



let it
SNOW

ASHLYNN MILLS

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Ashlynn Mills

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This is a work of fiction. Names and characters have been made up, and the story came from the author's imagination, and any resemblance to real life events or people is pure coincidence.

Thank you to all my amazing betas, Courtney Gray, Tammy Jones, Jennifer Wooddall and Jennifer Bozzette.

Cover artist: Covers by Jo

Editor: Anita Ford

Warnings

Mentions of death of a spouse and child. Mentions of one of the Mc's dealing with Essential tremor disorder.

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One

Snow

With a smile, I swipe through my last few pictures I took with Brian, selecting one as my phone's screen saver. I kiss the screen, wishing my lips were pressing to his instead. We finally spent a weekend away together in a hotel overlooking a lake and it was everything I could have hoped for. All the kisses we shared only a few days ago were still vivid in my head, along with the hours we spent in bed making love and holding each other.

How did I get so damn lucky?

My cheeks ache as I write him a text message, staring down at the fading heart he drew with a permanent marker on the back of my hand. It's almost time for a redo and for him to touch me again.

Me: I miss you already. A million times a hundred.

It's something Brian says to me every time I ask him if he likes me. He reaches for my hand, whispering the sweet words into my ear, almost as if they were only ever meant for me. Our relationship was on the newer side, but I haven't felt this happy in a long time. Too bad we have to keep what's between us mostly under wraps. Stupid college and their rules against teachers dating students. Though with it being the end of the semester, he's not my teacher anymore, so maybe he'll soon take me to a restaurant we don't have to drive almost an hour to.

Humming a Christmas tune to myself, I slide my phone into my back pocket and enter the double doors of the diner, while tying the back of my green apron that does zero favors for my figure. People turn away from me, snickering. Shaking it off, I ignore them and keep walking past the tables filled with laughing and whispering customers. I glance around, wondering if it's all in my head and my paranoia is getting the best of me. The uncomfortable looks continue, and my chest tightens. Do I have something on my face? Did I put my shirt on backward? I keep walking, checking my clothes, and my hands shake as I lift my apron.

Alecia, a friend and one of the waitresses I work with, rushes from the kitchen offering me a sympathetic smile. "Oh, Snow...I'm so sorry. I tried to pull them down as fast as I could but people had already seen them and Rick..."

I tilt my head to the side, squinting in confusion. Before I can ask what she's talking about, I'm being called over by my boss, Rick. He releases a soft sigh, his face tense. His eyes are laced with worry and he walks closer, resting a shaky hand on my shoulder. "You should come with me."

"What is this all about?" I ask, my brow furrowing.

"Just follow me and we will talk in my office." Rick steps back, tugging at his tie while he walks to the back of the diner.

I follow him through the kitchen, my hands shake as a tingle of nerves creeps up my spine. Lately I've felt more in control of my disorder than I have in a long time. But now, my boss not being able to meet my eyes triggers the symptoms I wish I

could get rid of completely. I'm usually not as affected when my limbs are at rest, but it doesn't matter what I'm doing when my anxiety levels are high. It's only when they're somewhat tolerable do I feel like everyone else. As helpful as the beta blockers and change of diet are, upsetting situations can disrupt their efforts. Being relaxed and less stressed helps tremendously. Too bad I can't get a single part of me to settle right now.

Instead of focusing on their tasks, the staff are all staring at me with wide eyes. I'm not sure what's happening here but by the looks of it, it can't be good. Entering the large office, I sit in the chair across from Rick and he presses his hands on the desk, lips forming into a thin line. "You have no idea why I brought you in here, do you, Snow?"

I shake my head, shuffling in my seat. "No, I'm sorry but I don't understand what's going on."

He sighs, running a hand through his brown wavy hair. "Oh boy. I'm not even sure how to say this. I think it's best I show you."

Wiping my sweaty palms on my jeans, I lean back in my chair while Rick pulls a stack of papers from his desk. He hesitates for a minute before setting what appears to be a set of flyers in front of me. At first I'm confused as to why my boss is showing me prints of two men having sex. That's until I realize one of those men is me. My stomach churns and I gasp, covering my mouth with my trembling hand. There's no getting it to stop now. Why does he have these? Where did

they come from? Brian was very clear about no one being allowed to find out about us while I was still attending his class at the university. I reach for the papers slowly, not even sure what to do. All I know is, I want them to disappear. My chest caves in and it hurts to breathe.

“Are you okay?” Rick asks, his words hard to hear over the buzzing in my ears.

I crumple the papers in my hands, not even bothering to look through each one. “Where did you get these?” I ask, my words coming out shaky, the vile flyers burning my skin.

He swallows hard, straightening where he sits. “They were plastered all over the windows outside the diner. Is he a friend of yours? Did things maybe end badly between you two? That might explain why he would do something like this.”

I shake my head. “Brian wouldn’t do this. It had to be someone else.” But who else would have access to our pictures? I thought it was sweet and sexy when Brian first took out his camera, wanting to take pictures of me.

“These are for whenever I miss you too much,” he’d whispered in my ear as he lay naked next to me on the hotel’s king sized bed. My heart sinks in my chest. Was it all a lie?

Rick stares at me for what feels like a long time, as if he’s trying hard to find the right words. Nothing about this situation is right. Nothing he can say will fix it. Who knows about us? Someone must have found out. We weren’t careful enough. Sometimes we were too impatient to wait until we were fully away from the building. Is this some kind of blackmail?

“Then who would?” he asks, folding his hands together.

“I’m not sure. Maybe another student but I don’t know how they would get the pictures. Brian always set his phone on his desk when he walked away. Maybe someone got a hold of it.”

He nods. “Look, I’m not sure what’s going on, but I think it might be best if you take the rest of the day off. Maybe even the whole week. Go spend the holidays with your family.”

I stare down at my shaking hands. “Yeah, that’s probably a good idea.”

“And maybe this will give you some time to figure this all out.”

I stand from my chair, nodding, my head feeling too heavy for the rest of my body. “Yeah. Thank you, Rick.” Before he can say anything in response, someone enters from behind me. “Um...I hate to interrupt you two but, Snow, you should see this.”

“Is it more pictures?” Rick asks. “We’ve been pulling them off all morning. I was hoping we got them all.” How did I miss them before? I was so lost in my own head, I probably walked right past them.

Alecia shakes her head, frowning. “It’s worse.”

“What could possibly be worse than pictures of me having sex plastered all over my place of work?”

“Just come with me and you’ll see for yourself.” She swallows hard, tugging on the sleeves of her jacket. “I tried to

stop them, but they took off so fast. They looked like teenagers.”

“Stop them from what?” I ask.

Rick and I both follow Alecia outside the diner. I grow more curious the closer we get to my car. The questions running through my head come to a halt when I see that my car windows are smashed in and my tires have been slashed. The words whore, homewrecker, and slut are spray painted on my doors. My throat goes dry and my pulse pounds in my ears, I can't hear anything else around me. I take a step back, my whole world spinning. This isn't real. It can't be. Was Brian lying to me? I read the words again, one standing out more than others. *Homewrecker*.

Why would someone write that? Unless...no. It can't be.

With shaking limbs and fury running through my veins, I grab my phone from my pocket, having trouble bringing it to my ear. Brian answers on the second ring.

“Snow...”

“Brian, what is going on? I've never been so confused in my life. There are fliers of us everywhere. Words sprayed on my car calling me horrible names.”

“Look, Snow...I think it's best we don't see each other anymore. In fact, you should never contact me again. I'm sorry things couldn't be different. I really am.”

The other end of the line goes silent and sharp pains stab at my heart like shards of glass. My eyes burn from suppressing

tears and my face is hot from anger. I went from having an amazing weekend with Brian to this. There are still so many questions unanswered. So many things I want to know, but when I try to call Brian back, it says the number I've called cannot be reached at this time. My feet grow heavy, and I feel as if the ground will swallow me whole at any minute.

Alecia places a hand on my shoulder and while the warmth is comforting, it's not as much as I need it to be. "How about I give you a ride home, huh? I'm about to leave for the day anyway. Maybe we can even grab a bite to eat somewhere?"

I gaze into her sympathetic eyes. "No, just home will be fine. I don't want to be anywhere else right now." I'm too sick to my stomach to even think about food. What do I even do? The humiliation and embarrassment are too much for me to bear. So many people saw those pictures and they will see my car too. My heart hurts, my chest is heavy, and walking on steady legs is a difficult task.

She nods, her eyes softening. "I understand. Let me just grab my things."

"I'll get the cops on the phone and then call a tow truck," Rick says from behind me. He's been quiet this whole time; I forgot he was there.

I nod, twisting my shirt between my hands. "Thanks, Rick. It can be towed to my parents' house. I'll call and let them know to expect it." What will they think when they see the car? How do I explain why someone has written such horrible words about me? My mind is like a whirlwind and my

emotions are all over the place, unable to decide where to stay put.

Rick pulls out his phone, forcing his lips into a stilted smile. “Yeah, sure. Anything I can do to help.” He walks back toward the diner, holding the phone to his ear.

As I’m about to call my dad, my phone pings in my hand with notifications. It’s more than likely from my YouTube channel. I really don’t have time to deal with questions from fans right now. It pings again. I open the app to my channel, expecting to see the last makeup tutorial video I posted Friday. Instead, it’s a video of me lying back on the bed with Brian’s head between my legs.

My hackles rise. No, it can’t be. My heart beats so loudly my pulse pounds in my ears, and my phone slips from my hands, landing hard on the ground. The crack going across my screen isn’t enough to blur out the images of mine and Brian’s naked bodies moving together.

Ping. Ping. Ping.

I don’t have to pick it up to know those alerts are coming from fans commenting on my latest video. Content I never posted. The tears are now streaming down my face, hot and heavy. I close my eyes, hoping when I open them again this whole nightmare will go away. It doesn’t. The only escape I’ll probably get is when I finally go to sleep. If I even can.

I pick up my phone from the ground and attempt to delete the video and it asks me to confirm my password. When it no longer works, I know the nightmare has only begun. “Come

on,” Alecia says, pulling at my arm gently. “Let’s get you out of here and how about you give me that phone for now, huh?” She snatches it from my hand and we both make our way to her car, wasting no time climbing inside.

My phone buzzes and Alecia turns it off before sliding it in her pocket and pulling out of the parking lot.

“Here, use mine to call your parents. It’ll be easier.”

Inhaling and exhaling deeply, I take the phone from her hand and wipe my tears with the back of my sleeve. My dad answers on the first ring.

“Hello?”

“Hey, Dad.” I say, my chest heavily rising and falling.

“Hey, kiddo. You still bringing your new boyfriend over to meet us this weekend?”

Fuck, I forgot about that. The pain only escalates, gripping every part of me. ““No. We aren’t together anymore.” My words shake and I’m worried if I keep talking, they will come out as twisted as I feel.

“Oh no. I’m sorry to hear that. You doing okay?”

“No, Dad. I’m not but I don’t really want to talk about it right now, okay?” I struggle to keep my voice steady. It was only supposed to be a short conversation.

He takes a deep breath. “Okay. Then we won’t until you’re ready.”

“Was only calling because a tow truck is bringing my car there soon. My tires were smashed at work and some obscene words were written on my car by mistake. I think they mixed me up with someone else.” Is it really a lie if I’m not completely certain if they did or not?

“What? Did you see it happen? Were the cops called?”

“My coworker saw it and my boss called the cops since it happened on his property.” My fingers shake as I press the phone tighter to my ear.

“What should I tell your mom?”

“Whatever you think will help her not overreact too much,” I respond, suddenly lightheaded.

“So nothing then?”

“Tell her I’ll explain later. I have to go for now. I need to handle some things.”

“Okay. Just take care of yourself.”

“I will. Bye, Dad.”

I hang up as we arrive in front of my complex. A bad feeling stirs in my gut, unsettling me the whole way to my front door. My steps come to a halt and my mouth gapes open when my gaze falls on the harsh words written in marker. Slut, whore, skank, man stealer, and one that sticks out to me the most, *homewrecker*.

I scratch my head, still unable to grasp the last insult because Brian said he wasn’t married or in a relationship. He

had broken up with a live-in girlfriend a few months ago, but that was all he told me. He never wore a ring and said he lived alone. Do I still believe him? My heart still wants to cling to hope but the twisting in my gut says I shouldn't.

My door pushes open easily and the whole place is wrecked. On the back wall in the living room are large red letters spelling out the words, "Stay away from my husband." My heart cracks in two. He lied to me. None of it was real. It wasn't some jealous student who did this. It was Brian's wife. The one he said he didn't have. My blood runs cold and my feet feel like they are cemented to the ground when I try to move them.

"How could something like this be happening?" I whisper to myself, twisting the bottom of my shirt between my fingers.

Walking past the gut churning words, I check each room, but whoever was here is long gone. I release a sigh of relief when the whole apartment is empty. Nothing was stolen but picture frames are broken, and my computer monitor is tossed on the floor. My laptop is on my desk playing the same video someone uploaded to my channel.

I never even knew there was a video and assumed Brian was only snapping photos. My mouth goes dry and I feel as if the collar of my shirt is tightening around my neck.

Desperate to make the loud moans go away, I slam the computer closed. Shuffling comes from behind me, and Alecia grabs my arm, causing me to jump in place.

"You can't stay here," she whispers.

My lips shake. “No—what if they come back?”

“Can you stay with your folks?”

I shake my head, unable to meet her gaze. “No. My mom will want to know too much, and this will probably get back to them soon.” I can’t even find the words to say I’m too ashamed to go home. I can’t handle my family looking at me the same way people did at the diner. “I-I can’t. I don’t even want to be around anyone in town right now.”

“I don’t blame you. Look, my brother has a cabin a few hours from here that he rarely uses. I’m sure I can talk him into renting it out for the week.”

I nod. The idea of getting away from here and disappearing to some secluded cabin sounds wonderful. Surely there will be hardly anyone who would recognize me at some place far out in the country.

Alecia calls her brother and paces the kitchen with the phone to her ear. My stomach twists and I worry I’ll be stuck here until Alecia turns around, giving me a thumbs up. Relief settling in my bones, I waste no time, rushing back to my room to toss clothes and essentials into two suitcases, adding some of my favorite Christmas decorations. It takes a few tries to zip my bags closed, my unsteady hands forcing me to take breaks.

I don’t know how long I’ll stay at the cabin but no way am I coming back here anytime soon. I turn on my phone and call the cops to report the incident. They say they will be here in ten minutes; it’s fifteen before they show up. Alecia stays with

me the whole time and my landlord agrees to have the door fixed as soon as possible. None of this settles me. Not even a little. After asking tons of questions and writing down my answers, the cops leave, saying they'll give me a call if they find anything. I doubt they'll do much, but I couldn't sit here and do nothing. The looks they gave me tell me they see me the same way as the person who defiled my property does.

We finally leave the apartment and thirty minutes later, Alecia drops me off in front of an Enterprise Rent-A-Car where I load the rental with everything I need to disappear for a week. "Thanks for all this," I say before pulling Alecia into a long hug.

"You sure you don't need anything else? To borrow some money to get by until you can return back to work?"

I shake my head. "No. I have the money from my makeup videos and also have plenty saved up for a rainy day."

Tightening her arms around me, she nods into my hair. "You will get through this. Trust me. This will soon be nothing more than a bad memory. I'll do my best to make sure things are taken care of here. I will stay up all night ripping down those disgusting pictures if I have to. I know Rick will too."

Neither of us say anything else. I'm unsure if I can even speak anymore without becoming a blubbering mess. The fact she is willing to do this all for me speaks volumes of our friendship. No one else I work with would even look my way. I won't forget her kindness and I'll also remember everyone who turned their backs on me.

Alecia returns to her car, waving goodbye one last time before getting inside. Once her car is out of sight, I slide into the rental and turn up the radio, wanting to drown out my thoughts. They don't go away no matter what I do. If anything, they eat at me the whole time I'm driving. It's suffocating.

