HOTTIES

ALLY CREW  
BRYNN HALE

# FIRST NOELLE

HOLIDAY HOTTIES 4

ALLY CREW  
BRYNN HALE

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Thank you to my writing cohort, without you this wouldn't be possible.

I'd love to hear from you. Seriously.

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# CONTENTS

## First Noelle by Ally Crew and Brynn Hale

1. Noelle
2. Ramsey
3. Noelle
4. Ramsey
5. Noelle
6. Ramsey
7. Noelle
8. Ramsey
9. Noelle

## Epilogue

## Also by Ally Crew and Brynn

## Hale About the Author

FIRST NOELLE BY ALLY CREW AND  
BRYNN HALE

♥After walking in on her boyfriend having a holiday treat, she's ready for something different. Ramsey's never done a one-night stand and afterwards he knows why. Will one-night be enough, or will her return to Ribbon Cove end in coming back home for good? ♥

**Noelle**

After catching my boyfriend with another woman, I needed to get away and a girls' weekend sounded just perfect .

At a bar in downtown Ribbon Cove, I watch a man walk in, and I have to know him better.

He's tall, dark, and more hunky and handsome than one man should be allowed to be. And he makes a cocktail with a flair only reserved for gods and magicians.

The magic of a one-night stand lingers with me, and as much as I fight myself, it's clear.

I'm scared to make another mistake. But Ramsey's no mistake —he's just too perfect.

**Ramsey**

Noelle was in my bar before and I was in bartender mode, but not tonight. Tonight, I'm off the clock.

When I tell her my past of loss and being alone, she understands and I can see something new in her eyes that I've been missing.

Her mahogany eyes, light and airy laugh, and sparkling smile fill my soul, but I need more than a one-night stand.

A surprise guest helps me understand the truth of why she's fighting what we have.

I want a family but I need Noelle, but will her fears keep us from being a forever-night stand?

*Find out how Belle, Wynter, Candy, Noelle, and Holly discover the true meaning of Christmas and the best present they'll ever received.*

*Holiday Hotties is a sweet & steamy instalove series of five curvy, strong women who will find their happily ever after with the man of their dreams—sugar plum dreams, that is.*

## NOELLE

You know what can make a good woman doubt herself? A man. At least that's what I thought since Jeremy ruined our good thing and a good woman's confidence. *Mine*. We had been together for three years. Naively, this year I was expecting a ring, not panties that weren't mine under the mistletoe. So I was more than thankful for the distraction to join my friends back in Ribbon Cove for the holidays. All it took was for Holly's chat bubble to pop up on my phone for me to exuberantly text back.

**Noelle: Yes, whatever your idea is...YES! Get me the hell out of this city, girl.**

But in my excitement, I may have agreed too quickly. The destination chosen was our hometown. Coming back was hard for me, not for any negative people lingering, but for the lack of people here to draw me back. Before high school finished my parents packed up the family and moved to Georgia, right around Christmas my senior year.

Devastated and too committed to my life in Colorado, I stayed behind to finish out my last year. I stayed with Holly and her family while my family went on without me. Her parents appreciated me as a straight A student to anchor Holly's wild-child ways down, and I was appreciative of the whole Thomas family for allowing me into their home. Holly quickly learned what it was like to have a sister. As grateful as I was, still am, it left me with a disconnect for home.

Now here I am celebrating the most wonderful time of year with my closest friends. I've already seen life



transformations in them in the short time together, namely Belle and Wynter, and I expect with the way Candy keeps giving Mr. Tall-Cute-And-Handsome across the room googly eyes, she's next. *The lucky ducks. I know how love feels—or at least I thought I did.*

I give Candy a knowing smirk before turning my eyes on Belle, opening her gift during our exchange at the local new pub- Library Bar. My smirk is still in place as she pulls the glittery tissue paper from the bag. Her face turns beat red and her eyes dart to me, my wide grin confirming who the gift had come from.

“You devil,” Belle hisses softly, pulling out a skimpy Santa's Helper outfit from the bag. It's red with white trim and hardly anything in way of coverage, especially with her beautiful and bountiful curves. “Where did you even find this in town?!”

“Oh, honey, I bought that before I came to Ribbon Cove.” I chuckle and bring my martini glass to my lips, slipping an olive past my lips—always extra olives. In truth, the outfit originally was to put a bow around me and be a surprise under the tree for Jeremy but since we're no longer together and Belle and I have similar figures, I knew it would do the bookworm some good and help her come out of her shell with her new beau, Cohen.

While I'm downing the martini like it's water, my eyes catch something of interest for me in the Library Bar. The door jingles merrily each time it's opened with people coming and going. *Yes, with Jingle Bells.* The noise similar to that of the message notification for work; the jingle peaks my interest naturally.

This time though I'm greeted with more than just a reminder of work. It's much better than that. It's over six feet of tall, dark, and huge smile attention grabbing man. “Goodness gracious” as my nana would say. The man is way past handsome and into unreal territory.

After removing his orange beanie, he rubs the snow off the top of his head, hair nearly a buzz cut to his scalp but kept

sharp with clean edges. His eyes are so dark they stand out even in the bar's soft glow atmosphere. They absorb all the light in the room and the moodiness suits them, with a sadness to the turn of his eyes that makes me wonder. But he smiles with ease even through the melancholy.

He greets the bartender warmly, helping himself to a piece of bar top, opting out of sitting, giving me the best view of how well those jeans are fitting. Wrapping around each of his tight assets. I sip my martini, those are some fine, fine assets.

He casually reaches over the bar to behind the counter, fishing a beer out of a cooler filled with ice. I know he works there from seeing him behind the bar the other night. I attempted to flirt then and rile him up, wondering if a one-night stand might just get me over the hump of my own poor attitude. But my advances seemed to have gone unnoticed or he wasn't interested. And I went back to the bed and breakfast with Wynter pouting that night but tonight I have a lot more liquor in me and my give-a-crap-what-others-think filter is either missing or severely frayed.

"Careful, Noelle, stare any harder you might catch his pants on fire," Holly teases, taking a seat next to Belle in the reserved booth. She examines the Christmas-themed lingerie in hand with interest.

"I'm going to do more than stare." Personally, I believe I'm an extraverted-introvert. I'm definitely the second most outgoing of our friend group. Holly is by far the most outspoken, but I hold my own in the world of the bold and brazen. I can go out and have a good time *and* I also liked my alone time.

*I didn't become a computer programmer for no reason. Just me and the language, a connection some people don't get with their job, but I love the solace of working alone.*

I polish off my martini, releasing a quick puff of air to shake off the strong flavor of the minor chug and make my way to the bar. There's a convenient stool open up next to TDH—tall, dark, and handsome and I settle into it. Patiently

waiting to get the bartender's attention, in no rush at all to leave the man beside me.

"Hey Kyle," his voice is as deep and dark as his skin color. It positively vibrates through my whole body.

I lick my lips as the sound makes my mouth water. *I wonder what his morning voice is like. Or when he's heated, I imagine with a giggle.*

The bartender without pausing a second gives the man his undivided attention.

"I need a martini, extra dirty...like *really* dirty, with six olives."

I blink, turning my head to see those dark eyes on me as he's speaking.

"Put it on my tab," he adds. Kyle nods as he pops the lids off a few beers to hand to patrons before he starts to work on my drink.