The further away I am from town, the easier I'm able to breathe. Escaping for a while won't solve all my problems but it's at least a start. Hopefully my issues back home won't follow me out here. It's hard to think when all I want to do is curl up into a ball and cry until I've drowned in my own tears. I can at least pretend everything's okay in a new place where no one knows my name.

A few hours of driving leads me to my destination and soon cedar trees, along with snowy hills, replace the buildings and houses I'm used to seeing. I'm already more at peace as soft flurries fall down on my windshield.

When I pull up in front of the small, modern cabin, my shoulders relax, and I take a deep breath before shutting off the engine. As long as no one else knows I'm here, I don't have to worry about anyone randomly showing up and ruining my small amount of peace.

My phone rings and as soon as I see Alecia's number on the screen, I answer, placing the call on speaker.

"Hello?" My breath fogs in front of me.

"Hey. Did you make it yet?" she asks, her voice hopeful.

I glance around, taking in all the trees and dirt roads around me. “Yeah. I think so.”

“There should be a few wind chimes hanging from the front porch and a black welcome mat with a deer on the front. If you see them, you’ll know you’re in the right place.”

“Great. I’m about to go inside. I gotta get my bags out first. I don’t think I have the right clothes for this weather,” I say, wrapping my arms around my shivering body.

She laughs and for a few seconds I forget what a shit day it’s been. Too bad it doesn’t last and I’m back to wanting to peel off my own skin.

“I wanted to make sure you got there okay and to tell you my brother left you a key under the mat. He turned the heat on for you and also stocked the fridge with some basic necessities.”

“Awesome. I was worried I’d be entering a freezing cabin and I appreciate the food. I’m not sure I’ll be able to drive out again for the rest of the day with the way the snow is coming down.” I glance out the window and the snow is starting to cover the ground. Great. I’ll probably be trapped in this cabin the whole time because I don’t trust myself to even drive when it’s sprinkling rain outside.

“The store in town delivers groceries. All the numbers should be on the fridge. Also, I think you’ll be relieved to know my boyfriend Robert, being the computer nerd he is, was able to get back into your account and get that horrible video removed. I’ll text you the new password.”

I breathe a sigh of relief, leaning back against the seat. “That’s...oh, Alecia, you have no idea how grateful I am. Thank you so much for having him do that for me.” Even if it only meant one less person viewing me in my birthday suit while my English professor had me bending in every possible position. My face heats. Most people are aware of what I look like when I come now. Something only people I’ve been intimate with should be aware of, not a bunch of fucking strangers.

Alecia speaks again, bringing me away from my thoughts. “It’s what friends do. You’ve been there for me many times before. Remember when I needed help finding my dog and you printed over a hundred fliers to hang up all over town?”

“Yeah but still. This is so much bigger than what I did. This may save my YouTube channel and help me keep my college scholarship,” I say. Too bad I can’t say the same for my reputation in town or my crumbling heart.

“What are you talking about? If it wasn’t for you, I wouldn’t have got Rosco back. Who knows what would have happened to him if we didn’t get him from that pound in time. Either way, what happened to you was wrong in every way and I’d want someone to be there for me in a situation like this.”

I release a drawn out sigh. “I swear, it’s like no one else gets in situations like this but me. I actually thought I got it all right this time. Brian was the kind of man I dreamed about.”

“Until he wasn’t. He’s not worth another thought. Now how about you go inside before you freeze to death, unpack, order

groceries, and maybe take a relaxing bath. Anything to help you forget about that asshole.”

I nod, pulling my jacket tighter to my chest. “Yeah, you’re right. He’s a piece of shit who doesn’t deserve any more of my energy.”

“Nope.”

“Thanks again, Alecia. Thank your boyfriend and brother for me too.”

“Will do.” Heavy breathing comes from the other side of the line. “Take care of yourself and hopefully this whole thing will work itself out by the time you come back.”

I sure hope she’s right. “Will do, and I guess only time will tell. Later, Alecia.”

“See you when you get back. Call me if you have any trouble with anything and Merry Christmas.”

“Bye and Merry Christmas,” I say less enthusiastically.

I hang up the phone and log into my YouTube account, seeing she was true to her word. The video is gone. But my notifications are still going off from comments on my other videos including similar harsh words I’ve seen on my car and apartment door.

The same foul ones that had my stomach twisting. Looks like some things do follow you everywhere you go after all. I log out and shove my phone in my pocket, swallowing so hard my throat throbs.

Shoving the car door open, I grab my bags and rush toward the porch eager to be inside a warm house. The windchimes singing and rocking in the wind reassure me that I'm at the right cabin. I find a key under the mat and walk inside. Warm air wraps around me and I shake off the snow, dumping my bags on the floor by the door. It's smaller on the inside than I expected but it's cute and cozy, decorated in subtle browns and greens.

The cabin is a little dusty and not fully kept up with but it doesn't bother me. It's much better than the place I left. I take my bags into the quaint bedroom. The bed is nicely made with a handmade quilt and a few throw pillows. I unpack, realizing I don't own much warm clothing. It's much colder here than where I live.

The minute I see my mother's name appear on the screen while pulling out all my toiletries, I know there will be a follow-up voice-mail full of questions. I hit play, confirming my assumptions. I can't even answer all of them, because I still don't fully understand what happened myself. I'm not sure I want to know at this point. I hate spending Christmas away from my family, but I can't handle all their questions right now.

All I want to do is bury the past two months under new memories and to forget about Brian.

Two

Malcolm

I down my last bit of beer from the frosted glass and the empty cup slams hard against the bar as I set it down. Today was another rough day of work. More wearing mentally than physically. The hard labor wasn't the issue. I love what I do for a living and wouldn't give it up for anything, but there are days where I want nothing more than to get away from it all. I push my glass forward and clear my throat loud enough to get the bartender, Chris's attention. "I'll take another."

Chris nods, grabbing a new glass from under the counter. "Want me to keep them coming?"

I chuckle. "Nah, maybe just one more."

"Another long day of orders?" His green eyes focus on me, wrinkling in the corners.

He has no idea. I nod, fumbling with the napkin in front of me. "You know it. Those benches and baby cribs won't build themselves."

He sets a glass full of golden liquid in front of me, the glass tapping the wood. “I hear that, man. It’s a popular season for them. Along with wooden chests and rocking horses.”

“Don’t forget about the rocking chairs,” I add. “People who live outside of town can’t get enough of them,” I say, wrapping my fingers around the glass.

“Speaking of which, Candace really wants one for the nursery.” He shifts uncomfortably. “I told her I’d ask you but if you’re not—”

“Sure. I can do that for y’all. Just tell her to send me a picture of what she wants and give me a date y’all need it by,” I respond, trying to come off more chipper than I feel.

People still tread lightly around me when mentioning nurseries and baby items. It’s been over a year. You’d think they’d learn to be normal around me again by now. How can they be though, when I can barely handle hearing them mention Nancy or the baby in passing?

He smiles, relief setting in his shoulders. “After the holidays is fine. We still have months until little Beau makes his entry into the world. I’m sure you have your work cut out for ya for the rest of the year.”

I nod and sip my beer quietly. I’m my busiest during Christmas time and start taking orders for handcrafted gifts beginning in the spring. I get requests for handmade benches, dressers, chairs...you name it, people wanted it. This week I had a very special request that I had a hard time fulfilling.

I started working on the crib two weeks ago, stepped away from it and came back, still feeling a tightness in my chest and the lump in my throat that lodged itself there every time I thought about the first one I ever made. It always took me back to the day I lost the person I used to be. The man who was once passionate and full of life. He left the night an unexpected accident took my son and wife from me.

After being robbed of the family I never dreamed of losing so easily, all I could do was build things. People looking in from the outside saw it as having passion but it was more of a distraction than anything else. After a few months of locking myself into my makeshift workshop in the backyard shed, I had so many pieces of furniture, I had to start setting things outside.

I only kept one item—a white wooden swing that still hangs over my front porch this very day. My wife Nancy had asked me to make one for months and I kept putting it on the back burner. After finally getting it set up, I spent so many mornings and nights sitting on it watching every sunrise and sunset, wanting to feel closer to Nancy any way I could. She made me view every one with her when we first moved out here.

Once business blew up, I told her I was too busy and now I wish I didn't take those days for granted. If I could go back in time, I'd make her that swing the first time she asked and sit in it from dusk to dawn every day. Except I can't. All I can do now is live in regret and continue to drown myself in my own grief.

Chris clears his throat, dragging me from the thoughts I prefer not to get caught up in to begin with. “Any plans for Christmas? You going up to see your family?”

I run a hand through my thick wavy hair. “Nah, I haven’t spoken to my family in years.” They still blame me after all this time.

“You should have never let her drive out so late to go shopping,” or *“You should have gone with her instead of staying home to work.”* The list goes on.

There was nothing I could do about any of these things now. All the “what ifs” won’t bring them back. Nothing can.

Chris frowns and his eyes grow sympathetic. “Well you should come have Christmas dinner with us then. It will only be Kathy and I.”

I smile, shaking my head. “That’s sweet, Chris, but you don’t have to do that. Besides, you two will miss this alone time when the baby comes.” I don’t tell him about my sister-in-law coming. He’ll ask more questions if I do and then we’ll be talking about Nancy. I can’t handle it right now. Not with it only being a week since the anniversary of their death. My throat will clog with too much emotion for me to speak. I have to ready myself for when Claire and her family arrive as it is.

He chuckles and it lessens the tension. “Yeah, yeah. Well, just know the offer still stands. Kathy always makes way more food than we can eat. I’m sure she’d love having someone else around to cook for. She loves any opportunity to bake too.”

I smile. “That’s a fact and I appreciate every single baked good she leaves on my porch, but really, man, don’t worry about it. I’ll be ordering in and taking some much needed time to rest so I’m good.” Too bad the rest will only last for a couple of days. It’s a hard thing to do when Claire’s around. My stomach twists. It’s been months since we’ve seen each other last, and it’s still not long enough. If only I had more time. I swallow down the lump in my throat.

“It’s about time you took some time for yourself.”

Before I could respond, Chris heads toward another customer. He and Kathy are like family to me. They are all I have as of lately and I’m grateful to them, but sometimes it’s not enough. Being alone in my cabin is hard most days. The haunting memories of the screaming ambulance near my street takes over more when no one else is around, along with the visual of Nancy’s car flipped over and the semi truck smashed into the side. Sometimes to escape them, I take extra trips to the grocery or hardware store. Even when I have everything I need.

I drink the rest of my beer in two gulps, leave money on the bar, and hurry toward the exit, back to the small cabin I call home. Except it hasn’t felt like that in a long time. At night it gets cold and quiet. I used to love being away from the loud noises of the city which is why Nancy and I moved out to the country. Now the silence kills me.

Sometimes when I come to the bar, I don’t drink. I stay for the noise of the music and random conversations from other

customers.

I slide into my car, turning on the radio. “Jingle Bell Rock,” one of Nancy’s favorite Christmas songs, plays, and it has me driving with a smile on my face. I think back to when she would drag me Christmas caroling with her in her sister’s neighborhood. It was tradition for them and as much as I hated it, I did it for her.

“Jingle Bell Rock” was the first song we ever sang together and as horrible as my voice was, Nancy’s came out as lovely as an angel’s. Ever since then, I looked forward to the moment she would hold our child in her arms in the rocking chair she asked me to make, singing sweet Christmas songs. She never did get the chance. My son, Henry, only being a few months old, never got to see his first Christmas and the rocking chair sat half finished in the basement.

I pull up in my driveway and notice the cabin across the way has a black Mazda parked in front of it. One I’ve never seen before. The people who own it rarely stay there and they never rent it out either. Maybe they finally decided to. The front door opens and a slender man wearing a pink beanie steps outside. He stares at me before glancing back toward the ground, zipping up his small jacket. He’s clearly not from around here based on his clothes alone.

I wave his way when he looks at me again and he waves back, forcing a smile on his face. Other than the small jacket, he’s wearing white skinny jeans and a scarf that looks like it was made more for fashion than it was meant to be useful.

“Hi there,” I shout, walking closer.

“Hi,” he responds.

“You just stopping through?” I ask, shifting my feet in the fallen snow.

He nods, moving closer. “I wasn’t sure if anyone lived in that house. I thought I was alone out here. I’m Snow by the way.” He folds his hands in front of him, shying away.

I nod, my lips forming in a thin line. “I’m Malcolm. You should probably invest in a thicker coat if you plan on staying out here for long or else you’ll freeze to death. It gets pretty cold around this time.”

He glances around nervously, rocking back and forth on the balls of his feet. “Well I didn’t plan on leaving the cabin much and decided to order groceries instead of picking them up myself but thanks for the tip. I’m sure I’ll see you around.”

“Probably for the best and I’m sure I’ll see you around.” The town outside these roads might be small but out of towners still manage to get lost. I turn toward my door and don’t look back no matter how much my eyes want to keep examining the stranger from across the way. I don’t know what’s weirder: him randomly showing up alone so close to Christmas or the fact he remains on my mind even once I’m inside getting started on dinner.

Three

Snow

The loud noise of an engine outside catches my attention. Alecia said her brother wouldn't be here so I'm not sure who else it could be. Stepping back out into the frigid air, I shiver, wrapping my arms around my body. There was one more thing I needed to get from the car and it was my bag full of Christmas decorations. It was a necessity to me. I needed something to help cheer me up after the day I had.

The truck I heard pulling up isn't in front of my cabin, it's parked across the way instead. It was so dark and empty looking earlier, I thought no one lived there at first. Which didn't bother me since I had no interest in being around other people right now. Even my own family and old friends weren't being very welcoming in my time of need. I don't know what to expect from strangers in a new place.

Most people I know were all accusing and ashamed of my actions. As if I wanted everyone in our town to witness me in my most private moments with a man who had been lying to me from the start.

Only Alecia and my boss had been understanding. They knew this was all just as much a shock to me as it was to anyone else. I did nothing wrong. All I did was spend a weekend away with a guy I thought was my boyfriend. My heart sinks in my chest. I never would have accepted his first invitation to dinner if I knew he was married. I'm not a homewrecker like the insults on my car and apartment door suggested.

A man stands in front of the house, stepping out from under a tall tree. I didn't notice him before because my eyes were too focused on the truck. He waves, and even though I'm not feeling my usual cheerful self, I try to force a smile anyway. At least we are off to a friendly start. I'd hate to create more enemies on my first day here.

When we get closer to each other, I'm able to see him more and he's really got the whole small town, rugged, hot guy look going on. From his faded baseball cap, all the way down to his ripped, tight fitting jeans. He offers me a half smile and fuck does it make my heart beat faster.

No. I don't need to be crushing on some guy I only met a few minutes ago. Not after what I just went through.

What's wrong with me? Was getting my heart broken earlier not enough?

We don't talk long and even though he comes off friendly, he's also a bit standoffish. When he lifted his red hat, I noticed his sad dark eyes.

They were large, surrounded by a few crows feet and dark circles. He was older, a little on the thicker side and the whole scruffy look was working for him. He was definitely not the type of guy I would find back home.

After we part ways, I grab my last bag before walking back to my cabin. I leave all my decorations in the living room for later and use the number on the fridge to order groceries to be delivered, not forgetting to include a few bottles of wine, hot chocolate, two boxes of candy canes, and popcorn for my Christmas movie binge tomorrow.

Curiosity has me pulling back the curtains and I see Malcolm unloading planks of wood from his truck bed, while white flurries fall down on him. He carries a few pieces into his house before returning back for more. What does he need so much for? Is he building something?

I close the blinds, needing a better distraction, one that doesn't involve me watching my neighbor like a creeper through my window. There isn't a TV in the cabin but there is a shelf full of books and I did have my Kindle, phone, and laptop with plenty of Christmas movies downloaded. None of those things interest me at the moment so I sit on the green suede couch in silence, taking in the peaceful moment until the memories of earlier pull me away.

Slut.

Whore.

Homewrecker.

The words creep inside my head and stab at my heart like a grouping of sharp knives. I get to my feet and play Christmas music on my phone, turning it louder than the thoughts in my head. My stomach grumbles and instead of being in the mood for real food, I crave something sweet.

The taste of my mother's famous snickerdoodle cookies always helped put me in a better mood. Too bad it'll be a while before my delivery gets here and I doubt everything I need is already in the cabinets and fridge.

Shivering, I walk to the fireplace, staring down at the few logs sitting inside. I've never had to light my own fire before. Surely it can't be hard. Finding a lighter would be a good start. I search in all the kitchen drawers until I stumble upon a box of matches. Taking a deep breath, I hurry back to the living room and crumple to the ground after failing at my first few attempts of lighting the wood. My hands shake too much and when the matches don't slip from my fingers, the constant waving puts out the flame too soon.

I can't even handle a simple task like getting a fire going. I'm useless out here on my own. I try a few more times and end up throwing the box of matches at the wall, screaming in frustration. I crawl toward the bag by the door and open it, taking out all my decorations and setting them on the ground. I stroke a ceramic snowman my grandma gave me on the last Christmas we spent together. It's smooth and the paint is chipped in certain spots.

If she was still alive, she'd know all the right words to say to help me feel better and she'd never assume the worse of me right off the bat. I hold the snowman to my chest, a tear slipping down my cheek. Why am I out here? What good is it doing for me? Choosing to be alone right now was the worst idea I've ever had but it's not like I had any better alternatives.

A knock at the door has me shooting to my feet. I set the snowman on the mantel and rush toward the front of the house, wiping my eyes with the back of my hand. I open the door without confirming it isn't a burglar or serial killer first. A man wearing a thick coat and carrying a few grocery sacks stands in front of me, offering a friendly smile, his cheeks pink and rosy.

“Snow?”

I nod, taking a step forward. “That's me.”

He sighs in relief. “Oh good. I was worried I got the wrong place at first. No one ever stays here. You in town visiting for the holidays?”

“Yeah. I'm renting the place from a friend.” It's partially true. More like a friend's brother I've never met. I reach out for the bags and he releases them into my hands.

“Well welcome, happy to have you even if it's for only a little while. Always nice to see a new face around here. I'm Nick.”

“Thanks. It's my first day here and so far those I've met have been great and it's beautiful out here. I'm Snow, but you

already know that.”

“I do. I’m glad you’re enjoying your first day here and just wait until the snow sticks. It’s like walking right into a winter wonderland.” He shuffles from side to side. “I’m going to grab the rest of your groceries.”

I glance around searching for my beanie. “Should I help?”

He gives me a once over. “Is that the only jacket you have?”

“Yeah,” I say, tugging on my sleeves.

He frowns and shakes his head. “Then you stay here and keep warm. I’ll get the rest. No use in having you freeze to death. Hope you packed something thicker than that.”

I sigh as he heads back to the car. Not sure how many times I’m going to hear about needing a thicker jacket today. I would have brought a coat if I owned one. I didn’t exactly have time to prepare for my trip but it’s not like they know that.

When I see more movement outside my window, I again notice my gloomy looking neighbor and realize I’m not the only one who could use a pick me up.

I was always taught to make good with your neighbors and if the weather reports were right about all the snow coming in, I might be stuck with this guy for a while. Maybe taking him some snickerdoodle cookies will help put him in a better mood and earn me a new friend. After all, I could use a few sugary treats myself right now, along with something to keep my hands busy.

The man with the groceries steps back onto my porch carrying a full box. “Thought this might be easier. I can set it on the counter if you’d like.”

“Sure,” I say to the stranger who could be using this as some trap to take me by surprise and knock me over the head with my own wine bottles. I watch too many damn Lifetime movies for my own good.

He shakes off the snow before entering and walks toward the kitchen, glancing around. “It’s pretty cold in here. Having issues working the heater?”

Fumbling with my jacket, I shake my head. “I uh...haven’t taken the time to fully explore yet so haven’t found the thermostat.”

He sets the box on the counter and walks over the short hallway leading to the bedroom. “Not the first time I’ve been in this house. I’ve done some maintenance for the owner before.”

I arch a brow, stepping closer to where he’s flipping open a small white box on the wall.

“You deliver groceries and work in maintenance?”

He releases a soft chuckle. “Yeah. It’s nice to have the extra income around the holidays.” He closes the flap and releases a small sigh. “All done. Anything else I can help you with?”

I consider asking him to assist me with the fire but decide against it. I don’t want him to know I’m completely helpless. “Nope. I’m good. Thank you.”

“Sure thing. Happy Holidays.”

“Same to you.” I walk him to the door and wave one last time before shutting it behind him. I unload the groceries, leaving everything I need to make the cookies out on the counter. Searching the cabinets, I find mixing bowls and measuring cups.

I turn on the oven to heat while I mix the ingredients together in a bowl, humming Christmas tunes to myself. After laying the dough out on a cookie sheet, I slide the pan into the oven and set the timer.

Waiting for them to cook, I pull some gold plastic beads from my bag and dangle them below the kitchen bar, then hang some garland wrapped in lights around the door.

A stocking with my name stitched on it rests inside my suitcase. My grandmother handmade it for me when I was a kid. All the grandkids got one. I leave it in the bag, saving it for later.

The smell of cinnamon and vanilla wafts in the air, causing my stomach to growl. All I ate today was breakfast. I turned down Alecia’s offer earlier to eat lunch. There was no way I was stepping foot in a crowded restaurant in our town. Back where we lived news like mine spread like wildfire and even the people who don’t know me, know me. I wasn’t famous per se, but I did have a large following on YouTube. With my town being its smaller size, they praised anyone who got just a little big and well known.

When I remove the cookies from the oven, the smell is even more heavenly. I set them on the stove top to cool down and go back to filling the cabin with my decorations. I'm going to make the best of this situation and having the cabin look like Christmas spat up in it is a start.

I brought only a few lights with me, enough to light up a Christmas tree. I saw a tree farm on the way here and as I still have few days left before Christmas Eve, I plan to pick out the perfect Christmas tree whenever the roads are clear again.

Unable to find the extension cord I thought I packed, I walk up into the dusty attic, hoping I'll come across one since there didn't seem to be any in the house. Not only do I find an extension cord, I also stumble upon a box full of ornaments and more strings of lights. My Christmas heart is overjoyed.

After hurrying down with the box, I set it on the floor in front of the sofa, staring at it for a while, scratching my head, wondering how else I could put these Christmas lights to use. I'll need some tools if I plan to hang any outside on the trees and maybe even a ladder. As weird as it is to decorate a house I'm only staying in for a week, I need something to help keep me busy, and my spirits up.

The kitchen drawer not only has a box of Ziploc bags to place some cookies in, I also stumble on a few tools, including an outdoor staple gun. I always did love stringing lights outside with my dad growing up. Maybe I can borrow a ladder from my neighbor across the way. He definitely appears to be

the type of guy who uses one often. The man looks like he came straight out of one of those outdoor survivor catalogs.

Pinching it between my fingers, I sprinkle some more cinnamon sugar onto the cookies before stuffing a bunch in two bags. With a huge, forced smile on my face, and in my barely qualifiable jacket, I stomp my way back into the cold and knock on the door across the way, my fingers going numb by the time he finally answers.

Four

Malcolm

Malcolm

Bang bang bang.

A loud knock comes to the door and I sigh, setting down my empty plate in the sink to walk over and open it. A few more bangs come before I make it over to the impatient visitor. “Okay, okay, I’m coming.”

I don’t expect to see the new guy from across the way smiling at me when I finally pull the door open. He is still dressed for spring time and that alone has me shaking my head. It takes me a while to notice what he has in his hands. When I do, my head tilts in confusion. “Did you need something? Still haven’t found a coat, I see.”

He laughs, shaking his head, causing snow to shake off his hair. His hat is gone, leaving his wavy, blond hair visible. “No, silly. I came bearing gifts.” He holds up two small baggies between us. “They are homemade snickerdoodle cookies. I couldn’t find a container in the cabin.”

I lean against the entryway, my eyes widening. “You mean to tell me you made those today?”

He nods. “No, I’m lying and bought them at the shop down the road and took them out of a box to put them in bags to trick you.” He smirks, cocking his head and his teeth chatter. “Can I come in?” He glances behind me. “I can feel my body slowly shifting into a snowman.”

I hold back a groan and step to the side to allow him to pass. “I suppose you could for a little bit. I have to get back to work soon,” I lie. “And you wouldn’t be so cold if you were dressed properly.”

His shoulder brushes mine and wearing a curious expression, he takes a look around. “Do you live here alone?”

“Yes, you can set the cookies on the table over there.” I point toward the kitchen.

He walks in the direction I lead him, glancing around. “Do you have any plates?”

“For what?”

“To build a pyramid with.” He shakes his head, chuckling. “For the cookies, silly. Unless you don’t believe in using dish wear.”

I roll my eyes. “Sure I have plates. I didn’t think you expected me to eat them now and wasn’t aware this was a social call or I would have worn my good sweat pants.”

He gives me a once over, his eyes heated. “Yes, I came by so we could enjoy them together. You must not do this often.”

I place my hand on the nearby counter. “Do what often?”

“Socialize with other people.”

I scoff. “Actually I talk to people all day long. It’s kind of a requirement in the work I’m in.”

I approach the cabinets, pulling two plates down and setting them on the table. Opening one of the bags, he sets two cookies on each plate. “What is it you do for a living?”

We plop down in seats opposite of each other, and I can’t stop staring at the way the sugar remains on his lips after he takes the first bite of his cookie.

The soft dough melts in my mouth, the cinnamon springing my taste buds to life the moment it comes in contact with my tongue. I’ve never been much of an eater of sweet treats but these cookies could definitely change my mind.

“I build furniture. I run my own business, three years in the making. Are you some baker or something? Because if not, you may want to switch careers. These are probably the best cookies I’ve ever eaten.”

He nibbles on another cookie and I notice how his lids shimmer purple when he stares down at his food, the sliver of black eyeliner highlighting his already mesmerizing eyes. What’s wrong with me? Never have I stared at another man this much before. “No, actually, I only bake for fun. Me and my family always bake during the holidays. It’s a tradition. I’m actually a part time waiter at a diner and a YouTube makeup artist on the side.”

I squint in confusion. “I’m not even sure what that last part even means. Exactly what is a YouTube makeup artist?”

He laughs, swallowing his food. “Wow, I knew you were older but I didn’t realize it was by that much.”

“How old do you think I am?”

He taps his chin. “I’m guessing maybe late thirties.”

“Actually I’m forty-two. I’m guessing you’re no older than nineteen.”

He laughs, rolling his eyes. “More like twenty-two. Here, let me show you what I do whenever I’m not delivering plates to people’s tables.”

He pulls out his phone and does some tapping on the screen before setting it down in front of me. It was him demonstrating how to put on concealer to help cover up dark circles. I lean in for a closer look and he’s wearing the same smile in the video he has on now, except it was more relaxed and genuine.

It’s a bit forced now and doesn’t match the sadness in his eyes. I wonder if that’s why he’s here. Is he running from something? “Looks like you’re really enjoying yourself in the videos. Do you plan on doing it permanently?”

He nods, waving his hand from side to side. “Sort of. I would like to open my own studio someday. This is to help gain me some exposure and I love making them. Sometimes I have people send me random combos of makeup that they don’t think I can pull off. I always love the challenge. I’ve

recently gained a few sponsors too which I'll probably lose now." He sighs, staring down at the table.

Not wanting to dig too much into his business by asking more questions, I glance at the screen again watching him dab his skin with foundation on a sponge. "Well, it looks good to me."

He chuckles and grabs the phone from my hand. "The look isn't even complete yet, silly."

I swallow hard, realizing I don't know a damn thing about makeup. "I think it's safe to say I don't know anything about this stuff. Nancy never wore much of it." Before I could take back her name, it's already too late.

His head tilts to the side and he removes another cookie from the bag. "Who's Nancy?"

"My wife." I hadn't said that in a while and it felt so foreign. Not many people asked about her anymore and the people who did know her are usually afraid to bring her name up. I stopped wearing my ring after a while because the reminder became too painful and so did the questions about if my wife would be joining me for dinner or if my wife enjoys the furniture I make, every time someone's eyes fell on my wedding band.

He shuffles in his seat, glancing around. "Oh, I thought you said you lived alone?"

I release a soft sigh, shuffling my plate around. "I do." I don't say anything else and he goes quiet for a few seconds

before opening his mouth again. “Oh. Okay then. Are you guys in a long distance thing or something?”

“Sure, you can call it that,” I say, ready to change the subject. He’s a stranger. I don’t owe him anything. It’s hard not to blurt out answers to all his questions though when he looks at me with large doe eyes.

He nods, going silent, shifting uncomfortably in his chair. Great, I made shit awkward. I have a habit of doing that. It was my fault for accidentally bringing up Nancy. I was so lost in our conversation, I didn’t even give it a second thought. I haven’t talked so comfortably with someone in that way in a long time. It was so nice, I forgot where I was and the world felt right again for a little while.

Then he asked too many questions, and I was talking about my wife in the past tense—it was like reopening a healed wound.

He glances between me and the door. “I should probably get back before it gets darker outside. I still need to figure out how to light my fireplace.”

I arch a brow. “You don’t know how to start a fire?”

He chuckles, not meeting my eyes. “You would think anyone could handle such a simple task. Not this spoiled, city boy apparently. Never had a reason to light one.”

“I guess I can help. Consider it my way of thanking you for the cookies.”

“Really?” His eyes brighten. “I’d hate to take you away from work more than I already have.”

I wave him off and stand from my chair. “It’s not any trouble and the beauty of working for yourself is, you can take as long a break as you want.”

A smile tugs at his lips. “Great.” He gets up from the chair and waits for me by the door while I set the plates in the sink.

“Aren’t you forgetting your cookies?”

“Nah.” He yanks the zipper on his jacket higher. “I brought them for you.”

I nod, grabbing my jacket from the entryway closet and yank down my hat from the hook. “I don’t think I’ve ever had so many sweets in my house at one time before. Could be dangerous.”

His eyes widen and he holds his hand to his chest. “Really? It’s only like ten cookies.”

“I don’t bake and try not to tempt myself by keeping any of it in the house.”

“Well, it’s almost Christmas and no one should limit themselves during the holidays.”

I pat my stomach. “One of my customers is a baker and with all the bread she brings me, I gotta make sure I set some guidelines somewhere.”

He chuckles and opens the door. A cold gust of wind hits us in the face, causing us both to turn away.

“You’re right, I am not dressed warm enough,” Snow says, stepping onto the porch first. I close the door and follow behind him, trying my best to keep up with his rushed steps. What started out being a quiet evening alone in front of the TV has turned into something else entirely and every time Snow looks back to smile at me on the way to his house, I become more okay with it.

Five

Snow

Snow

I struggle getting the key in the door with my frozen fingers. After a few minutes of fighting with the door, Malcolm holds out his hand.

“Allow me.”

I give him the keys and he gets the door open with no issues, gesturing me to go inside first. Shivering and wrapping my arms around myself, I rush forward, relaxing into the welcoming warmth of the living room.

“I should have given you the keys from the start,” I say, taking off my jacket.

“Yeah, maybe but then again most people know how to open a door.” He grins in my direction, pulling off his hat and setting it on one of the bar stools. Fuck is the gray peppering in his hair sexy. I clench my fists, slamming them into my thighs. He’s married. The man has a wife.

The last thing I should be doing is lusting after another taken man. Even if Malcolm is a fantasy come true. He's seriously one of those small town men you see in Hallmark films. He's stand offish, mysterious, owns a small furniture business, is drool worthy, and here he is coming to my rescue by lighting my fireplace. Sounds a lot dirtier than it is.

"You got a lighter or matches?" Malcolm grabs a few pages of newspaper from under the coffee table and kneels in front of the fireplace.

"Yeah." I rush to the kitchen and grab the matches from the counter. "Right here." I stick out my hand, and his fingers brush mine as he grabs the box, sending shivers down my spine.

"Thanks." He strikes the match and lights the tip of the newspaper before lowering it to the wood and drops it in between the two logs. The flames grow, slowly spreading and he tosses more newspaper into the fire. Standing up, he grabs one of the pokers and moves the logs around.