"Are you buying me a drink?" I ask a little caught off guard, almost sliding off my seat with internal giddiness.

"It's the least I could do for not giving you the attention you deserve the other night." His smile though genuine still doesn't meet his eyes.

"You remember me?" I say with a little surprise.

"How could I forget..." His dark eyes drift over me slowly. "I don't like to flirt when I'm behind the bar. I like to give my patrons the equal attention they're paying for."

"I understand. I don't flirt at work either." My work is mostly a computer screen though—emails, messages, and the occasional phone call. I only go into an office for corporate events or special occasions. Otherwise, I'm exclusively a remote worker and up until walking into our apartment last week, working from home felt comfortable. "Not working tonight then?"

"Even the owner gets a night off every now and then." He spins his high-backed stool to look out on his accomplishment. He tucks his hands into his pockets and leans back against the

bar, head tilted to keep his gaze on me. He really is giving me his undivided attention.

And a part of me is too attentive, too interested, too hopeful next to him.

## RAMSEY

“Owner?” she asks with raised eyebrows. Her surprise is cute. She probably thought I was only a bartender the other night. It happens more often than not and in this town some wish I wasn’t the owner.

Hell, it’d been amateur night with her around. I broke two martini glasses while trying to focus and work. I’m a hard worker, my job and my bar have always come first, but there hasn’t been much to focus on other than that. Ever since I lost my parents in close succession to quick illnesses, I hopped in my car and never looked back at Ohio.

I drove for 24 hours straight before I stumbled into this little town in Colorado. I didn’t believe in magic before that moment, but in this quaint cove in the mountains, I felt connected to something bigger. And I’m not usually one for believing in that “woo-woo” and “mystic” drivel, but this time I admitted there was something that felt different.

I got a job dishwashing in a tiny kitchen at the only bar in town, The Watering Hole. It was a job that didn’t come close to using my skills, but the monotony gave me time to get over my losses and see what was really important. I quickly moved up in the ranks as they realized what talents I had and became head bartender in less than a year, but it wasn’t enough for me.

I needed more distraction, more focus, more room to grow. So I sunk my entire life savings into buying the small, vacant city jail and turning it into the Library Bar it is today, all with the sweat on my brow and callouses on my hands.

Unfortunately, leaving The Watering Hole wasn't as smooth as I'd have liked. A few locals followed me to my place of business and there's a tension between my bar and theirs. Now I'm feeling a lot less welcome in the town that enchanted me from the get-go.

But I was honest when I said I don't flirt while behind the bar, and believe me, she tested that rule. When her friend Wynter called into book a booth a few days ago, I knew I'd be taking the night off. I'm happy to see her. And equally happy I'm not behind the repurposed countertop. Tonight, I'm a semi-regular patron. I drink for free but I'm not making the decisions tonight. My staff knows if I'm on that side, I'm boss, but on this side, I'm just a patron. And as a patron flirting is completely allowed and I'll be damned if I'm not giving this sparkling woman my undivided attention.

I pull my hand out of my pocket to offer it to her. I warmed them up just for this moment. "Ramsey Hanneman, owner of the Library Bar."

She takes me hand into hers, incredibly soft, nails neatly trimmed and painted a dark, mysterious red, the same color of her full lips.

"Noelle Travers," she introduces herself, unable to contain that radiant smile. Her eyes are the color of mahogany and they crinkle just slightly at the corner for her exuberant smile. She lets go of my hand after a long moment and brushes her bangs aside, moving her pixie-cut hair out of her eyes. "Quite the place you've built here, Ramsey," she praises looking around my bar, but I'm keeping my eyes on her, I know what my bar looks like.

It isn't big, hardly needs to be for the size of the tiny town. And it's packed on game days with a max of about forty people but still comfortably. I prefer the small and intimate atmosphere on holidays nights like this. Ones where I can see her friends off in the corner doing a gift exchange and having a good time and yet the couple in the intimate small booth in the back, rekindling a flame they may have let simmer all year.

I also made sure it was a completely different vibe from the Watering Hole. Their rustic and cowboy theme suited them well. Whereas I went for a classic bookstore blends with whiskey and rye feeling. The tension between the bars still gets to me. I wanted things to be smooth, easy. Even in this small town there are plenty of folks wanting different things to give both bars enough customers.

“Thank you, I worked hard to get this place where it is. I still see upgrades I can do here and there, but it’s a big part of me.” I try to stay humble but I like impressing her. There’s a fine line where my bar stops and I start. I am this place. I am my success. And some days I really wonder if that’s all I am.

But I can see she knows who she is. The leather skirt with over the knee boots, and a blouse that plumes at her shoulders but clings to her petite voluptuous frame, a sophisticatedly dressed city girl. Impressing a woman with developed and expensive taste is an achievement in my book. I, on the other hand, wear a thermal with thankfuly, no holes in it, a worn out leather jacket—it was my father’s from days long ago, and dark khakis. Simple and effective during these cold winter nights. But when I worked, I wore a flannel covering a simple white T-shirt, well-loved jeans, and a towel tossed over my shoulder, even when in the office crunching numbers and taking inventory. I still had a uniform that said boss versus patron.

“This was a jail the last time I was home,” she shares with me, turning in her seat as her fresh and filthy martini is set in front of her. She smiles at Kyle and thanks him, her good nature infectious as Kyle can’t help but smile back. I feel a slight blip of jealousy, a sensation of never wanting to share this woman with another man.

“Ah, home for the holidays?” I ask.

She purses her lips in thought, looking back at her friends opening gifts. “A vacation away from the city. Just a few nights with my girlfriends from high school.” She takes a long drink and pops two olives in her mouth, chewing delicately and I wonder how salty her lips would taste at this moment.

Those lips are a siren call for me, that red blaring a woman who takes charge and doesn't mind being the center of attention—at least once in a while. Her eyes shine a similar hue of red but richer like chocolate covered cherries. And I quickly wonder if she tastes like cherries under the salt of that martini, and Kyle knows how to make a martini—I taught him after all.

“Just a short time back then?” I ask, a little disappointed at the news. I'm not a fling guy. They aren't good distractions, and someone always comes away feeling less than they did when they went in, at least in my past. They aren't investments in a future.

But looking Noelle over, I consider that one night would be an investment in itself.

“Leaving the day after Christmas,” she says with a sigh.

“I guess that means I need to take a little time off,” I admit.

“Why's that?” she inquires innocently, but her smile tells me she already knows why.

“If I've only got until Christmas to see you, I need as much time as I can get,” I breathe out and she breathes me in.



## NOELLE

The man knows how to get to the point. Flirting aside, it's nice to experience the direct honesty in him. I'm gambling with my heart and maybe a little virtue as well. The first should scare me, the second is an ephemeral reflection.

I'm not much of a one-night-stand girl, in fact I don't think I've ever had one. Before Jeremy any dates started with drinks and ended with goodbyes and after him, not a soul sparked my interest...until Ramsey.

*But can I do the deed and not feel the need?* I would be going back to the city, to an empty apartment. Could I leave all thoughts and feelings of him—us—behind in Ribbon Cove? In some ways, I could see it being enough to give me closure with this town and a reason not to ever come back.

But with my friends finding true love on this trip, it felt a bit wrong and wicked to bag a guy for one night. They would be here for the foreseeable future with their now significant others. And in comfort, I know whatever I decide, my girls won't judge me.