"You've got a fire now. If it starts going low again and you're not ready for it to be out, you can add in some more wood."

"Wow. You did that in half the time it took me to retrieve the matches." Hopefully it doesn't take me very long to find some more wood. I don't remember seeing any more in the house. I could always go wandering in the back of the house for some but not sure I should risk being mauled by some wild animal in the woods.

He laughs, his body shakes. “There isn’t much to it really. The newspaper, or any paper really, will help get it going faster.”

“I’ll keep that in mind. Thanks again.”

“Yeah.” He waves his hand around. “Don’t mention it.” He stares around. “If you need any help with anything else just holler.”

“Will do.” I walk him to the door, trying to think of something else he can fix for me to keep him here longer. Sadly, the only thing I want assistance with will no doubt have him running straight out the door, never coming back.

“See ya around then,” he says, heading back into the snow. I wave him off before closing the door on the blistering air rushing toward me. My teeth chatter and I move toward the fire, warming up in front of it, stretching out my arms and breathing in the smell of burning wood. It’s always been one of my favorite smells.

Going toward the kitchen, my eyes land on a familiar red hat. I lift it up, running my fingers over the front words, “Number 1 Dad.”

My eyebrows bunch together. I didn’t realize he was a dad. I didn’t see any family photos or toys in his cabin. Did his wife move somewhere else with his kid? As much as I wanted to ask him more questions, I could tell I was making him uncomfortable and that’s the last thing I wanted to do. It was clear by the weariness in his eyes he wanted to take back saying his wife’s name the minute I asked about who she was.

He wasn't wearing a wedding ring and appeared grateful when the conversation fully shifted. Sadness and loneliness filled his eyes and staring into them for too long nearly broke my heart. Tonight, I wasn't the only one in his kitchen hurting but something tells me his pain isn't new and runs much deeper than I can imagine.

I toss on my jacket and scarf, before pulling the door open again with the hat still in my hand. The frigid air has my body going stiff and my whole face aches, a rush of cold air sweeping through my eyes. Unable to hold them open for long, I hurry back into the cabin and slam the door shut. I can always give him his hat tomorrow. What would he need with it now anyway? I'll take it over to him first thing when I wake up.

Setting the hat down, I take off my jacket and walk into the bedroom to change into my favorite flannel pajamas. I grab my fluffy Christmas robe and as I'm carrying it into the living room, a piece of paper falls to the floor. My heart stammers as I slowly bend down to pick it up. Drawn on the other side is a lopsided heart with words written underneath that read:

I hope you think of me the next time you put this on.

Xoxo Brian

I swallow down the lump in my throat and tear the piece of paper to shreds, holding back the tears. I won't cry anymore for this asshole. No matter how much he's wrecked my life. It's the holidays and I don't have much to go back home to as it is; I won't let him take this too.

I close my eyes, taking a few breaths, and when I open them again, I rush over to the trash can and toss the shredded pieces inside. He's the last person I want to think about out here. Why can't I just make the images of us together go away. Everyone makes it sound so easy when they say not to waste your time on someone who doesn't deserve it. It's anything but.

I grit my teeth wishing I could toss all the memories of Brian away in a box and bury it deep under the ground, so far down it can never resurface again. Sliding into my robe, I pull it tight to my body and grab a bottle of wine from the fridge. I place a few cookies on a plate, tuck the bottle under my arm, and settle myself on the large couch in front of the fire. I lose myself in the flames, drinking straight from the bottle of Moscato in between stuffing my face with cookies.

When my eyes grow heavy, I set the wine down and curl up on my side, placing my focus back on the scorching wood and as my eyes fight to stay open, I watch as the logs engulf in flames the way my day has.

Six

Malcolm

I search everywhere around the house again and no matter how many cushions I turn upside down, the hat is nowhere to be found. I couldn't have left it at the cabin across the way, could I? I never take it off anywhere other than home. Even then, it's hard to separate myself from it. It's the one piece linking me to them that I'm able to carry with me everywhere I go.

My heart clenches, my throat growing tight when it's nowhere outside or in my truck. Leaning against the door, I close my eyes trying to think of when I had it last. I was so exhausted last night after my unexpected guest, I fell asleep watching home videos of me and Nancy on the couch. My eyes pop open, landing on the cabin across the way.

Pulling my jacket closer to my body, I march across the road, stomping my feet into the snow. He doesn't look like the type that would be awake at six a.m. but it was hard to care when something so precious to me was inside with him.

Before I can give it another thought, my hand comes in contact with the door a little harder than I planned for it to.

The door is yanked open after the third knock and a pair of tired eyes stare back at me. “Oh...uh...”

“My hat,” I say a little too quickly.

“Huh?” Snow says, rubbing his soft blinking eyes.

“Where is it? I know I left it here.”

His eyes widen and he steps back. “You’re here for your hat. Sorry, I’m not fully awake until about ten a.m.” He chuckles softly, gesturing me inside. “Come on in and I’ll grab it.”

I follow closely behind him, shutting the door. Glancing around, I suddenly remember setting it down on the wooden stool in the kitchen. “It was here, wasn’t it?”

He glances behind me and nods. “Yeah but I saw how dirty it was and thought I’d give it a nice wash. It’s air drying in the bathroom...”

“You what?” My voice grows louder, my heart racing in my chest.

“It...uh was really dirty and I thought it would be nice if—”

He jumps when I slam my hand against the counter. I take a deep breath, trying to calm down but my anger doesn’t stop rising. “Why would you do that?”

“I—” His bottom lip trembles. “I was wanting to do something nice. You looked like the kind of guy who doesn’t

get much time for yourself so—”

“You washed something of mine without my permission?”

“Look, just let me get it. You’ll see that it’s fine.” He rushes to the bathroom and the moment my eyes land on the clean ball cap in his hand missing all traces of my Henry’s painted hands, my stomach shifts and my feet are so heavy I can’t move forward.

“See.” He holds his hand out. “All good.” He offers a reassuring smile and I’m having a hard time reaching for the unrecognizable item. He glances between me and the hat, his face falling. “What’s wrong?”

“You ruined it,” I say between clenched teeth.

“What do you mean?”

I snatch it from his hand, taking him by surprise. “You had no right touching my stuff. No fucking right,” I yell, my throat aching with each word.

“I don’t understand,” he says, his voice cracking.

“A person like you wouldn’t, would they?”

“Wh-what?”

“You come here from the city, probably escaping a perfect life and too spoiled to realize what you have, taking it all for granted. You don’t know what it’s like to lose anything and your worst day is probably when the coffee shop swaps out skim milk for whole.”

His brows furrow. “That’s not...I’m sorry, Malcolm, if—”

“Don’t bother. There’s no use. You can’t take back what you did.” I shove the hat back on my head and rush out the door, slamming it so hard snow falls off the roof. Not thinking clearly and my fury still taking over, my eyes fog as I go back to my house. I make a beeline for my room and toss everything out of my nightstand until I come across what I’m searching for. My eyes grow heavy, my heart aching as I trace my fingers over the picture in my hand. My son and I are painting with smiles on our faces.

A tear slips off my cheek landing on where my hand is pressing his to a piece of blue paper, making an imprint to create an antler. It was something we were making for Nancy. She had made a statement about how she couldn’t wait until our son was old enough to create masterpieces for us after seeing her nephew’s pictures on her sister’s fridge. I wanted to surprise her. I placed it in a picture frame, wrapped it, and before I could give it to her, the accident happened.

My chest caves and I clutch the picture to my chest, falling to the carpet. I don’t know how long I sit here but it feels like forever before I’m finally able to peel myself off the floor. I place almost everything back in the drawer, minus the picture of me and Henry. I leave it out on the nightstand before heading into the kitchen. The house is suddenly too quiet and guilt creeps into my heart, weighing it down in my chest. Snow. I slam my hand against my forehead. Fuck.

How could I’ve been such an asshole to him? He didn’t know. He only had good intentions and instead of saying thank you for taking the time to clean my hat, I told him all those

horrible things instead. It didn't matter if I was right or not. It was wrong of me to yell at him that way and make all those accusations. We don't know each other well and we probably never will now. He more than likely thinks of me as the crazy man with anger issues that lives across the way. Who gets upset over a clean hat?

If only that's all it was.

I sigh and pace the living room, thinking of a way to make it right. I don't know how to bake. I eat mostly microwaved dinners or take out these days. Then a smile spreads across my lips as a thought enters my mind. Inside the cabin he's renting, he had a ceramic snowman sitting on the mantel. It was the only ornament he had out. It must have been special to him. He handled it a lot judging by the chipped paint. On the front of its stomach it had the letter S engraved.

I head out back to my shop, grab a few smaller blocks of wood, and sit at my desk with the image of Snow's snowman buried in my memory. I use an app on my phone to fill the room with music as I carve the wood into the right shape. I switch from my knife to my chisel as I create the face and buttons. I finish him off with a hat and scarf before adding paint.

I wet the snowman so I can see the indents of the carving better. A little red paint gets on my hands as I'm adding two last strokes to the ribbon of his hat. Perfect. Grabbing some old wire from one of my scrap boxes, I cut and bend it to make

arms while I wait for the paint to dry. Setting everything on the desk, I go back to my house to get a drink and wash my hands.

A loud wailing coming from outside has me rushing to the front door. I yank it open, tilting my head to the side when I see my new neighbor slinging an ax forward, missing the wood he's trying to chop. I chuckle, sighing softly. Closing the door behind me, I jog over, my stomach grumbling, reminding me all I ate today was half an apple, washed down with a cup of black coffee. "Need some help?" I ask, as I step closer.

Snow looks up with flushed cheeks, his whole body shivering. He shakes his head. "No thanks," he says, going back to his current task, hitting the corner of his target, only a tiny piece separating, flying in the air.

I laugh, stepping closer. "You sure?"

"Yes. Now go away." His eyes water and he brings the ax down again. It flies out of his hand, landing on the ground.

"I'm going to take that as my cue to step in. I'd rather you not lose a limb and I'd feel responsible if I walked away and came back to only parts of you."

His teeth chatter as he glares my way. "Are you only helping me so you can yell at me again?"

I shake my head and move toward the ax, bending down to retrieve it from the ground. "I actually want to apologize. I was an asshole to you this morning and I'm sorry. You were only trying to do a thoughtful thing and I got too into my feelings to realize it."

He bites his lip, tugging on his scarf. “Okay.”

“Thank you by the way.”

“Huh?” His eyes squint together.

“For washing my hat.” I try to smile but only one side of my lips move.

“Yeah, sure.” He stares into my eyes and then at the hat while chewing on his lip.

“It was kind of my first gift from my son,” I say quietly. “My first Father’s Day. He wasn’t born yet but his mom picked it out while she was pregnant.”

“Oh,” is all he says.

“Yeah. The paint was from the first day we did a craft together. He was just a baby so it was mostly me doing it,” I say in between soft chuckles.

“Ohhh.” His eyes grow wide. “Did he leave with your wife?”

“In a way, yes.” I try to say more but the words get caught in my throat.

He smiles softly, placing his hand on mine and it’s like a fire burns between our skin. It’s the sweetest warmth I’ve felt in a long time and I can’t help but lean into it.

“Can you show me how to use it?” he asks, pointing at the ax. “You can’t come to my rescue every time.”

So far it hasn’t felt like a burden. “Yeah,” I say, glad he changed the subject before I could get lost in the bad

memories again. It was harder to talk about it than it was to think about. I felt my world shattering all over again as if I was hearing the words, "*Your wife and son didn't make it,*" for the first time.

How can something that happened over a year ago still feel so fresh? Why does saying they're dead out loud make me feel as if my heart is splitting in two? I'm pretty sure it's been broken this whole time because a part of it still feels gone and buried with them.

My breathing grows heavy and fingers squeeze around mine. "Whenever you're ready."

Something tells me he's not talking about chopping wood anymore. I focus on his smile and the ache in my heart lessens, the tension in my throat fading, making it easier to breathe again.

How can someone hold the power of making me both so angry and calm all in the same day?

Seven

Snow

Snow

A shiver runs through me and I wrap my arms around my body. Did it get colder in the last few minutes? Snow has fallen here and there but not much has added to the ground. I hide my shaking hands under my pits, shifting where I stand. The nervousness added with my stress and the emotional toll I've dealt with the last two days isn't helping my medical condition.

I wasn't ready to tell Malcolm the real reason I struggled to hold the ax. It was easier to say I was clumsy and accident prone. I preferred people to look at me like I was this hopeless mess rather than treat me like I was incapable. Even when sometimes I feel that way. Truth be told, I'd never used an ax before. Didn't have a reason to. Chopping my own wood hadn't been something I pictured myself ever having to do. I don't have a fireplace back home and there were stores everywhere carrying lots of wood already cut up for me if I did.

There's no way I'm driving into town in this weather. It was hard enough for me to put on clothes today with my unsteady hands. I'm mostly fine when at rest but sometimes the simplest tasks during my bad days take longer than usual, causing frustration to rise in me. I must have screamed at the air five times, stomping my feet while trying to buckle my jeans.

I take a deep breath, watching Malcolm chop the first piece of wood. The ax comes back down and it splits again. "You paying attention?"

I nod, scared if I speak, my teeth will chatter too much for him to understand what I'm saying.

He releases a deep sigh, setting the ax against the stump. "Here, you need this more than me. My hoodie should be enough to keep me warm for now." He slides off his coat, handing it to me.

"No way." I take a step back, holding out my hands. "That's yours. I'm fine."

He grunts, shoving the coat at my hands. "Take it. If I need to I'll run inside and grab another. I should've offered to lend you one yesterday but didn't even think about it at the time. It had been a long day."

Judging by the exhaustion in his heavy eyes, today must have not been any less daunting and it's not even halfway over yet.

I glance between him and the jacket, my body begging to be wrapped in the warmth my hands got to sample. I can still use

the cold as an excuse for my trembling hands. Jackets don't completely keep the cold from touching you. "Okay. Thank you." I take the coat and put it on, feeling instantly warmer when I slip my arm through the first sleeve. Once I get my other arm in, I zip up the front, lifting my arm to hide my trembling fingers. The large zipper helps me grasp it better with my unsteady fingers. I pull the hood over my head, my cheeks already stinging less.

"You look warmer already." He smiles and it's different than before, lighting up his eyes. My breath catches in my throat the longer he looks at me.

"I am. Now you can continue your demonstration."

He bends over, picking up the ax. "I think I showed you enough for you to try on your own now." He hands the ax to me and I stare at it for way too long before I reach for it. My fingers shake as they wrap around the handle. "My hands are too cold."

"Stick your hand in the right pocket."

My brows bunch together. "Is that some kind of trick? How can I hold an ax with one hand?"

He laughs, his shoulders shaking and his whole face beams. Damn, just when I thought he couldn't get more gorgeous, he proves my ass wrong.

"No, goofball. There's an extra pair of gloves in there."

Smiling, I slide my hand in the pocket. "So there is. Do you always carry two pairs of gloves on you?"

“Sometimes I leave them in my coat in case I forget to grab some on my way out. Makes life easier. These are my favorite pair though.” He stretches his fingers out in front of him, the brown leather wrapping tightly around his wrists bringing attention to the small tattoo partly hidden beneath his hoodie.

“Well I’m glad one of us has a somewhat boy scout mindset. I swear I’m just out here wandering around the world lost.” At least it’s what Brian always said, along with other things I usually laughed at so he wouldn’t see how much his statements bothered me.

“Here let me do it,” he’d say. “Otherwise we’d get nowhere real fast.”

So when Malcolm said similar words, I felt small, and anger settled in my bones again. My stomach sinks and I focus on the wood in front of me, ready to prove them both wrong. I can do this.

“You are stronger than you think,” my grandma would say whenever I’d come to her feeling lost and hopeless.

“I’m ready,” I say, stepping closer to my target.

“Hold on.” He steps behind me and moves my arms a little, straightening my back. His breath heats my cheek as he looks over my shoulder, reaching for my hands. He adjusts my fingers, and offers me a reassuring smile. My heart speeds up so fast, I almost think it’s going to jump out of my chest.

“Now you’re ready,” he says, his words tickling my ear.

I suck in a breath, my body relaxing with him so close. I haven't felt this sense of calmness in a long time. Brian and my dad have never offered to show me anything before.

They'd get irritated and impatient then end up doing it themselves, assuming I wouldn't catch on. Or they'd take one look at my shaking hands and automatically deem me incapable. It wasn't true. I could do anything anyone else could. Sometimes it just took me longer.

I take another deep breath, gripping onto the ax to help steady my hands. I lift it in the air and then swing down the same way Malcolm did. The wood splits and my heart leaps in my chest. Feeling I can take on the world, I chop a few more pieces before raising my hands with the ax in the air.

I release a soft chuckle. "And just like that I'm a professional wood chopper!" I say, bouncing in place.

Malcolm laughs. "Alright. Don't jump too high with that ax still in your hands."

My eyes widen landing on the ax, and I quickly set it down. We stare at each other as I look back up and both burst out laughing. "I guess I can't blame you after I allowed it to fly out of my hands earlier."

"You did good. See, it wasn't too hard, was it?"

"I guess not. I did have a good teacher," I say, grinning widely.

"Can't argue with you there," he says cheekily. "Anything else you need me to show you?"

I shake my head, biting my tongue to keep from mentioning all the things I wouldn't mind having him help me with. "I think you can take the rest of the day off."

He nods, glancing back at his house. "Well don't hesitate to come knocking if anything comes up."

Before he can turn all the way around, I call after him. "Wait, Malcolm. Your coat and gloves."

He presses his lips together. "Hold onto them. I have plenty of others."

"Thanks." I shove my hands in my pockets, shifting in place. "Would you like to come over for lunch? The least I can do is feed you some soup to help you warm up after forcing you to be out here in the cold with me in nothing but a hoodie."

"You didn't force me." His chest rises and falls, his lips twisting. "But if you insist, I won't say no to free food."

I laugh and collect the chopped wood from the tree stump. "Great. It should be ready by now. I hope you like potato soup."

"You had me at potato." He follows me into the house.

"Want me to take that?" He points to the wood. "I can get another fire started while you check on the food."

"Actually, I'd like to start it this time."

He smiles, nodding. "Okay. Well, how about I put the wood by the fireplace for you until then."

“Sure. Thanks.” After I hand him the wood, he carries it to the living room while I check the soup. The savory smell hits my nose, causing my mouth to water the moment I open the top of the pot.

I grab the ladle and stir before scooping up enough to do a taste test. The warm liquid slips over my tongue and down my throat. My stomach rumbles, wanting more after I swallow down the small amount. “It’s ready,” I say, setting the ladle down and reaching into the drawer for a clean one. If my mouth touches something of his, I rather him be aware of it, and I’d also prefer it to happen in a different way.

“It smells delicious. Haven’t smelled anything that good in a long time,” he says stepping behind me, his boots scraping against the kitchen tile.

“Take a seat and I’ll fix us some in a bowl.”

“You sure you don’t need any help?” he asks, stepping closer, his heavy presence nearly overwhelming. His woody scent mixes in with the food, making my head spin. How can a person who doesn’t even wear any scented soap or cologne smell so good all the time? Brian was always wearing strong scented deodorant and expensive aftershave. He was always hiding behind something else.

Malcolm is all him and I want to be wrapped in all of it. This isn’t good. I need to stop falling for some straight, possibly taken man. Even if he is single, he’s definitely emotionally unavailable and shouldn’t I be too? It’s hard to remember everything I’ve been through in recent days

whenever he's near. Being around him feels so damn good. He brings this warmth with him I never knew I could experience from another person.

"Yeah," I finally manage to say. "I got it. You're a guest, remember?"

"Alright then." The chair scrapes against the floor when he pulls it from under the table. He plops down, scooting forward.

I fill two bowls and carry them to the table, along with a couple of spoons. "You thirsty?"

"I could drink something," he replies, leaning over to inhale the steaming soup in front of him, satisfaction clear on his face. When was the last time he had a homemade meal? I noticed the take out containers and microwave dinner boxes in his open trash bin when I entered his kitchen looking for plates yesterday.

"What would you like?" I rest my hand on one of the empty chairs.

"Anything you have is fine."

"Iced tea?"

"That works. Unsweetened if you have it."

I grit my teeth. "All I have is sweet but I can probably make ano—"

"Nah, don't worry about it. Water is fine."

"Okay. After I pour our drinks, I return to the table and Malcolm is shoving the spoon in his mouth, humming around

it.

“Someone’s hungry.”

He laughs and I swear it grows lighter each time. “I hadn’t eaten much today and this is delicious. Probably the best soup I’ve ever had.”

“You must have not eaten much soup before if you think that.”

His brows bunch together. “Why do you say that? You’re a really good cook and baker. Not many people have the gift of being both.”

I wave my hand at him, placing my spoon in my bowl. “That’s sweet, it is, but you don’t have to be so nice.”

“Something tells me you don’t take compliments very well.”

His dark eyes sear into mine, holding me hostage.

“I take them okay.”

He sips more of his soup, his eyes not leaving me, and I sigh.

“Alright, fine. I don’t always. Also Brian told me more than once, my soup was okay and that he’s had better cookies from his ex.”

His forehead wrinkles. “Whoever this Brian is sounds like a complete ass and he can’t be more wrong. I’ve tasted okay before and this is beyond that. Trust me, this is amazing.”

“Says the guy who is used to food he heats in a microwave.”

“I didn’t always. Nancy used to do most of the cooking. The only time I did was when I was able to use the grill.”

“Not so good when it comes to using the stove?”

“I’ve burned more than enough bacon and fish to know the stove life isn’t for me. Cooking was just never one of my things. Now heating up soup, beans, and using the toaster is definitely something I can handle.” He opens his mouth to talk again and stops.

We finish our food in silence and afterward Malcolm helps me take everything to the sink. I turn down his offer to help me load the dishwasher and convince him to have a seat in the living room. When I’m done cleaning up my mess in the kitchen, I find him flipping through the book I forgot I left on one of the cushions earlier today.

I often read in the mornings on my days off for a little while before dressing and getting around to whatever I had to get done for the day. It settles me and puts my head in a good place. My tastes vary from smutty romance and cozy mysteries to fantasy and horror. I’m a mood reader so each day I read a different trope or genre. Malcolm laughs, turning the page.

“Enjoying yourself?” I ask, plopping in the empty space next to him.

“A little. You like romcoms, I see.”

“Sometimes. It’s what I need right now. Laughing is the perfect medicine on tough days.”

He frowns. “Hopefully it wasn’t needed because of me.”

I shake my head. “No. Don’t worry. You were only a small part of my need to get out of my head earlier.”

“I’m sorry again.”

Leaning back against the couch, I sigh. “It’s okay, really.”

“It’s not.” He closes the book and rests a hand on my knee. My heart leaps. He’s touching me. Is he aware of where his hand is? If so, does he know what he’s doing to me?

“You’re nothing like that and that’s clearer the more I get to know you. I was wrong to assume. I should know better than anyone not to make snap judgments.”

“You mean there’s more to you than the outer mountain man exterior?” I ask, pressing my hand to my chest.

He shakes his head. “Believe it or not, whenever I’m not out chopping wood and climbing trees, I’m in the city fighting crime and saving babies from burning buildings.”

Laughter spills from me and I rest my hand on his. “I figured as much. You do kind of have this whole *Smallville* thing going on.”

Body tensing, his gaze drops to our hands, and he slowly slides his away, placing it on the couch. “Yeah uh.” He swallows hard. “It’s pretty cold in here and soon the heater won’t be enough.” His gaze drops to the unlit fireplace.

“Oh right.” I jump up from the couch, my cheeks heating. I got so caught up in the moment, I no longer knew what I was

doing anymore either. He was only being friendly and here I am wanting it to be more than it is. It can't be.

"Don't forget the newspaper," he says, taking some more pages from under the table before standing up to hand them to me.

"Right." My mind is such a jumbled mess after being so close to him and having our hands touch, I'm surprised I remembered how to move my legs. I collect the paper from him and grab the matches from the mantel. I replace the old wood with the new logs and shove the paper between two pieces before lighting the part sticking out. Standing up, I grab the poker, spreading the fire around.

A smile plays on my lips as I set the poker on the stand, stepping back. "Today is turning into a long list of firsts."

A large hand rests on my shoulder. "The firsts of many."

"I can't see me needing to do any of this back home in the city but hey, at least I'm set while being out here."

"How long are you here for?" he asks, keeping his hand on me. I don't move because I'm scared that if I do it will be a long while before he touches me again. If I was smarter, I'd put distance between us but whenever he's this close my brain short circuits and I can't figure out how to use my legs.

"A week." Or more if needed. Who even knows if I still have my job at the diner. Everything that's happened can't be good for business. Customers will probably think the worst of me now and won't want me serving their food. I can't blame

them. If I was a stranger looking at everything from the outside, I might feel the same way. The last few days have taught me so much though. There's always more going on than what's sitting right in front of you.

“So you'll be here for Christmas then.”

“Yeah. Will you?”

He retracts his hand quickly as if forgetting he ever placed it there to begin with. “I'm always here.” He shoves his hands in his pockets. “I have some guests coming over. Nothing formal though. If you'd like, you could join us for Christmas dinner.”

“Who will be doing the cooking? Will it be Marie Calendars or Lean Cuisine?”

He laughs. “Neither. My sister in-law plans on cooking up a feast. She and Nancy always loved preparing Christmas dinner together.”

His in-laws still come by for holidays but he doesn't say anything about Nancy being there. My heart aches at the revelation. “Nancy didn't leave, did she?” Without meaning to I ask this out loud. It's too late to take back the question once it's out of my mouth.

He stares at me, his face paling and eyes going cold.

“I'm sorry...I shouldn't have.”

“You're right, you shouldn't. You're really good at blurting out whatever's on your mind, aren't you?” His jaw twitches and the fury I saw earlier is back.

“Malcolm, I’m sorry. You mentioned family coming and... it’s none of my business.” Stupid. Stupid. I have a problem blurting out things when I shouldn’t. My mouth often gets ahead of my brain and it’s something I need to work on.

“No. It isn’t. I don’t even know why I thought it was a good idea to come inside for lunch. It was a mistake.” His face hardens. “I have to go.” He pauses in front of the door. “You can still come by if you want. Just maybe dial it down on the questions.” With that he opens the door and walks out, slamming it shut behind him. I sink into the couch and my phone vibrates in my pocket. I pull it free and the number on the screen has my stomach twisting.

Brian: We need to talk.

I guess he decided to unblock me when it worked in his favor. Uninterested in anything he has to say, I delete the message and hit the block button on my end. Fuck him. He can save his energy and go put it toward the marriage he forgot to tell me about.

I swallow back a scream and collapse to my side, burying my face in the throw pillow. As much as I wanted answers before, they are no longer needed. Neither is Malcolm’s pity dinner.

Eight

Malcolm

Malcolm

I enter my house, slamming the door shut behind me. It was my fault. I mentioned Claire coming over and how she would cook with Nancy for the holidays. Of course he would be curious as to why Nancy's sister was coming over and she wasn't. I could tell by the shock on his face at his own words, he didn't mean to ask about Nancy.

Every time we talk, I blurt out memories and topics I usually struggle to bring up at other times. Why does he make it so easy? What is it about him that opens up a part of me I thought I shut a long time ago.

His sunken eyes are burned into my memory and I hate having them there, the sadness gnawing at my heart. It was my fault again. My emotions keep getting the best of me and I need to get a hold on them somehow. There's a reason I don't get invited to many things anymore. Everyone's too afraid of saying the wrong thing.

How did I allow myself to become this person? Nancy wouldn't have wanted this for me. I don't either. My phone vibrates in my back pocket as I head for my workshop. I answer it, my steps coming to a halt when a soft, unwelcoming voice comes from the other end.

“Malcolm?”

“Hey, Claire,” I was trying not to make my annoyance clear. She hasn't left me any messages since last week. I was hoping her silence meant she changed her mind in coming to visit. Maybe she's calling to let me know she can't make it. She and Nancy don't really have any other family and her husband isn't close to his.

“Hey. How are you?”

“I'm alright.” I continue walking to the shed, pushing my way inside.

“You don't sound like you are.”

I sigh, clenching my hand around the phone. “I am. Just coming inside from the cold.”

“Well I'm glad to hear you're holding up okay over there. We should be heading your way the day after tomorrow, hopefully getting in before dark.”

I grit my teeth. “Great. I'll get the guest room ready for y'all. I have a blow up mattress for Cameron I can set up in the room you're staying in by the time y'all get here.”

“Don't you have three bedrooms?” she asks, already knowing the answer to her own question.

“Yes, but only one guest room.”

“What about the one that used to be Henry’s? Surely you’ve cleared it out by now.”

I clench my fists, my jaw tightening. “It’s unavailable. Cameron can share a room with you and your husband.”

“Sounds like you’re not doing as good as you say. It’s been over a year, Malcolm. Continuing to stay in the past isn’t healthy. When I get there, we can go through everything together.”

“That won’t be necessary,” I say too quickly.

“Mal—”

“I’ll see you when you get here. Have a safe drive.” I hang up, my hand so shaky, I nearly drop it putting it back in my pocket. This is just like her. She’s always tried to interfere in our lives. I know she blames me like everyone else. I see it in her hard expression every time we meet up. Thankfully, it’s been a while since the last time.

Claire lives a few hours away, near where a past client was located, and I agreed to meet her for dinner after I delivered a few large pieces of furniture to their house. As soon as I went to the restaurant, I immediately regretted ever telling her I’d be in town. I would have told her not to come for Christmas but there are a few things Nancy kept from their parents that Claire wants to come get, along with a few pictures I agreed to let her have of her sister.

Taking a deep breath, I grab the wooden snowman from my table. He's dry and ready for his new arms. I drill a hole on each side and fill them with super glue before shoving the pieces of wire inside. Searching around the room, I look for a box or something I can put the gift in. Coming up empty handed, I head into the house and go through the pantry, stumbling on a few gift bags piled on the top shelf. My heart thumps as I pull down a blue striped one with Henry's name on the tag.

Swallowing the lump in my throat, I yank the tag off and shove it in my pocket. Nancy used to keep old gift bags to reuse. This must've been from a present she got at her baby shower. Luckily, there is already tissue paper neatly folded inside. I smile at the left over evidence of Nancy being the last to touch it. She was always so organized and hated wasting anything she felt could be reused. I place the snowman inside and adjust the tissue paper on top, making the outer side somewhat presentable.

I set it on the counter and before I can head for the door, a loud knock comes, causing my feet to stop moving. Two more follow it and I pull the door open before Snow's hand can come in contact with the door again. "Oh...hey." Snow's face is flushed and his eyes round in surprise.

"Hey..." I release a soft sigh, stepping to the side, gesturing to him to come in.

Swallowing hard, he stares around before entering the house. "Look, about earlier, I just wanted to say ..."

“I lost my temper again and I’m sorry. It happens a lot whenever anyone talks about her. It’s not your fault.”

“But I—”

“I’m really sorry. I hope you’ll still come over for Christmas dinner. I’d really like it if you were there.” Maybe his presence will help me not notice Claire’s as much.

His shoulders relax and the corners of his lips twitch. “Does this mean you’ll be showing me how to do something else now as a way of apologizing again?”

I laugh. “Maybe tomorrow. I’m all lessoned out for the day.”

He smiles softly, fumbling with his hands. “I shouldn’t have overstepped and I won’t do it again, I promise. Whatever happened between you two is your business alone.”

“Snow—”

“It’s okay. We don’t know each other well enough to do the whole backstory thing and what’s the point anyway when we’ll probably never see each other after the holidays anyway.”

My stomach knots. For some reason, the thought of him leaving affects me more than it should. He’s right. We don’t know each other. So why does it feel like we’ve been friends for years?

“I actually have something for you.”

“Oh,” he says, shifting his feet.