*And to hell with anyone else's thoughts of me.*

When I'd start to get self-conscious, my grandmother used to say, "People are going to talk about you, whether you're doing good or bad. Just let them and do what's best for you." What feels best for me right now is this man and me doing a horizontal tango until the sun cracks the shades.

I shouldn't be so hard on myself. I deserve a break, a real break, and not the kind my friends could give me. I can seize a

moment and make it mine. I just have to be careful not to want to make *him* mine, too. And that's the trick.

When I don't answer quickly he clears his throat. "I mean, I understand if there's family or things you have to do while here," he adds.

I can see the doubt in his eyes as he backtracks a little.

"No. My family's gone," I murmur, running my finger over the rim of my glass slowly, hoping for a low purring note but only getting a tight squeak.

"Noelle, I'm so sorry," he purrs empathetically, taking my other hand into his. His hands are large with callouses indicating hard work and dedication as they scrape across my palm and he envelopes mine warmly. I blink slow and look up at him. "I've too...I know what that feels like. I lost my family too."

*Oh no, he thinks I meant dead.*

I feel the moment too late, and way too intimate to correct him. I bite my lip, feeling my eyes water. This poor sweet man's soul is exposed. He's broken in a way that doesn't heal easily or maybe ever. No wonder his eyes are so sad and his smile so big. Camouflage for ache and hurt comes in many ways. I know this.

I can't bring myself to say anything and we hold hands for a while, sipping our drinks in the comfort of one another.

"Let me make you a drink," he offers me, pushing off the bar and releasing my hand slowly.

"I thought you said this was your night off?" I sip at the remnants of my martini and nibble on remaining olives.

"It absolutely is and as owner I'm going to flex a little." He grins and slips his jacket off and hangs it on the back of my barstool, fingers brushing my shoulders briefly.

*Touch me again.* Goosebumps crackle all over my skin. Chemistry was a tough subject in high school, but right now I feel like a giddy school girl working a different kind of

chemistry. One with hopefully an exceedingly thorough final exam.

“Flex away,” I agree with a final sip, sliding my empty sparkling glass across the bar. “But I must warn you, don’t be disappointed when I don’t like it. I drink *only* martinis when it comes to liquor—”

“Extra dirty,” he cuts me off, winking. “I know, Noelle.” My name rolls off his tongue, the effect of it just as bad as his touch. “I think you’ll change your mind though. Change can be good.”

I watch him work behind the bar quickly, starting with two coupe martini stems with ice water in them to chill the glass. He cuts two orange slices into a twisted swirl of a flower like structure and drops each one into the now empty glass. Then pouring a stirred—not shaken—concoction into the hazy glass, he does it with a long flourished drip of the final golden dewdrops. He slides them onto the bar and with a raised finger asks me to wait, hustling back over the bar side to join me as a patron.

I chuckle at his youthful vitality and the warmth of his excitement settles deep into my stomach. He’s probably older than I’m imagining and at my twenty-six, I’d give him a good decade of wisdom, even if he looks a lot younger.

“What is it?” I sniff the light amber hued liquid.

“Promise to try it first and then I’ll tell you?” he asks, eager to please me and potentially to tease me.

He takes his drink in hand and we cheers. A soft clink and he hesitates, the coupe glass perched at his lips, but he’s watching me carefully, waiting for me to take the first taste.

*What else would he let me do first?*

I take a thoughtful sip from my mystery drink. The flavors roll complex and bold across my palate. A different kind of punch that reminds me of my dirty, dry martini. It’s herbal, floral...botanical with the orange slice with a nice sharp tang.

“You’re only supposed to do a small piece of orange peel,” he says after finally taking a sip of his own drink. “But then it

wouldn't be *extra* dirty.”

“Tastes extra *clean* to me,” I say. “And definitely tastes like change is a good thing.”

“That’s a good way to put it. I’m going to use this method when people want a bolder orange zest.” The lift in his voice tells me he’s excited that I don’t hate it.

“It’s good,” I admit, taking another drink, smiling. “Now tell me what it is.

“Bijou,” he says with a grin.

“Boujee?” I ask, causing us both to pause.

“No, not that. Bijou,” he repeats, a remainder of chuckle in his voice. “Gin, Green Chartreuse, Sweet Vermouth, and Orange Bitters. It’s three jewel toned liquors. White for diamonds, green for emeralds, and vermouth for rubies.”

“So a jewel studded drink?” *Made by a stud.*

“Precisely.”

We both take a quiet sip and enjoy the warmth of one another’s company and the cool drink that feeds me life when I should be winding down.

“Stick around after close?” he asks me.

“Thought you’d never ask,” I find myself saying with ease.

Spending more time with him doesn’t sound like a bad plan at this moment. One-night stand worries or not, I want to be around him more than anyone else in this bar.

*And that should probably worry me.*

## RAMSEY

She feels like life expanded to the nth degree. Her laugh flows easy and her humor ricochets into my chest with warm happiness. Her drink taste is fixed, and she returns to her dirty martinis, a strong minded woman for sure.

I have to remind myself throughout our conversation of how little time she has in town and not to get attached. But every time I look at her, I feel myself falling down the rabbit hole into her warm gaze.

It's closing time before we know it, her friends stopping by and offering her a ride back to the inn they are staying at. I wave and introduce myself, only knowing Cohen personally. Small businesses have a lot in common, and we're both transplants to town. And my bar is a supplier for the alcohol he keeps at his inn, as well as creation of batch-style craft cocktails for events that he holds there. We try to support each other when we can.

I feel concern briefly, wondering if she would change her mind and leave with her friends. But she remains planted in her seat though, glancing between me and a flushed Belle under Cohen's arms. Belle gives me the once over, her friend-protection vibes like a laser beam.

"Okay, but call us if you need anything," Belle demands and Noelle agrees with a tug on Noelle's arm, before saying something in her ear.

Noelle rolls her eyes as she turns back to her final drink. "I will. Promise." She wiggles in her seat, her cheeks plumper

and singed with a blush as her friends leave and she remains.

The other patrons shuffle out as last call hits and the lights brighten slightly to remove the all too comfortable atmosphere. I make Noelle another drink to sip on while I help close up shop.

I'm not working but it feels wrong to have one bartender work while I drink with a beautiful woman. I'm the owner, not a wealthy man about town. Even if my bar does well, it doesn't stop me from remembering where I came from and how hard I worked.

"Head home, Kyle," I say as he finishes counting off his tips and refreshing the stock. "I'll lock up."

Kyle eyes the remaining single guest and smiles. I can tell he's holding back a sarcastic remark. He's one of my younger bartenders, newly twenty-one but all too good at bartending, just a bit mouthy from his youthfulness.

"Whatever you say, bossman." He pockets his tips and grabs his coat. "Merry Christmas," he tells Noelle as he passes her on the way out.

"Night, Kyle," she says with a honeyed sigh. He's easy on the eyes, but her gaze never strays from me.

We're alone and the remaining queue of music in the jukebox quiets the background ambiance and the silence feels a little stifling. I'm about to invite her over to my place just to hear something when her eyes close and she hums softly, fingers tracing up and down the stem of the glass. I don't disturb her and I rest my elbows on the counter as she sings softly.

She relaxes into the groove and I unabashedly stare, desiring to see her that content and at peace in my arms. When the song ends she opens her eyes slowly and smiles at me. I can't help but want to see her smile like that forever.