“You can call it an early Christmas present.” I walk toward the counter and grab the gift. I hold the bag out to him and he stares at it for a few seconds before taking it.

“But I don’t have anything for you. If I would have known we were exchanging gifts, I’d...”

I shake my head, smiling. “Don’t worry about it. I wanted to do something nice for you, the way you did for me.”

He sucks his teeth, his hand shaking as he lifts the bag higher.

“Go ahead, open it.”

“Now?” he asks.

“Yeah.”

He removes the tissue paper and his mouth parts as he pulls out the snowman. “How did you...” His words shake and his eyes water. “It looks just like it. Oh, Malcolm, it’s perfect. Thank you.”

“I saw the ornament on the mantel and thought maybe—”

He rushes forward, wrapping me in a hug, cutting off my next words. “Really, thank you. I actually came over here to yell at you.” He laughs, burying his face in my shoulder. I didn’t think I could ever enjoy someone being this close again. Let alone someone like him. The comfort I feel when he’s around is only something I’ve ever gotten from one other person. He’s not Nancy though. Actually the complete opposite in every way. Although, he does share the same light

she had, brightening every room he enters with his infectious smile and laugh.

“Well you’re not doing a very good job so far,” I say, wrapping my arms around his waist, leaning into him. It doesn’t feel as weird or awkward as it should. His closeness and warmth are surprisingly settling.

“Yeah. I had it all figured out in my head and it’s like it all vanished when you opened the door. Then you apologized first and all I could do was say sorry back.”

“Now I feel like I missed out.”

He laughs again, his nose brushing over my neck. A shiver runs down my spine. “Don’t worry, at the rate you’re going, you’ll give me another reason soon.”

“I sure hope not.” I move my face and my nose lands in his soft hair which smells like peppermint. I have a feeling the smell will linger in my nose for days.

I haven’t been able to think of anyone besides Nancy in a long time but whenever I’m back in my place alone, his face floods my mind and the moment my eyes meet his, hope flutters in my chest. I don’t understand this feeling I get when he’s around. Almost as if...no. That’s impossible. I shake the silly thought from my mind.

I release my hold, taking a step back, clearing my throat a little too loudly. “So are you still coming Sunday then?”

“Sure. I can bring more cookies.”

“I’m sure they’ll enjoy them just as I have.”

“How many people are coming?”

“Only my sister in-law Claire, her husband, and their son.”

“Can’t wait to meet them.” He glances toward the living room and back at me. “You don’t have a tree.”

My eyes shift from side to side. “And?”

“You can’t host Christmas without a tree, silly. Seriously, it looks like the Grinch came in and robbed the place.”

“Maybe in some ways he did,” I add, grinning.

“It’s almost as if he’s still here.” He sets the gift on the counter. “I was going to wait until tomorrow but we can go today instead.”

“Go where?” My eyes blink rapidly.

“To the tree farm. I saw one on the way here and its only ten minutes from where we are.”

I roll my eyes, grunting. “I know where it is. Small town remember? I’m actually friends with the owner, Benny.”

“Good, then you can drive us there.” His smile widens and as much as I want to say no, I struggle to push the word past my lips. Instead I say nothing, crossing my arms over my chest, hoping my unamused expression is enough to get my message across.

“Please.” His lips pout and he holds his hands together in front of himself.

Running my hands through my hair, a small sound creeps up the back of my throat.

“Does that mean yes?”

I roll my head on my shoulders, my hands dropping to my sides in defeat. “Fine.”

He hugs me again and this time it's brief but doesn't affect me any less than the last time. It shouldn't feel this good when another man touches me but here I am wanting to lean in closer to feel his skin on mine. What's happening to me and why am I not doing anything to stop it?

Maybe because I haven't felt this at ease in a long time. Buying a tree was something I've been avoiding, telling myself I wasn't ready. Snow smiles at me, reaching for my hand, and for once moving forward doesn't feel so hard.

Nine

Snow

S

We reach the tree farm quicker than we would have if I was driving. I drive slow when it rains, I'd probably be even worse on snow since I've never had to drive in it before. This is way more than a few flurries flying everywhere. The ground is covered in inches of white, cold dust and it's falling down harder than when I first arrived.

We hop out of the truck at the same time as an older man with a long gray beard walks out of a large blue house, waving our way.

"Y'all must be here for a tree."

"Yup," Malcolm says, shoving his hands in his pockets and looking around.

"I was wondering if you were coming out this year. It's good to see you, Malcolm." The man, Malcolm referred to as Benny, glances between us. "Who's your friend?"

“Oh this is Snow.” Malcolm smiles my way. “He’s staying in the cabin across from me and wanted to help me pick out a tree for Christmas.”

“Will you be getting one too?” Benny asks, tilting his head.

“No. I’ll be celebrating at this guy’s house. He invited me so I wouldn’t have to eat alone. He isn’t very big on decorating so I thought I’d help before his family came.”

“Sounds like a good plan. How long are you in town for?”

“Only a week.”

“How you liking it so far?”

“It’s beautiful out here and I’ve felt very welcomed so far.”

“I’m glad to hear it. Let’s go find you two a tree, shall we?”

We both nod in agreement and follow him out toward the pasture. “We have a few great ones left.” He takes us through a path of trees all varying in size. “Go ahead and have a look around, and let me know if you need any help. I’ll be right in the house.”

“Do we get to cut our own tree?” I ask.

“You do,” Benny says, pointing at the shed. “You’ll find some axes in there. I know this guy here won’t have any trouble,” he says, patting Malcolm on the shoulder.

“Thanks, Benny. We’ll give you a holler once we’re done.”

“Sounds good.” Benny walks back toward the direction we came from and Malcolm sighs, staring ahead. “See one you like?”

I tap my finger to my chin. “Not yet.”

“Let me guess, you’re one of those people who takes hours to pick out an outfit every morning?”

“No. Only one.” I grin his way.

He laughs and I link his arm in mine, yanking him to the right. We walk around for ten minutes before my eyes land on the perfect tree. It’s not too tall or too short, reminding me of the one my grandma had in her home last Christmas. “This one.” I reach out and touch the branches.

“You sure?”

I nod a little too enthusiastically. “Positive. This guy wants to come home with us. He told me himself.”

“Oh you’re the tree whisperer now I see.”

“What can I say? I’m a man of many talents.” I rest my head on his shoulder briefly before pulling away. He takes out his phone and I reach into my pocket, retrieving my wallet.

His hand falls on my arm and he shakes his head. “Don’t worry. I’ll take care of it.”

“But I’m the one who wanted the tree.”

“You were. Past tense.”

I smile, shoving my wallet back in my pocket. “I knew you weren’t completely against Christmas.”

“I never said I was against it. Me and Christmas just haven’t exactly been on speaking terms this year. It has more to do with me than the holiday itself.”

“Dear Christmas, it’s not you, it’s me,” I say wagging my brows.

He elbows me in the side, shooting me a glare. “Ha ha very funny. I sent Benny a text saying we’ll be ready in ten. He’s gonna meet us at the truck, so let’s get to chopping. It’s not getting any warmer out here.”

“I swear it gets colder by the second.” My breath fogs in front of me as I speak. “I’m ready to sit in front of the fire with some hot cocoa while watching you decorate the tree.”

He grunts. “Yeah, not happening. You’re the one who wants the darn thing.”

“I *was*, remember? Past tense.”

Rolling his eyes, he heads back the way we came. “Whatever. You wait here while I get the ax. I’d hate to have to find the tree again.”

“I’ll be here, doing my whispering magic.”

“Good. Maybe you can convince it to separate itself from the ground so I have less work to do,” he says walking away. I don’t miss the way his fitted jeans hug his ass. Get a grip, Snow. You’re out here to pick out a tree, not gawk at some unavailable man’s ass.

I sigh, touching the branches again. It is a nice ass though and a great distraction from all the other places my mind has been lately.

“Alright, step back and let me work my mountain man magic.”

I laugh, standing out of his way. The tree falls after a few whacks of the ax. “Which end do you want?” Malcolm asks, glancing back at me.

“The top.” It’s the only time you’ll hear me choosing that as an option while talking to a hot guy.

“Good. That’s my least favorite part,” he says, bending down and reaching for the lower end of the tree.

I walk over to the top of the tree and wrap my hands around the branches lifting when he does. It takes lots of navigating and we realize halfway through that I shouldn’t be the one leading us out because I have no idea where the hell I’m going. After lots of laughing and giving each other a hard time, we finally make it to the truck. Benny is leaning against the back with a hand on his hip. “Perfect timing,” he says, opening the truck bed. “You two got it?”

“We do,” Malcolm answers, shoving the tree into the back of the truck.

“Well, he’s mostly got it,” I say cheekily.

They both laugh and Malcolm ties the tree down before paying Benny.

“I left an ax out there that I need to go back and—”

Benny waves him off. “Ah don’t worry about it. I’ll get it. I gotta do my walk around anyway. You two have a good rest of your day and thanks for coming by. It was really good seeing you out and about again, Malcolm. Glad someone could finally get you out of that cabin of yours.”

“I get out plenty,” Malcolm says quickly.

“I mean for something other than work,” Benny says, his eyes softening.

“It wasn’t easy,” I add. “But I wouldn’t take no for an answer.” I walk around the truck, heading for the passenger side.

Benny snorts. “I like him. You should definitely keep him around.”

“As long as I’m here, this man won’t be able to get rid of me.”

“Lucky me,” Malcolm says. “Thank goodness it’s only for a few more days.”

Benny smiles. “Well it was nice meeting you, Snow, and I do hope you come back for another visit.”

“Me too. Thank you for the lovely tree and I hope you have a great Christmas.”

“Same to you.” He waves us off and waits until we’re out the gate before heading back into the field of trees.

“I’ve never been to a tree farm before.” I smile, buckling my seat belt.

“So I take it you enjoyed your first time then?”

“I loved it. I’ll definitely have to visit one back home next year.”

“You only say that because you didn’t have to do most of the work.” He shoots me a grin, turning onto a different road.

“You’re probably right but there was also something magical being surrounded by all those beautiful trees.”

“Even in two degree weather?”

“You need to stop focusing on the negative side of everything. Otherwise you’ll miss out on all the good things around you.”

“You sound like Nancy. ‘Always look ahead instead of backwards,’ she’d say.”

I shift in my seat, keeping my eyes forward and my mouth shut.

He sighs from beside me. “Go ahead and ask. It’s okay.”

“Did she like Christmas?”

He huffs out a laugh. “Like is an understatement. It was her favorite holiday.”

“We have something in common then. I’m guessing she was the one who usually bought the tree?”

“And the decorations, ornaments, and all the lights. She forced me to go caroling with her too,” he says smiling.

“Really?”

He quickly glances my way. “Don’t even think about it.”

I laugh, lowering my shoulders. “Fine. I don’t wanna sing with you anyway.” I fake pout.

He chuckles, turning onto our road. Or should I say his. I don’t live here. I’m only visiting for a few more days. The

revelation has me sinking in my seat. I stare out the window, watching how snow falls on the trees. “It’s snowing again.”

“Yup.” He pulls into his driveway and turns off the engine. “Let’s hurry up and get your new friend inside before it starts coming down harder.”

I nod, shoving the door open. He gets out of the truck after me and we carry the tree inside the house, getting snow everywhere.

Malcolm shrugs it off saying he’ll grab some towels after we get the tree in the stand he gets out of the attic. “I didn’t keep many of the ornaments from last year but—”

“I have some,” I offer. “I actually brought a whole bag of them.”

“Of course you did.”

“I was hoping I’d find a tree while here. I brought lights too. I found more in the attic of the cabin I’m staying in.”

“I think a few will do just fine.”

“But what about the outside?” I ask, batting my lashes.

“I don’t remember agreeing to that. You’re lucky I said yes to the tree.”

“You’re right. We’ll start on the inside and work our way to the outside.”

“So you think.”

“I’m feeling pretty optimistic,” I say, straightening the tree. My stomach rumbles.

“How about we order some dinner and you can get started on the decorating tomorrow?”

“Sounds good to me.”

“What do you feel like eating?”

“Whatever. I’m not picky.”

“There’s a great barbecue place in town and they make the best pork sandwiches.”

“You had me at barbecue.”

“Great.” He smiles and grabs his phone from the coffee table.

He orders the food and I run to grab a few things from my cabin. My bag of ornaments, including the one I set on the mantel, and the box of hot chocolate mix I still haven’t opened. I was too busy working my way through the wine.

When I enter Malcolm’s house again, he’s sitting on the couch and has already started a fire. He looks up at me, his lips pressing together. “Back already?”

“Yup.”

“Did you bring the whole cabin with you?”

“Nope.” I set the bag by the tree and carry the hot chocolate mix into the kitchen. “Only half of it.”

He throws his head back laughing. “What else have you got there?”

“Hot chocolate. It’s the best way to warm up.”

“Coffee is good for that too.”

I wrinkle my nose. “I wouldn’t know. I don’t drink it.”

He gasps. “How do you survive?”

“Off hopes and dreams,” I say, grabbing two mugs from the cabinet after searching through each one.

“You can use the tea kettle on the stove top to warm up the water.”

“Okay. Now that, I know how to do,” I say, filling the kettle with water and turning on the pilot.

He smiles, leaning back on the couch. “I’m sure there’s many things you’re capable of. We all have our strengths.”

Silence fills the room for what feels like too long and the whistling kettle echoes around me. My hand shakes as I lift it in the air and I grip tighter as I slowly fill each mug. I add the hot cocoa mix, and grab a spoon from one of the drawers to stir it into the steaming water.

“You making the hot chocolate from scratch over there?” He cocks his head, his brown eyes sparkling.

“Yup. Had to go outside and pick the cacao and everything.” I massage my hands, waiting until they are steady enough to carry the cups. The last thing I want to do is splash hot cocoa everywhere.

“Need help with anything?”

“Nope. I got it.” I lift my cup again, sighing in frustration when the cup shakes too much. I bite back a groan, setting the

cup down harder than the last time, the ceramic clinking against the granite countertop.

“You sure?” He looks over his shoulder.

I swallow hard, shaking my head. My shoulders drop and my face crumples in defeat. “I can’t carry the cups to the coffee table. It’s such a small thing and I can’t do it.”

He quirks a brow. “What do you mean?”

I lift my hands in the air and the higher they go, the more they tremble. “I have a disorder that sometimes causes me to have—”

“Tremors,” he finishes. “My aunt gets them a lot. The incident with the ax earlier makes sense now. I’m sorry I gave you such a hard time about it. If I would have known—”

“You would have pitied me and offered to do it yourself, and yes, I have Essential tremor. It’s a neurological disorder. It causes different parts of my body to shake at random times. Sometimes it’s worse than others.”

He shakes his head, standing up. “Not at all. I would have been more patient and understanding. There’s no reason for me to pity you.”

“I can bring the cups. I just have to wait a bit,” I say, staring down at my hands.

“I’m in no hurry.” He sits back down. “You can even bring one at a time if it helps.”

I smile and my body relaxes. Slowly, I lift one of the cups, my hand steadier than before, and carry it to the coffee table, only trembling a little. I place it in front of him and he scoots to the edge of the couch, pushing back the sleeves of his sweater. “Thank you, it smells delicious.”

Steam rises from the top and he blows on it, leaning closer. I go back for my cup, taking my time again as I carry it back to the couch. Sitting down in the empty space next to him, I inhale the sweet aroma before setting the cup in front of me. “I wish it wasn’t too hot to drink.”

“Then we’d have to call it warm chocolate.” His lips tilt and he parts his legs, causing our knees to touch.

My mouth twitches and I bite back a smile. “Just when I think you can’t get any more cheesy, you prove me wrong.”

“Must be my old age.”

“Has to be.”

He elbows me, reaching for his drink. He takes a sip, quickly pulling back. “Yeah, it’s still too hot.”

My laughter mingles with his and I can’t picture a better way to drink hot cocoa. Maybe my life won’t turn into a Christmas romance movie where I leave my hometown with a crushed heart, finding love in a small town with a hot woodworker. But I still found something I would have hated to miss out on if I didn’t come here anyway. A new friend and someone who doesn’t take one look at my imperfections and see me as broken.

Ten

Malcolm

Waking up way too early, I catch up on some laundry and a few other house chores before coming out to my shed to work. It's only gotten colder outside. It takes a while for the small space heater to warm up my workspace, so I made sure to bundle up before walking out of my house. Ignoring my rumbling stomach after eating next to nothing for breakfast, I spend the next few hours completing my last orders I need to have done before Christmas. Adding the wood finish to the last leg of a chair for a child sized table set, I get lower on my knees, the slight ache reminding me I'm getting too old for this. A knock comes to the shed door as I'm adding a few last strokes before tossing my brush on the newspaper covered floor and walking to the front of the shed. Staring down at my watch, my eyes widen. I've been out here for way longer than I thought. Time really gets away from me while I'm working and it's already long past lunch time.

Standing on the other side is one of my customers and longtime friends, Jenna.

She smiles, twisting her blonde hair in her finger. “Hey, Malcolm. You said you were done with the wooden animals I ordered for Toby. I thought I’d come over before he woke up.”

“Yup, come on in,” I say, gesturing her inside. I walk to the back to grab a green gift bag from one of the wall shelves.

“You’ve been busy.” She glances around, fumbling with her hands.

“Yah. I’m finally done with the Christmas orders and am going to take the next few days off.”

She glances at the drying chair on the floor and then back at me. “You really do beautiful work. I just know Toby will love the new additions.”

“I hope so. I wrapped them for you in case he’s around when you get home. Don’t want the surprise ruined before Christmas.”

“I really appreciate it.” She takes the bag from my hand. “You have family coming into town?”

“Yeah. My in-laws will be here tomorrow. So I’ve got lots of cleaning ahead of me.”

She chuckles softly. “I know how that goes. Luckily I have Rob to help me.”

“Is he finally taking time off for the holidays?”

She nods, clutching the gift bag tighter in her fingers. “He had no choice this year. I wasn’t dealing with his mother all by myself this week.”

I laugh. “Well, tell him I said hi.”

“I will.” She rests a hand on my shoulder, lightly squeezing. “It’s really good to see you smiling again.”

Swallowing hard, I nod. “Yeah, I’ll uh see ya around and Merry Christmas.”

“Same to you.” I walk her to the front and as she’s driving away, the trees across the way shake, catching my attention. Assuming it’s a bird or family of squirrels, I turn around heading for the house, stopping midway when I hear a slew of curse words echoing around me. I laugh, turning around. The branches shake some more, and I run over when I notice Snow standing on one of his kitchen stools.

It wobbles and as I get closer, Snow’s attempt at grabbing onto one of the branches fails and he falls backward. I sweep underneath him, spreading my arms out. As I step forward I almost miss him, steadying my balance when he finally lands. Not as limber as I once was, I fall back, my ass hitting the frozen ground. Snow remains in my arms, grabbing onto my neck.

Right as I look up, a lump of snow falls in my face and I close my eyes, shaking it off. Snow is looking up at me, still clinging to me like a monkey when I open my eyes again and we both erupt into laughter.

He throws himself backward, rolling around on the ground and I rest my hands behind me, shaking my head. “You could have asked to borrow a ladder.”

“Then you wouldn’t have been able to make your hero debut.”

I roll my eyes, rubbing some leftover snow from my face. “You could have broken an arm or something.”

“Awe.” He sits up, dusting off his arms. “Are you worried about me getting hurt?”

“Yeah, because then I’d have to be the one to decorate the damn tree.”

His lips purse and he fights back a laugh jumping toward me, tackling me to the ground.

“You’re getting snow all over my clothes,” I say, trying to push his body off mine. He’s a lot stronger than he looks. He continues to pin me down and I tickle his sides, flipping him onto his back, my thighs holding his legs together.

His face is flushed, and his eyes are bright as laughter spills from him. “That’s not fair. I’m super ticklish.”

“You probably shouldn’t have told me that,” I say, digging my fingers into his armpits. He squeals, his body shaking. “Stop, I can’t breathe,” he says, his face beet red and his lips spreading wider as he clenches his teeth.

“Serves you right for making me have to change my clothes so early in the day.”

I release my hands, staring down into his steel blue eyes.

He dusts off my shoulder with his fingers. “You can always dry off by the fire. It’s only snow.”

“Why would I do that when it’s faster to change?”

“You’re ruining the moment again with your old man logic.”

I pinch his sides and he stretches his hands out gathering fistfuls of snow. Before I can stop him, he slides a hand up my shirt and I release a loud yelp when the cold snow touches my skin.

“That’s it,” I yell. “You asked for it.” I dig my hand into the snow, grabbing a fistful, and I shove it up the front of his shirt. Lucky for me his jacket is unzipped, making it easier to fit my arm inside the constricting fabric. I smear the snow all over his stomach and chest, my fingers accidentally grazing his nipples. His eyes heat and a soft moan spills from him causing my cock to twitch.

What the hell? I swallow hard and instead of moving, I stay where I am. I should run but I can’t get my brain to pass the message to the rest of me. My overthinking has my stomach swirling and I’m a confused mess. My body, on the other hand, wants to be closer and my heart flutters, my chest expands, feeling like my lungs aren’t getting enough air. My mouth moves closer to his as if on instinct and he pants, the warm puff of air spreading across my face.

Unable to stand the distance any longer, I press my lips to his, breathing him in as if he’s my only source for air. He thrusts his tongue against mine and my body vibrates. I don’t know what’s happening but I know if I stop now, the fire

spreading throughout my limbs will die and my heart will go back to being frozen.

His fingers tangle in my hair and I roll my hips, rubbing our bodies together. Arousal erupts inside. How can something I've never wanted before suddenly feel so damn good. I swallow his moans, dominating his tongue with mine, kissing him harder. His hand slides up my shirt and he thrusts upward, his cock hardening.

My heart races and I pull away. He stares up at me, his eyes bloodshot and his lips swollen. What am I doing? This isn't me.

"I-I have to um..." I quickly get to my feet and dust myself off. "I'm sorry."

"Wait, Malcolm." He calls after me but I keep walking away, rushing back toward my house, my mind all over the place. Thinking about our kiss, his hands on my body, and my hands on his. It's all too much for me to wrap my head around. I need time. I don't have a clear mind when Snow is around.

I open the door and slam it shut behind me. The house is quiet and the bare tree occupies a corner of my house. I can't stop looking at it. It's so empty and dull. The way my life has been until an interesting, joyful stranger came to town. I walk closer to it and think about Snow's smile when we were at the farm, how contagious his laughter was when I tickled him, and the way his bright blue eyes glowed when I was lying on top of him. He looked at me as if he wouldn't want to be anywhere else in the entire world.

No one's made me feel so seen before. Like I wasn't such a hardship to be around. He wasn't only tolerating me the way everyone else does. He wanted me there. I wanted to be there too.

I pinch between my brow, closing my eyes as guilt squeezes at my heart. I know it's been over a year since Nancy passed but for so long she has been my last everything. I was more than sure she always would be. I touch my mouth, my stomach knotting. She isn't anymore.

I open my eyes, staring at the tree again. The one Snow chose. The exact one he touched only yesterday. Nothing about what we did felt wrong. It was freeing. I was finally coming out of the dark place I allowed myself to be trapped in all this time and now I'm curious to see where else Snow could take me.

I inhale a sharp breath, slowly releasing it, my chest aching from each move. Taking a step forward doesn't mean I'm moving on. The world around me is constantly living and eventually I'm going to have to join it. It's so much better when you don't have to do it alone.

A knock has me freezing in place. A few more sounds against the door and I rush to open it. Snow is standing on the porch, facing the other way, muttering something to himself.

I clear my throat and he spins around, his face flushing. "Hi," he says.

"Hey." My heart pounds in my chest and I feel like if I don't grip my feet hard enough to the ground I'll float away.

“You uh dropped this.” He hands me my phone. “It was ringing and I thought it might be important.”

My eyes widen and I reach for my phone, our hands brushing together. “Thanks. It’s probably just Claire making sure I have everything ready.”

He nods, shuffling his feet together, his hands pressed to his sides. “Yeah, I’ll uh go now.”

“Wait,” I say as he begins to turn around. “Don’t leave.”

“Why?” He tilts his head.

“Well, how else are you going to decorate the tree? You kind of need to be here to put the ornaments on, don’t you?”

Eyes round in confusion, he presses his lips together. “Are you sure you still want me to? I don’t want to make anything more awkward than it already is.”

“I do and you won’t. Please come in.”

He shoves his hands in his pockets, conflicted. “I also don’t want you to think I typically roll around in the snow, kissing men I only recently met.” He chuckles, the sound out of place.

“Don’t worry about it. It was cold and neither of us were thinking clearly.” I rest my hand on the door frame, stepping more to the side to give him room to squeeze by. “We can pretend it never happened,” I lie, knowing I wouldn’t ever be able to erase the recent events from my brain.

“Yeah. Sure. Alright.” Closing the door after he steps inside, I follow him into the living room.

“You didn’t start without me.” He bends down, grabbing a string of lights from the bag.

“And why would I?” I plop down on the sofa, taking the seat closest to him.

“I thought maybe tree shopping would awaken your holiday spirit.”

“You thought wrong.” I cross my ankles, no longer sure where to put my hands. Nowhere I set them feels right.

He wraps the first sets of lights around the tree, starting at the top and working his way to the middle before running out. I stand up and hand him the second string and he smiles, taking it from my hand. I help him add the second round to the bottom and plug it into the wall. The tree shines in blues, greens, and reds. “Multi color lights were always my favorite.”

“Not surprising,” I say, bending down and looking through his selection of ornaments.

“Why not?”

I grab the ceramic snowman I remember seeing on the mantel and stand back up, my eyes meeting his as I keep the ornament cupped in my hand. “Because you’re anything but simplistic.”

His blue pools sparkle and the corner of his lips lift. We place our ornaments on the tree at the same time, our gazes falling between the identical snowman sitting next to each other. We both crack a smile at one another, our eyes locking

in place. Like before, we get caught in a moment and if I walk away now, we can keep going on as we have been, pretending.

If I don't, I'm not sure this will be something I can come back from again. What if I don't want to?

My hand falls away from the ornament and I increase the space between us. Not only is it too soon, he's leaving in a few days and I'm straight. Or at least I always saw myself that way. I don't know what any of this means for me now. It has to be my loneliness getting to me. My mind mistook needing a friend for something else.

Clearing my throat, I stare toward the kitchen breaking the trance. "How about I make us some tea and sandwiches?"

His face falls. "Yeah...okay. Peppermint if you have it and I'll prefer mustard to mayonnaise.

"How about peppermint bark to shake things up," I say, glancing back over my shoulder. "And don't worry, I'm not a mayonnaise fan myself."

"Sounds perfect." He reaches into the box again, pulling out a few more ornaments. By the time I'm done preparing the food and the tea is ready, he's already added ten more reindeer, Santas, and a mixture of ceramic balls to the tree. He was careful not to place anything identical too close to each other; everything new he added color coordinated.

I carry the two mugs to the living room and set them down on the coffee table before going back for our plates. "What about the two snowmen?" I ask.

He glances back at me, with his hand still in the tree. “What about them?”

“Shouldn’t they be separated like everything else?” I carry the sandwiches to where he is and set them next to our cups.

He glances at the two snowmen sitting beside each other, shrugging. “Probably but I have no plans to move mine. So the only way one will move is if you do it.”

I sit on the edge of the couch, reaching for my cup. “I won’t be moving mine either. So does that mean they both stay?”

He adds a few more ornaments and smiles back at me. “I guess so.” He spins around and leans over, wrapping his fingers around the handle of his cup. He lifts it to his mouth, his hand only slightly trembling.

“You know it’s hard to drink this when you keep staring at me like that.”

“Like what?” I ask, raising a brow.

“Like you want to kiss me again.”

I open my mouth to talk and close it again. Bringing my cup to my lips, I ignore the slight burn as I take my first sip. What do I even say? It would be a lie if I tell him I don’t want to and it’s dangerous to admit I do. I go quiet instead, causing him to grow more uncomfortable in front of me.

He grits his teeth, shaking his head. “I know...I’m sorry. I guess I’m not so good at pretending.”

“It’s okay.” I smile softly. “How about this...let’s not pretend. Instead, we acknowledge it happened and agree it can’t again. Then we move on.”

He nods, sipping his tea. He swallows so hard his Adam’s apple bobs in his throat. “Yeah. Right. That’s probably a better plan.”

Badly wanting to change the subject, I stand up a little too quickly, approaching the tree. “It’s looking really good so far. I’d offer to help but I’ll probably only mess up the perfect system you’ve got going on here.”

“Not as long as you keep your ornaments on the back side of the tree and not too close to mine.” He winks and sips from his mug again. Setting it down, he reaches for his sandwich, leaving the plate behind.

I laugh, reaching for an ornament. “My ornaments don’t want to be anywhere near yours anyway,” I retort, hanging up a blue present.

He sets his half eaten food down and goes back to working on the front while I decorate the back with a random assortment, my hands moving too quickly for my brain. “You never told me why you were out here spending Christmas alone.”

His hand stays in the air for a little too long before moving again. “I needed a change of scenery.”

“What about your family? Are you not close with them?”

His chest rises and falls heavily. “I am. We have traditions the same way your wife does with hers.”

“Did,” I correct him. My chest caves, still hating using past tense terms when it came to Nancy. I had to start though. I couldn’t keep avoiding it and living in denial. She isn’t here anymore. She won’t be making her famous Tamales for Christmas or hanging mistletoe over our front door. The tree won’t be surrounded by presents covered in her home made wrapping paper and she won’t be sitting in front of the fire singing Christmas songs with our son.

I can want these things all I want but it won’t matter in the end. They won’t happen. They can’t. My throat tightens and my fingers wrap so tightly around the ceramic deer, I can feel it breaking in my hand.

His eyes are sympathetic. “I’m sorry,” he says, his hand shaking as he places a different ornament on the tree.

“Don’t be. It was more for me than you. I haven’t been able to talk much about her until recently and hearing people do it, using the words was and did, used to make me angry. It wasn’t necessarily at them. I just hate how final it made everything feel.”

He nods in understanding. “I get it. I was the same way with my grandma after she passed away. She had cancer and I knew it was coming but kept pretending we had more time anyway. I got upset when they started packing up her room and moving all her things around.” He releases a heavy breath. “I wasn’t ready for her to be gone. Being there surrounded by her things

was the closest I got to being with her. It felt like I was losing her all over again.”

“I bet that was hard. I can’t even empty her drawers or clear the other side of the closet and I’m starting to think it’s made it harder to go on than it has helped.”

He reaches for my hand, squeezing my fingers. “How did she…” He glances down at his feet and then back at me as if uncertain if he should finish his question or not.

“A car accident. My son, Henry, was in the back seat.” My throat clogs up, making it difficult to say more. “Neither one made it.”

His eyes turn to crests. “Oh, Malcolm. I’m so sorry. When you said they left, I just assumed…gosh I’m an idiot.”

“No.” I squeeze his hand back. “It just means your mind doesn’t always go to the worse possible place. That’s not a bad thing.”

“Not sure it’s a good thing either.” His bottom lip trembles. “I didn’t just come here for a change of scenery and I’m not exactly on talking terms with my family right now. I was running from my problems instead of facing them head on. It was the only thing I could think of doing at the time.” He releases my hand, taking a step back, his sad eyes swallowing mine whole. “The man I was seeing didn’t only break my heart, the way our relationship was revealed nearly wrecked everything I worked hard for. I’m still not even sure how to fix it but being here helps lessen the burden a bit. And hanging

out with you has helped take my mind off it all.” He smiles again.

“That sounds awful. I’m sorry you went through all that. I hope you’re able to get back on your feet from it all soon. I’m here anytime you need a break. We can focus on all the good together and there still is so much of it out there. You’ve shown me that in only a matter of three days.”

“Yeah. You’re right.” He wipes his eyes with the back of his hands. I don’t know what this man did but I hate him for it already. It couldn’t have been a typical breakup for Snow to be all the way out here hiding and not speaking to his family.