"I love that song," she confides in me, her shoulders relaxing. "My grandma sang it to me growing up."

I slide out from the bar, turning off lights, leaving only a few soft glowing sconces on the wall by the window front.

Moving in closer, I use the height of the barstool to my advantage, taking her by her hips and lifting her to settle her on the bar. She's caught off guard and gentle giggles echo the quiet room. She's amused by me and swats my arm playfully.

But I'm not amused, I'm dead serious. "There, now I can gaze into those amazing eyes without having to squat," I tease.

"That all you want to do?" she asks softly as her fingers thread behind my neck. And I feel like we're both holding our breath.

"No," I tell her, leaning in. Our breaths mingle in a tight swirl between us, each brush pulling us closer as they tangle in threads of hope.

*Crack. Crack. Crack.* A loud knocking on the front door. We both jump, parting quickly. There's laughter outside and more door banging.

"We're closed!" I shout loudly, nearly growling at the disruption. More laughter and the small, likely drunk, party moves on. "Fuckin' rude," I mutter under my breath. I swing my attention back to Noelle as she slides off the counter, giggling and grabbing her coat. "And where are you off to?"

"As romantic as this bar is, I'd much rather be in a more comfortable setting." She pulls her purse to the crook of her arm and looks at me expectantly. "Your place?"

My body heats to an inferno imagining just what might happen there.

"Of course, Miss." I rub the top of my head a few times before pulling the beanie on and slide on my winter coat over my leather jacket and grab the door for her. I lock up behind us and I lead the way toward my place. She keeps pace beside me despite my long strides.

Sometime during our walk football is mentioned and she points to my hat.

"I can't believe you like live in Colorado and like the Cincinnati Bengals," she shakes her head in dismay at me.

I'm both indignant and astonished at her playful bullying.

“I’m not from here,” I defend. “Ohio has my heart and thus my team loyalty. I suppose you’re a Broncos fan?”

“I bleed orange and blue, baby,” she tells me, jumping ahead of me. She walks backwards in those fantastic heeled boots while teasing me. I can’t help but be impressed at her dexterity and smooth moves. Plus, it lets me stare at her heart shaped face, making me want to be closer to her and those fantastic lips.

I raise my eyebrows. “You should get that checked out. Last doctor I spoke to said blood should be *red*.”

She laughs and stops in her tracks suddenly, forcing a brake-check on me. I fail it miserably.

I bump into her and I can steady myself but she’s not able to, boots slipping out from beneath her. Damn icy edges. I grab for her, not wanting her to crack her head open on the hard sidewalk. I manage to keep her from falling but at the sacrifice of my own solid ground.

My arms tightly around her, we roll into the snow-filled embankment to catch ourselves. It’s the coldest version of a roll in the hay and I’m not hating it. We chuckle through the near death experience and the fresh fallen snow sticks to every inch of us. Brushing the fluff off, I show more concern for her outfit than she does. Looming over her, I still as she lays on her back in the snow, staring up at me with those big eye, licking her lips until they sparkle as much as the snow.

“Snow angel,” I say softly and she exhales slowly.

I don’t let the moment pass us this time, leaning in and kissing her there in the festive snow. Our breaths are warm and her lips are supple, just like the rest of her. I press into her, wanting to feel more of that soft form. The pressure evokes an approving moan from her just as I pull back from the kiss.

“Let’s get you out of the snow and warmed up, yeah?” I suggest, reluctantly getting to my feet and helping her to hers. I could’ve stayed tangled up with her in the snow forever...if it wasn’t freezing out and the snow dampening our clothes quickly.



We're not far from my home and we link arms to remain steady the rest of the way. I let us in, quickly shedding frozen damp jackets at the door. I let her busy herself with taking off her long boots and light my gas fireplace, and crank the heat up. No one's catching a cold in this house.

Returning to the entrance, I find her trying to get the snow off her. I help brush the frost from her hair and bring her in close and she shivers long and deep.

"You're freezing."

"It's my clothes," she laughs. "They're casualties of the roll in the snow." She shudders again and tries to shake the chilly water from her attire.

"You can borrow something, and we can hang your clothes to dry."

She chews on her lip like she's chewing on her response and nods slowly. "We'll see if you've got something in my size."

"Welcome to Boutique de Ramsey," I jest as I disappear into my bedroom. I find a flannel and some loose sweats and bring them to her, showing her to the guest bedroom. "I'll make some hottie toddies."

I leave her to change, to get out of my own wet clothes and start a pot of boiling water.

*But it's not the only thing that's boiling, and I wonder if the steam is going to get hot and thick in here.*

## NOELLE

I struggle to button the third to top button of the flannel he gave me, but otherwise his loaned clothes fit me. The pants are snug but ultra-warm. Before I leave the bathroom I inhale deeply, I can smell his cologne—amber and rye. Even the man's laundry makes me want him more.

He welcomes me with a hot drink in only gray sweatpants. I'm not sure where to look first, the shirtless torso or at the distinct bulge at the front making its presence known.

*I'm definitely warmer already.*

“Thank you,” I manage before taking a piping hot sip. The hot whiskey, sweet honey, and tangy lemon are a welcome relaxer and distraction from the stunning man before me.

Drinks in hand he leads me to the couch, a rich caramel leather couch before a roaring gas fireplace. There's a white animal fur-styled blanket laid across the couch. We settle down on the couch together. I naturally sit near the arm, leaning back into the corner and tucking my legs beneath me so I can face him while we talk. He sits close to me, ignoring the other stretch of couch. Keeping me in arms reach.

My nervous energy kicks in, fueled by his close presence and only waning with the occasional sip of my drink. He seems comfortable beside me, eyeing the fire before taking a long drink and looking down at me. Even sitting the man is a tower and I'm not hating it. I feel precious in his presence.

His eyes settle on my cleavage unaided by a bra but trapped by the poor pulling buttons of his shirt. I couldn't stop

it from happening and by his hooded eyes, I think he likes the view.

“I like you in that flannel,” he admits, eyes moving up slowly, tracing my throat, lips, then finding my eyes and capturing my stare.

“It’s warm. Thank you, Ramsey,” I play it off coolly, even if saying his name heats me in places and at temps that rival the burning fire.

He inches a little closer, setting his drink down and resting a balmy hand on my thigh. The heat radiates through the loaner pajama pants.

“Noelle, you’re...”

“Not used to this,” I interrupt, setting my drink aside too. “I don’t do this...Like ever.” I feel anxious for a moment as I confess my lack of indulgences. “I’m a boyfriend kind of woman but tonight I’m finding it hard to say no to you...” My gaze sweeps over him again, a dark pleasure in just getting to look upon him. “A proverbial god of a man on this mountain.”

He laughs and breathes a sigh of relief. “Oh man, I’ve been trying to be so smooth here.”

It’s the first time I see his smile reach his eyes.

He continues, “I don’t do this either. I don’t know about the boyfriend material but I don’t bring home women, Noelle. You’re just too beautiful to ignore and I’m almost certainly one night will never be enough.”

“It could be a few nights,” I say quietly, settling my hand on his thigh. “I have to return to work after Christmas. Is there a thing such as a three-night stand?” His smile stays but the sadness returns to his eyes as I explain, “I could’ve maybe extended it a little, like a five night stay, *if* I’d brought my work laptop but I wanted time away from the start-up. Young entrepreneurs are relentless in their need for attention. I see hundreds of messages a day and I just needed a break.”

He laughs weakly. “Not sure there’s such a thing as a multi-night stand. Your work’s lucky.” His voice softens. “I don’t blame them at all for wanting your time. I can only

imagine the brilliance and respect you bring to your professional life,” he praises. He inches a little closer again, our thighs touching.

*Lord have mercy. I'm about to jump this man if he gets any closer.*

“Do you have anyone for the holidays? New Year plans?” I ask, reaching for my drink to clear my throat and hopefully return my common sense.

“No.” He shakes his head as he glances towards the flames of the glassy hearth. “I throw a small party for my staff on Christmas Eve, late, and New Year’s Eve is a big night for business.” His thumb draws circles in my thigh as he talks. He pauses, tilting his head and offering me his thoughts. “Maybe... maybe we could be each other’s someone for the holiday?”

It warms my heart and it’s dangerous to even admit that. I want to climb into his lap and kiss away the sadness that hangs over his head like a raincloud.

*And what the hell is stopping me?*

I put my drink aside, make sure his hands are empty before sitting up on my knees. I act before he can catch onto my plans. I swing my leg over his lap, pressing my hands into his chest and straddling him. He groans at the contact of our bodies, those sweatpants no match for the heat between us. His hands slide to my hips where he holds me close, settling me down tighter into his lap.

“Is that a ‘yes’?” He leans in, licking his lips as he looks ready to wreck me in the best and most sensual ways.

“Let’s not be alone, Ramsey.” *At least not tonight.*

He kisses me hard, desperate to feel and taste me. I gasp at his ravaging pace. He’s devouring me, knowing he only has me a little while. I moan into his ear as he moves his mouth to my neck, rocking me in his lap as I feel him grow hard between my thighs.

*Thank God for gray sweatpants season.*

My thoughts of any deity are brief, quickly brought back down to earth as he tugs on the button at my breasts. It pops before he can get it undone. We both laugh and the pace only intensifies. He buries his face in my chest, taking a nipple into his mouth while his hand seizes a handful of my other breast. I grind my hips in return to his rocking. Friction sends zings through my core. The heat and pressure of his erection primes me. He doesn't let me ride it out in a dry hump, his hand abandoning my breast to pull on the drawstrings of my borrowed bottoms to bury his hand between my thighs.

"Oh, fuck," I moan, tilting my head back as he slips his fingers down to find my clit. He rubs gently, his motion mimicking that of the grinding pace he once had. I'm breathless, panting as he alternates between my nipples, biting and sucking each one carefully.

"Come for me, Noelle. Give me that honey, baby," he growls into my flesh, pressing his palm into my clit as he slides a long middle finger into me, combing my internal walls with a come-hither motion and dragging along that place that prepares to send me into orbit.

And it's too much for me to deny him what he demands of me. I shudder, wrapping my arms around his neck and crying out as waves crash over me. He doesn't stop his attention. He pumps and massage the softness as I pulse a guttural and long moan. Ramsey instinctually knows that it's not over, dragging my orgasm out in the best way ever.

"I need you," I plead, still riding a high but feeling empty as he withdraws his now soaked hand.

He pushes off the couch with me in hand, holding me up and kissing me before settling me down on shaky feet. He smiles, pleased with himself, walking away from me backwards so he can watch me struggle to walk towards him.

*Cocky and cute. It's well-earned though...*

He leads me tauntingly towards the bedroom, kicking off his sweats as soon as he's passed the threshold. He brings me in close to him, squeezing my bare midriff, the shirt fully open on me now. His thumbs find the waist of the bottoms and he

tugs them down, getting to his knees to do so, kissing my down my middle as he does. He kisses my thighs with the sweats in a pool at my feet.

“I need you too,” he decides, standing up and crashing us into the bed similar to how we did in the snow. This time we end up with me on my stomach and him to my backside, pressing his pelvis into me and no damp clothes to cool us off.

He takes his cock in hand and runs it over my butt cheeks, admiring my ass as he strokes himself, steadying himself for the plunge. I settle my face against the sheets and look back at him, back curved and presenting myself to him. I give a wiggle and he bites his lip, his eyes not sad but hungry.

He pushes into me in a hard, fast stroke. I cry out, squeezing the sheets in tight fists. In the throes of passion, I fight admitting that I’m finally feeling full, and fulfilled in more ways than ever.

Even at the peak of some of my longer relationships I had never felt so pleased in my life. He begins to thrust, hands holding fast to my hips. He’s not quiet, his grunts and pants efforts of appreciation and excitement. I join him in our love-making noises, calling out his name and a few choice cusswords as he drags me to the edge over and over again, pushing my juices down my thighs.

“Fuck, you’re beautiful,” he growls, pumping harder, making my flesh bounce and jiggle. And when I finally take the sheer drop into my next release, he’s right there to meet me. His groan bellows into the night and I can’t help but whimpering as the moment burns inside of me as something I’ll never get with anyone else.

For rough and thirsty lovemaking, Ramsey’s cuddles are spectacular. Either it’s my inexperience of one-night stands or a happy surprise to be invited to curl up next to him. When the connection ceased he relaxed, bringing me into his arms and snuggling me in close, wrapping the bedding around us and holding me as if he believed I would slip away from him.

*And I should slip away.*

I stay awake for a long time. Just listening to his breathing. His arm still has a hold of me. Spooning me in a cocoon of warmth and comfort. It feels so good here. The men before him typically finished and rolled over in bed with a mumbled “goodnight” and snores quickly following. But he won’t let me go. Keeping my ass cradled into him while he uses a pillow and his arm to rest his head.

*Only thing that would make this better would be brunch tomorrow morning, together. The new Culprit Cafe here in Ribbon Cove is nice. I wonder if he goes there?*

My hands and feet tingle. All the blood in my body rushes to my chest, the thought scaring me and causing a panic that’s completely new.

I’m getting in too deep. Too quickly. I was done with Jeremy only a few weeks ago. This was supposed to be a holiday fling, a roll in the snow, a sage cleansing of bad juju from my life.

*So why does the thought of leaving this bed hurt and the idea of having breakfast with him send me into a lightheaded state, panic searing my thoughts?*

I shake my head to clear the lingering fog.

*Because you know yourself...*

It can’t be a multi-night thing.

*I’m catching feelings. A disease that softhearted people like me have, and exactly why I can’t have a one-night stand. I should’ve known.*

I swear under my breath, and somehow manage to maneuver my way out from under his arm. I sneak into the guest bathroom where my clothes are hanging up and set up a ride share, using my GPS locator to locate the address. My skirt is still wet but my shirt is dry enough, I shed the button-busted flannel and pull on my night-out blouse, paired with the borrowed and now stolen sweats.

I watch him from the doorway for only a moment, sleeping peacefully in his empty bed, the sheets tossed about still in remnants of our night. My body aches to crawl back into bed

with him but the vibration in my hand pulls me back down and I escape out the front door to my ride.

On the ride back to the Red Wreath Inn, my chest feels like an elephant has taken roost on it. I thank the driver with a mumble and stumble through the snow onto the porch where Noelle and Belle are enjoying coffee.

I settle in between them, trying to catch my breath.

“Look what the cat dragged in,” Holly teases, but her volume and instant cringe tells me how hungover she is. “That is *not* the outfit I recall you wearing last night.”

I blush and look down at my mismatched pairing and bare feet. In such a rush, I didn’t even grab my other clothes or boots. *Shit, those boots were from my sister.* Extra panic.

“You’ve got a glow about you,” Holly adds, not noticing my slow decline.

Belle, more observant and quiet, chews on her thumbnail, letting me take a breather before approaching the topic. “Are you okay, Noelle?”

I attempt to put on my normal smile, but it fades like a shooting star. I can’t B.S. these people. They know me.

“No, I’m not okay. I had an amazing *single* night...with a man who did and said all the right things that now feel wrong and I don’t know exactly why. And I left all my stuff there and my boots were a gift from my sister. How did I get here?” I swallow the lump in my throat as it starts to close in. “I thought I had love with Jeremy, but it wasn’t. I don’t want to take that leap again. I’m not bad for not wanting that right?” I ramble on my worries while Belle, now joined by Noelle and Candy try to coerce me into calming down.

“It’s okay, we’ve all been there,” Candy, who’s dated more than any of us, chimes in.

“No, it’s wrong. I-I shouldn’t have done that. Or should have but not feel this way,” I struggle to grasp the turmoil inside me. It’s confusing and yet I know there’s a clarity I just don’t want to see it. I can’t. He lives here. I live in Denver. I won’t up-end my life for a man ever again.



“It’s okay to not want more,” Noelle adds, her guilt for her jokes earlier catching up.

“Sometimes you all don’t understand and maybe this visit wasn’t a good idea.”

It was harsh, but it’s what I’m feeling. I stand up and go inside, needing to decompress alone.

But I don’t want to be alone...anymore.

## RAMSEY

The bed's not as warm and plush as it was last night. I wake slowly, reaching for the goddess of my sheets only to find the bed bare.

"Noelle?" I call out.

*Maybe she needed to use the bathroom.*

I search the whole house. *No Noelle*. There is no number to call to see what's going on either.

Perhaps she wasn't kidding about the one night. The lone night of bliss.

I groan and flop onto the bed. They still wreak of our lovemaking.

I know where she's staying...

*No, too creepy.*

I make myself coffee and mull over my choices. When all the choices seem to scream that I'm the one who's acting like the tomcat who's looking for more kitty-action, I settle on fate. It brought us together on a chance meeting at the bar, it would surely happen again.

After all this is Ribbon Cove and it hasn't failed me yet.

There's a candlelight ceremony in the square this evening, I decide to go this year for the first time to try and make peace with the Watering Hole's owner. He's big on the town's Christmas traditions. And now there's also the chance I might see Noelle. She's gone to several events since being here. Why

not this one too? My hope sounds desperate, and I feel it to my soul. The woman changed me. That wasn't just a one-night stand.

*It can't be.*

“Bill!” I greet as warmly as I can, the moon high on a clear cold night. The man handing out candles stares at me. He's an older gentleman in jeans, a black Stetson, black boots, and a heavy puffy jacket. And owner of the Watering Hole.

“Ramsey,” he grunts my name in return, reluctantly holding out a candle for me to take.

“Thank you,” I say, trying to be as pleasant as possible. He turns away from me and I clear my throat. “Hey Bill, man, we're okay, aren't we?” He grunts, leaving me with the feeling that we weren't okay. “You know I'm grateful for the job you gave me and all you taught me. I just wanted more...I wanted my own business.”

“A business that steals from another,” Bill mutters, not trying to keep his voice down.

“The Library is nothing like your bar, and there's plenty of business for us both,” I say firmly, the tension striking a nerve.

“Bar's a bar,” he returns. “You took away liquor sales, too.”

He's being unreasonable, I know that, but I don't understand why. Just like I don't understand why Noelle left my bed this morning.

Bill turns and leaves without another word.

“Merry Christmas!” I shout after him. *Ya old grumpy bastard*, I add silently.

I feel more tense than usual, two problems now sitting heavy on my shoulders. So much for fate and the universe knowing what the hell it's doing.

The park is lit up with a variety of lights. And it reminds me of her eyes and how they sparkled as she sat on my couch. I can't deny our connection in the bed was something that I've never felt, just having her in my arms made a wish come true.

But it wasn't just the sex, it was her honesty, her acceptance... *her*. A shudder rolls through my body. I crave to feel her quake at my fingertips again or even to hear her easy laughter or her mahogany eyes pulling me into her world.

As if on cue I hear a musical laugh. She's in a small group of her friends and their partners, accepting candles. Holly's making a lewd motion with her candle, making Noelle laugh. I smile, happy to see her.

*Thanks, fate.*

I start to head towards them, wanting to talk to her again, about anything. Even if I can't have her, to just be near her will be more than enough.

I stop. *Fuck, I'm in love.* The realization hits me as I stare at her eyes filled with mirth. They glow like burgundy wine, deep and warm.

I'm about to call out to her when a young woman brushes past me with a quip of an apology to me. She's in a full-on sprint. The young woman squeals, running up to Noelle and throwing her arms around her. The two women look strikingly alike, one younger than the other and with longer hair, but there was no doubt in my mind they're related.

"Sissy!" The young woman screams, and the two of them break out into giggles.

*Sissy? A nickname?*

"Sera!" Noelle cries back. "What are you doing here?!"

"I wanted to surprise you for Christmas! I went to Denver first but you weren't home. Jeremy said you were here."

A sister *and* a man. She had told me she was alone, no one here.

How stupid of me. She meant not in Ribbon Cove. A crack in my heart starts and I swallow back the pain. I should've just kept to my quiet and lonely Christmas. At least I was used to taking that pain. This is a totally new kind of pain.

I tug my beanie lower to cover my ears, hand my candle to the front gate, and head back to the bar.

*Back to the one place where I belong.*

## NOELLE

I know I saw it: an orange striped Bengals stocking cap in the crowd. He's a tall man, he's hard to miss. But now Sera is here, my little sister, and I can't go after him. And why would I go after him?

*It's called a one-night for a reason.*

I focus on Sera, smiling and happy to see her. We light candles and enjoy the ceremony, giggling with excitement. It's been a while since I spent time with my family on Christmas. Sera drags us all to Culprit Cafe for some dinner and to warm up from the cold.

"Why didn't Jeremy come with you?" Sera pops a French fry into her mouth.

"Jeremy and I aren't together anymore," I admit, but with a lot less regret than I've been feeling. "He decided being between one woman's legs wasn't enough for him."

"Yikes..." Sera pouts but shrugs. "We need to get you into a bar then! Nothing makes me feel better than a couple drinks with the girls to get over a man...or getting under the next one."

I snort, Sera is barely old enough to drink, if I recall her birthday correctly.

"I've had enough of bars I think," I say, thinking of Ramsey at the Library Bar.

"What? Does that mean you've already tried out the new one up on main street? Bookstore or something?" Sera

struggles to find the right name

“Library Bar,” the girls correct her in unison and I roll my eyes at their intervention. It’s like they want to torture me.

Sera wiggles in her chair, giddy. “Yes, that on! You’ve been?”

“Yeah, Noelle, tell us about the bar,” Wynter inquires slowly. My face heats up from the attention, all eyes on me for the details of my affair.

“It’s just a bar,” I say through gritted teeth. “I’m tired. We’ve been out late a lot of nights. I’m going to just go back to the inn.”

“More drinks for me,” Sera shrugs. “Any you fine ladies want to join me?” she asks the others, her vibrant youth almost annoying. My misery taking my attitude into the dumps.

I grab her hand and squeeze. “Sera, come back with me, we can catch up more. Stay in with me” I try to convince her.

“Sissy, I need a drink and some music after the ride up here, another night we’ll do stay in,” Sera nudges me and goes back to demolishing her fries. Her metabolism like that of a hummingbird. But it didn’t seem to concern Ramsey that mine’s more sloth-like.

Even when I try my hardest, I can’t stop thinking about him.

The party splits, a few volunteers accompany Sera to the bar. To my surprise Holly rides back with me to the bed and breakfast.

“Why aren’t you going?” I ask her.

“I’m still hungover from last night,” she says with a chuckle. “The real question is why *you’re* not?”

I’m quiet at first, not sure myself why I was so adamant about not seeing him, I had wanted to at the ceremony with my brief glimpse.

“Holly, I don’t know what I want...or, maybe rather how I can have it.” I feel the pressure point break. “He’s such a good

man, and oh my God the sex...”

Holly raises her eyebrows at me.

I continue, “But I don’t have a life here. There’s no jobs for programming here like how Wynter is going to be the sheriff and Belle’s going to write from the beautiful inn or Candy can do real estate anywhere. Ramsey has his bar, his life here and I’ve got mine in Denver.”

*But do I really have a life there?*

Goosebumps start at the bottom of my neck and slide down my spine.

I don’t have a life there though. I have a job.

My apartment had never felt like home and now with Jeremy gone it was lonelier than ever...successful job or not.

“Sound reasons,” Holly admits, and I wish she wasn’t so supportive. “But know we’ve got your back, Noelle. You’re not alone in this. Maybe we don’t understand sometimes but we sure as hell don’t judge, sister.”

I brush away an escaping tear. “Thank you.”

Her arm wraps around me and I remember the past. Her family’s warmth. She still has it and some man is going to be a very lucky guy.



## RAMSEY

A familiar face sits down at the bar. She's a petite, shorter and younger version of Noelle, her hair long and eyes lighter than her sister's. She bats her lashes at me and does a small hair flip as she retrieves her Texas I.D. from her purse.

“What can I get you, Miss?” I ask after thoroughly checking her I.D. “Texas, long way from home...Miss Seraphine?”

“You can call me Sera. I'm visiting my sister for the holidays. Appletini, please,” she orders. Definitely not the same taste as her sister though.

“Coming right up.” I fix the drink with little fanfare.

It's quiet in the bar tonight, the party crowd in the night before. The tide changing to family gatherings as it gets closer and closer to Christmas. “Your sister live here, maybe I know her?” I ask innocently enough.

“Noelle? No, but we used to,” she pauses to sip from her green liquor and moans in delight, high pitched and flirtatious. “So yummy...” She winks. “No one in my family lives here anymore. We grew up here though. I was thirteen, I think, when we packed up to go to Georgia. Noelle stayed behind to finish high school. Miss Straight A's couldn't stand the idea starting over. She's super independent, something I admire about her. She probably appreciated the parental break, Mom and Dad were hard on her because she's the oldest of all three of us girls.” Sera smiles at me, trying to impress me with her youth.

“Are they still alive?” I ask. “Your parents, that is...” I stumble over words. “I mean, why didn’t they come with you?”

She laughs at my fumbling with words and leans on the bar. “Yes, our parents are alive. Dad can’t travel much anymore. Refuses to fly and long car rides are too much for him now. So Noelle visits now and then but we don’t get to see her much. So I wanted to surprise her and I think she needs me right now. I didn’t know she broke up with her boyfriend. Fuckin’ jerk messed around on her right under her nose.”

“Dang. So she’s probably hurting.”

“You know, I don’t think she is. She seemed confused tonight and the girls were being really weird about coming here.”

*I bet they were.*

“Do you plan on staying in Texas?” I keep probing, fiddling my hands with drying glasses.

“While I finish my degree, lack of rent is nice too. Noelle tries to get me to move back all the time, I’ll admit I miss the snow.”

“Ah, what are you studying then?”

“Public relations,” she takes a long drink from her appletini and sighs again in appreciation.

“Mhm, mind if I pick your brain? I’ve got a PR problem...” I tell her about my concerns with the tension between the two bars in town and my attempts at neutrality and friendship unsuccessful.

“Reminds me something grandma would say: People are going to talk about you, whether you’re doing good or bad. Just let them and do what’s best for you.”

“I wish I had sage advice like that growing up,” I chuckle.

But she’s right.

*Why do I care so much about Bill and his dissatisfaction with me?*

Opening my own place was what was best for me and it's doing well, both of our businesses are doing well.

*So who cares if we aren't friends?* And then I realize, his rejection only deepens the hole left by the lack of family. I crave to fit in, to feel accepted by everyone...to be loved. I just wanted a family. Bill certainly wasn't going to give me a family.

*But Noelle can. She feels like family. She feels like a future I've always wanted.*

"Sera, I know your sister. In fact, I know her really well." I rub my head in thought.

Her interest peaks and she sets her glass down, folding her arms onto the bar and leaning in to listen.

I lean toward her, almost like a brother would to indulge a younger sister. "Can you help me with something? Something for Noelle?"

"I'm all ears, handsome," Sera says with that same twinkle that Noelle has in her eyes.

*You're not getting away with only one-night, Noelle.*

## NOELLE

The clattering of metal scraping then clattering against pavement wakes me up. I had spent the night alone. Sera didn't come back and join me. My own little sister handles one-night stands better than me it seems.

There's more metal scraping followed by a sharp whistle.

"Who in the hell..." I flip back the bedding. "I know Cohen isn't shoveling the sidewalk this early." I climb out of bed for the window. My heart hammers in my chest.

Scooped out in the snow is a message.

### ***BE MY FAMILY***

I see that silly Bengals stocking cap on top of the man I know in my heart I'm desperate for. I don't even bother to grab my robe as I rush downstairs and out the door. I collide with him in my haste, slipping and his arms catching me before I can fall.

"Easy there, beautiful," he purrs, reluctant to let me go as he stands me upright.

I steady myself, trying to find the words to explain. "Ramsey, I'm sorry...for leaving. It's just...I don't know what I want or what to do. This confuses me and yet I feel like if I just stop worrying it's clear, but I'm not from here and you—"

He cuts me off with a kiss. I'll admit it was probably the fastest way to shut me up so he could get a word in.

"I met your sister last night. I get it, I do." He smiles down at me. "I'm afraid of not being accepted and loved...and

you're just as scared of being accepted and loved. Last time you thought you were, a man broke that trust." He wraps his arms around me and brings me in tight for a hug. I snifle and bury my face into his chest. "We need each other. I don't know how we'll make this work, Noelle, but I need you in my life, so I will. I need you to be my family, please."

He loosens his grip to let me pull back, tears streaming down my face and I shake with relieving laughter.

Work no longer feels like a valid excuse. Not with this man confessing before me.

I nod slowly, wiping my tears as I find the courage to commit again. "Yes. I want you to be my family. Forever and ever, amen."

I see for the second time his smile meets his eyes. The sadness lifts from him as he kisses me again, hard and passionate, stealing my breath and I hope he never stops.

He picks me up abruptly. "Woman, why on earth are you barefoot?!" He carries me back inside.

"I left my shoes at your place."

He stills. "*Our* place..."

And in that moment, I feel home and in love.

"I love you, Ramsey."

"Love isn't enough for what I feel for you, Noelle. I feel it all. You are my first all and you'll be my forever all."

I smile as he dips in for more kisses.

Ribbon Cove might be the place I left to find myself, but when I came back, I found so much more.

## EPILOGUE

### **Ramsey**

#### *Next Summer*

I swat away a bee softly from my lapel. The daisy surrounded by some white little flowers attracting a variety of insects in the late afternoon sun.

The music changes and I keep my head dipped low, wanting to see her at just the right moment. Or maybe I need a minute. I've never been one to cry, but there's always a first time.

The bridesmaids pass by and my best man grabs my shoulder, giving a squeeze that it's time.

I raise my sight and my legs tingle like I'm going to go drop to my knees.

She's truly radiant. A glow that I can't explain—angelic is too little and nuclear a bit too much, but she's definitely heating me inside.

The last few months have been a whirlwind of action. I stopped worrying about what people thought about me and started being the person Bill would want to be friends with. He hasn't come around to friendship, but we've been amicable with each other. I even had a drink at his bar with my bachelor party two nights ago. It wasn't uncomfortable. At least I didn't let it be.

Noelle found a remote programming job as a contractor about a month after we got together and then she moved to Ribbon Cove two weeks after that and I proposed two days after that. There's been a few glitches with internet, but we've worked them out and she's got a better life and work balance. We take hikes into the mountains and just lay on a blanket looking up the stars some nights. She doesn't take her computer places and when it's closed, it stays closed for the weekend.

Cohen, Belle's boyfriend, officiates the ceremony and our vows include to never watch the Bengals play the Broncos. I agree and everyone laughs.

After a nice long kiss on a dramatic dip, we walk the aisle to a shower of birdseed, heading out for our honeymoon immediately. It's a light show and only because her father insisted and said he'd be here. He is. And I think I found a friend...and family.

Noelle pulls on my hand in the aisle. "I can't wait... Ramsey, we're going to add another to our family."

I shake my head like I didn't hear her right. "What?" *A baby? But we've been careful.*

I'm not upset, definitely shocked, but not upset.

She whistles and a puppy comes running down the aisle, licking up pieces of birdseed as it nears.

I pick the small puff of fur and laugh when I see the half Broncos and half Bengals collar.

"I figured he has to be neutral," she says scruffing his head. "He'll stay with Belle and Cohen while we're gone, but he's ours."

*Ours.*

I look back at the people who are supporting us today and smile.

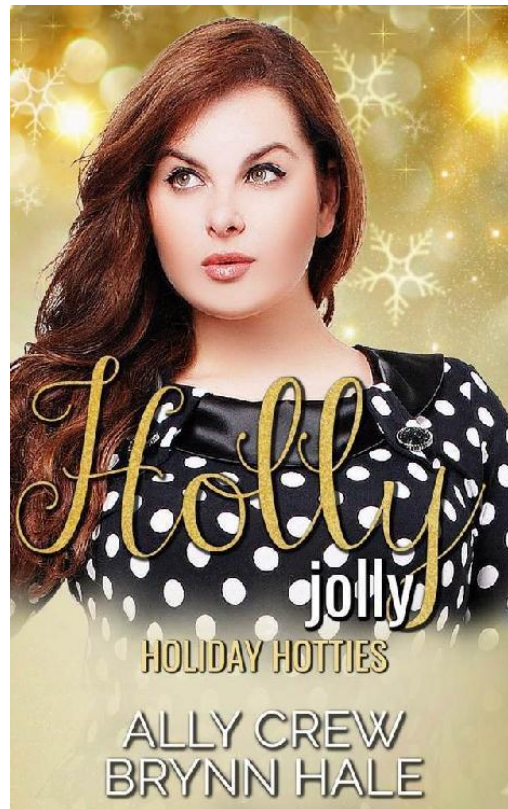
Family isn't always the people you're born into; it's the people who bring you into their lives because they want you there.

I look back at my wife.

*The fates knew what they were doing. I'm a very lucky man.*

~THE END~

Check out the final story in the Holiday Hotties series—  
**Holly Jolly**



♥ She loved him back in high school and after a humiliating experience, she vows she'll never do that again. After a traumatic brain injury, he's not the same guy and he's trying to prove it. Will she forget the man he once was to love the man he is now? ♥

*Holiday Hotties is a sweet & steamy instalove series of five curvy, strong women who will find their happily ever after with the man of their dreams—sugar plum dreams, that is.*

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**Multi-author series works:**

Dared Under the Mistletoe: The Sweater Series Book 1- [My Book](#)

Hungry for Jensen: Hungry Hearts Book 3- [My](#)

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Seducing the Mountain Man: I'm Yours Book 2- [My Book](#)

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Wonderboy Love: Tiaras and Treats Book 2- [My Book](#)

**Graffiti Street Series and Spin-Offs**

Graffiti Street Bad Boys: First in Series Collection- [My Book](#)

### **Graffiti Street Bad Boys**

Hemi - [My Book](#)

Zale - [My Book](#)

Copper - [My Book](#)

Leif - [My Book](#)

Cray - [My Book](#)

Box Set - [My Book](#)

Bundle - [My Book](#)

### **Graffiti Street Guardians MC**

Slater - [My Book](#)

Blade - [My Book](#)

Vice - [My Book](#)

Crow - [My Book](#)

Bundle - [My Book](#)

Series- [My Book](#)

### **WildStyle Brewers-Graffiti Street Bad Boys Spin-Off**

Fitz - [My Book](#)

Benji - [My Book](#)

Hudson- [My Book](#)

Bundle- [My Book](#)

Series- [My Book](#)

### **Diamond Ridge Series and Spin-Offs**

Diamond Ridge Mountain Men: First in Series Collection- [My Book](#)

### **Diamond Ridge Mountain Men**

Boone - [My Book](#)

Kaede - [My Book](#)

Wyatt - [My Book](#)

Woody- [My Book](#)

Box Set- [My Book](#)

Bundle - [My Book](#)

### **Rescued: Diamond Ridge Mountain Men**

Zeb - [My Book](#)

Flint - [My Book](#)

Mack - [My Book](#)

Bundle - [My Book](#)

### **Games: Diamond Ridge Mountain Men-**

Smythe- [My Book](#)

Aiden- [My Book](#)

Becker- [My Book](#)

Bundle- [My Book](#)

### **Passion Point Firefighters**

Boscoe - [My Book](#)

Kelton - [My Book](#)

Dairen - [My Book](#)

Archie - [My Book](#)

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Baxter- [My Book](#)

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Bren - [My Book](#)

Carr- [My Book](#)

Dexx- [My Book](#)

Eyan- [My Book](#)

Finn- [My Book](#)

Grey- [My Book](#)

Hart- [My Book](#)

A-E Collection- [My Book](#)

Bundle- [My Book](#)

### **Red Star Rebel Squad**

Murphy's Mayhem- [My Book](#)

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Halsey's Havoc- [My Book](#)

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Soulmate Hunger – [My Book](#)

Kindred Soul Desire- [My Book](#)

True love Craving- [My Book](#)

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Brynn Hale is a Midwest girl who can spot—and swoon over—a hard-working guy a mile away. She believes in winks across a crowded room, guys who do the dishes, a blue-collar alpha will always win a heroine’s heart, and a martini or craft beer is the perfect accompaniment to her stories.

You can visit her at