I swipe a falling tear from his cheek with my thumb. “After we finish our very late lunch, do you want to step away for a bit?”

He glimpses at the Christmas tree and nods. “Okay, and It’s more like a pre-dinner at this point.”

I laugh and we sit next to each other on the couch. We eat in silence, our chewing and breathing the only sounds filling the room. Snow finishes before me and after I take my last bite, I carry our dishes to the sink. He’s staring at his fumbling hands when I come back to the couch.

“Ready?”

“For?” He glances up at me, his brows lifting.

“To get away with me. I want to take you somewhere.”

“Yeah? It doesn’t involve walking through the scary back woods, does it? I’m not sure I know you well enough for that

yet.” He smirks.

“No. At least I wasn’t thinking about it until now.” I grab his hand and drag him toward the back door.

“Wait. What about the tree?”

“We can finish when we get back.”

“Should we put the fire out first?”

“Nah, it’ll go out on its own.” I hand him his jacket and put mine on. We slide on our gloves and hats before walking outside.

“Are we going in the truck?”

I shake my head, pointing toward the frosted dirt road.

He twists his lips. “Are you sure you aren’t gonna try to murder me?”

“Nah, I don’t have the time for all the cleanup, and someone will notice you missing since we don’t get guests out here often. Everyone knows it’s almost always the neighbor.”

He laughs and follows me to the first stop sign we reach. We turn on a different road and before he can ask where we’re going again bright lights come from every direction. He sucks in a breath, his mouth parting in wonder as he spins us around in the middle of the street, taking in all the giant light displays.

“Not everyone avoids the holidays like me. It used to be a tradition around here to light up the streets as much as we could. Nancy and I used to cover all the trees around our house

since we only had one neighbor who was never there. Now this is the only street that participates.”

“It’s beautiful,” he says, still holding on to my hand.

“Yeah,” I say looking at him, watching how his face shines in the dark. It’s hard to notice any other light when he’s so close to me.

“Thanks for bringing me out here. This is the best break I’ve ever taken from Christmas tree decorating.”

I bark out a laugh and pull him against me, wrapping my arm around his waist. We walk to the end of the road, and while he watches all the moving figures and blinking lights, I never tear my eyes from him.

“Can we stay out here a little longer?” he asks, looking up at the dark sky. It gets dark around five p.m. during this time of the year. I was never a fan of it until this moment.

“Yeah. As long as you want.”

“Maybe not too much otherwise we’ll be covered in snow again and have to change.”

“We can always dry off in front of the fire.”

“I thought you said changing is faster?” His eyes squint, his nose reddening from the cold.

“Maybe.” My lips stretch and I tuck a loose strand of hair back into his hat. “But I don’t mind wasting time with you.”

I meant it. I never knew how much time passed whenever I was with Snow, and I couldn’t bring myself to care anymore.

Not when I was finally living again.

Eleven

Snow

I left Malcolm's house last night feeling better than I did when I first got there. I didn't think that could be possible but somehow the grumpy man I met yesterday afternoon turned into someone who couldn't stop making me laugh and smile all night long.

Sure he wasn't completely jolly and cheerful but we would get there. After all, I only had less than a week to work with. After he shared his devastating past with me, I couldn't help but share my own devastation. At least part of it. I wasn't ready to tell him everything yet. Would he look at me differently if I did?

The man poured his heart out to me about losing his wife and son. Seeing hurt and pain in his eyes had me wanting to take his mind off those dreadful memories by giving him something else to focus on.

So I showed him my pain, letting him know he wasn't hurting alone. I didn't know how things would be after that and I worried it would make things awkward between us. It

didn't. It was as if we were long lost friends picking up where we left off. Laughing and talking about random things. I wanted badly to pull him in for a hug when we said goodbye last night but I held back, knowing it'd only make me want more again.

I doubt I'd find that same strength today.

Climbing out of bed, and stretching my arms out, I take a quick shower, basking in the warm water, and covering my hair in peppermint shampoo. Closing my eyes, I think about Malcolm's warm lips on mine, the heavy weight of his body, and how good his hands felt.

He said it couldn't happen again but it doesn't stop me from replaying our moment of rolling around in the snow in my head. My cock hardens at the memory of him growing hard against me. Too bad there were too many layers of clothes in our way. I shove my hand between my legs, stroking myself. My moans fill the bathroom and I buck my hips chasing my pleasure as I picture Malcolm's kisses traveling down my body, his teeth marking my skin.

My legs shake and heat pools in my stomach the harder I fuck into my palm, imaging Malcolm's mouth wrapping around my cock, sucking and licking down to the base. My head falls against the tile, my breathing heavy. A few more rocks of my hips have me spilling my load down the drain. Fuck, I haven't come that hard in a while. Not even with Brian. He didn't like to touch me much and it was hard to fully get off without the extra stimulation. Doing it myself while

with another person wasn't as fun and didn't heighten my orgasm the way I craved.

Yet being alone in the shower with memories and thoughts of Malcolm got me pretty damn close. I lean on the rail, trying to catch my balance. I slowly move my feet, shutting off the shower. The air grows colder around me when I pull back the curtain and step onto the cold floor.

I grab the large towel hanging from the metal rack, wrapping it around my body, relaxing in the warmth. Once dry, I dress in the warmest outfit I own. I was already looking forward to Malcolm's remarks about me wearing the wrong clothes. I put on my pink sweater that has a red sleigh on it with the words, "Ride me, Santa," stuffing my feet into a pair of black Converse. I pull on the pair of black gloves Malcolm loaned me, leaving the jacket behind, worried the heaviness will slow me down.

The cold, thin air stings at my cheeks when I exit the house and more snow covers the ground than yesterday. My body tingles in excitement when I touch it and the consistency is perfect for snowman building. I've wanted to make one ever since I watched Michael Keaton's *Jack Frost* as a kid, wishing I had a red scarf and black hat with me.

A whoosh of wind sweeps through my hair, reminding me I forgot my hat. Ignoring my freezing ears, I bend down to gather snow in my hands. I roll it into the best ball I can. It's much harder than it looks in the movies. It feels like forever just to form the first part of my snowman.

I gather more snow, piling it on top of the first layer. The second ball is even harder to form but eventually I reach the last part of the snowman's body, thankful it's smaller than the rest of him. Feeling proud, I stand there with my hands on my hips, smiling at my handy work. He's a little crooked but still perfect in my eyes.

A deep voice from behind me has me jumping two steps back. "What are you doing out here? Trying to turn yourself into Frosty the Snowman?"

I turn to face Malcolm, trying to think of something clever to say. "I'm building me a new friend, one that actually smiles and doesn't shake his head at all my jokes."

He lowers his chin to his chest, releasing a sigh. "Your new friend doesn't even have a face."

I stare at the snowman and back at him. Holding up a finger, I run inside quickly to grab a carrot, some blueberries, and two Oreo cookies. When I run back outside, Malcolm is still standing there with his lips formed into a thin line. I add the items to my snowman and give him the biggest blueberry smile the amount in my hand allows. Taking off my scarf, I wrap it around the snowman's neck. "There."

He circles the snowman with his arms folded across his chest. "I see you finally found a good reason to use that scarf and I have to say your new friend is missing something." He disappears behind my cabin and comes back with two long sticks. After placing them on the sides of the snowman's body, he studies it again, stroking his chin. "I think we need one

more thing.” He pulls off his black beanie and shoves it over the snowman’s giant head. “Perfect.”

I touch his elbow with mine when I step beside him. “I think I somehow tricked you into building a snowman with me. You sure I couldn’t get you to make snow angels?”

He laughs and it’s so deep it causes my insides to warm. “No chance.” He gives the snowman a once over and then his eyes land on my outfit, arching a brow. “I didn’t think I would miss that ridiculous thin jacket of yours until now.”

I burst out laughing so hard I nearly tumble to the ground. “What? I’m just trying to get in the Christmas spirit.”

He shakes his head and I’m certain I might give this guy a headache soon. Maybe I should start keeping Tylenol on me whenever I’m around him just in case. “I’m pretty sure there are much better ways. Covering my house with a hundred paper snowflakes while I was picking up dinner last night was one thing but being seen outside with you wearing that is a whole nother entirely.”

“Oh come on, you know you love it.”

“I’m pretty sure you are the only one that owns that monstrosity. I bet the people at the store were glad you bought it and relieved to be free of one less pink hoodie that says...” He sighs, his jaw twitching. “I’m not going to even say it.”

“Oh come on. I bet after a few more hang outs I can get you wearing a matching one.”

He laughs so loud it echoes through the trees. That's two for the day. I think I can get a third one out of him within the next hour. It was a lovely sound and I never knew someone's laughter could be so contagious. He doesn't even have to say anything to have me laughing right beside him.

“So, got any more of those cookies?” he asks with a hint of amusement lacing his voice. “Or do I have to wait until Christmas?”

I laugh again. “Yes, a few. You'd have to come inside though and Christmas has really spread in there since your last visit.”

“Oh joy. As long as there's nothing else in there that says ride me Santa on it, we should be good.”

With a huge teasing smile, I walk toward the door, glancing behind me. “Is someone jealous?”

He grunts, which makes me wonder if I can get him to grunt, shake his head, and scoff all at the same time. When we go inside, he looks around the living room. He runs his hand over the tinsel laying across the mantle. “You did all this in one day?”

“Yup. Why, want me to do your house next?”

He steps closer to the fireplace and runs his fingers over my stocking ignoring my question. “This is cute. Looks handmade and very old.”

I shoot him a glare. “Things were going so well until you called me old.”

He gives me a sheepish look. “I was talking about the stocking.”

“Same difference.” I say, running my hand through my hair in a dramatic way. “It was made after I was born you know.”

“I just meant that...you know what...never mind. I give up. I have a feeling I’ll be saying that a lot with you around.”

“Oh yeah, just how long do you plan on me being around?”

The air goes still around us and his eyes gaze into mine for far too long and I look back as if searching for the answer not being said from his lips. He inches closer to me and he’s so close I can feel the warmth of his breath on my lips.

Before I know what I’m doing, my mouth presses to his and his lips part enough for my tongue to slip in between them. His tongue is warm and tastes like peppermint. His fingers land in my hair while he chases my kisses. He said this couldn’t happen again and I didn’t mean for it to. Sometimes you get so lost in another person, it’s hard to pull your way out and it feels so much better being where I am.

Our tongues wrap around each other, our breaths mingling and noses brushing together. Time stands still and even with my eyes closed; the Christmas lights are still shining brightly around me. His mouth breaks from mine and my lips quip into a smile. “Let me guess, you wanted to fight against it but decided to give up instead?”

He breathes out a long sigh. “You are...”

“What? Annoying?”

He shakes his head and before he can answer, I call out another guess. “Ridiculous?”

He pulls me closer. “No. Like no one I’ve ever met before. I’ve never questioned so many things in my life until you came along. I still might not have all the answers, but I think I’m ready to figure them out. Pretending yesterday’s kiss didn’t happen won’t help with that and neither will putting it behind us. The truth is, I liked it then and this time wasn’t any different. In fact, I really want to do it again.”

“Okay,” I say breathlessly.

He sweeps his fingers across my face and his lips come closer but I pull away. “Wait.”

His forehead wrinkles. “Something wrong?”

“You sure it’s not the cold getting to you again?” I ask, my stomach swarming.

He smiles, sighing softly. “I can keep coming up with all the excuses in the world to continue pushing you away, but they won’t make me want you less.”

My heart leaps in my chest, my cheeks heating. “You want me?”

“Yeah,” he breathes out. “I’m not sure what it all means but I know I want to taste you again. To feel your hair against my fingers. Hold you in my arms and touch your skin. I don’t know what it’ll lead to but I figured we can take it one step at a time.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah. Maybe.” He chuckles. “I honestly don’t know anymore but there’s only one way to find out.” He kisses me again and my heart soars. This is risky and even though we are so close, I hold myself at a distance, not ready to have the rest of my heart in tatters. One more scratch and I’m not sure I’ll be able to hold it together any longer.

I lean in, pressing my body to his, enjoying the moment while it lasts. I’ll have to go back home soon, and I don’t know how I’ll do that if I get too attached to where I am now. Cold tingles spread down my spine and his lips imprint on mine the longer they stay.

Not ready to pull away, I cling to his neck, intensifying the kiss, and each sweep of his tongue has me floating higher. The butterflies in my stomach don’t only fly, they dance and sing.

We break apart breathlessly and Malcolm’s eyes still hold a tiny bit of uncertainty. He’s going to run away again, isn’t he? Did my hands move too quickly? Did my tongue wrap around his for too long? Whatever it is, it’s more than likely my fault. I keep ruining things everywhere I go. Why can’t I ever stop?

“I...need to finish getting the house ready for Claire’s visit. I will come back for those cookies later.”

“Okay,” I say when I want nothing more than to beg him to stay.

He tugs on his scarf, and rushes toward the door. As he’s pulling it open, he looks back and opens his mouth. “I’ll uh see ya,” he says, rushing out the door, closing it gently behind him.

I rush off to the guest room and grab my suitcase. My eyes fog as I shove everything inside. I'll come back for the decorations before I head back home. I just need the essentials to get through the next few days. My chest caves and my tears break free from my eyes, pouring down my cheeks. I'm so stupid. Always so stupid. I never learn.

Why didn't I see it before? He was a straight man. At first, I assumed maybe he was bi but no, he's definitely at war with himself when it comes to how he feels about me. I've been in the situation enough to know how it turns out. Brian was figuring things out when we first met. So much that he was still married to a woman I had no idea existed.

I toss in my toothbrush and my favorite shampoo before zipping up my bag. There has to be a hotel around here somewhere. I search for one on my phone and my heart settles a little when I find two only ten miles away. Perfect. Goodbye cute cabin in the middle of nowhere and goodbye Malcolm.

Dragging my bag behind me, I rush out the door and lock it. Malcolm is nowhere in sight when I leave his jacket and gloves on the swing. I walk under the carport, toss my bag in the trunk, and get into the driver's side of the car, frowning at all the snow around me. I can do this. People drive in snow every day and it is my name.

I turn on the car and drive forward, putting my foot on the gas more when the car struggles to move. I stop and get out, sighing in frustration, and grab the shovel from nearby, shoveling the snow out of the driveway as fast as I can. When

I feel it's good enough, I get back in the car and try again. I succeed in getting onto the road this time. Luckily the plow came by already and it's mostly clear. I keep going and everything moves pretty smoothly until I turn into the next street; my car swerves and I lose control of the wheel.

The brakes screech as I press on them and the car spins around, my heart racing in my chest. Fear claws at my stomach, a lump forming in my throat, and I pull the emergency brake, slowing the car down enough to stop spinning. Too bad it still slips over the icy areas landing in a ditch.

The airbag deploys, hitting me in the face. The side of my head slams against the glass, and everything goes dark.

Twelve

Malcolm

Walking inside, I slammed my head against the door. This time I didn't run away because I was confused or scared over what wanting Snow could mean for me. It was more than that. Nancy weighs heavy on my mind. I close my eyes, resting against the nearby wall remembering the last time we saw each other, feeling like I'm lost at sea, being dragged down by a heavy weight tied to my ankle.

Nancy lifts Henry from my arms. "Don't worry, we'll be back in time for dinner."

"You sure you don't want me to go with you?"

She shakes her head and presses a brief kiss to my cheek. "I'm sure. You're behind on your orders as it is. Besides, how can I buy your gift if you're hovering over me at the stores?"

I chuckle and brush a loose strand from her face, her green eyes holding onto mine. "Okay. Drive slow. There might still be some ice on the ground."

She waves me off, bundling the baby in his carrier. “You worry too much. We’ll be fine. I’ve driven in much worse.” She lifts the car seat from the table and kisses my mouth. “You’ll be so busy wrapped in your work, you’ll hardly notice us gone.”

She’s right. Sometimes being in the zone made it feel like barely any time passed at all. I know I worry too much and ever since the baby was born it’s only increased. I’ll learn to overcome my silly fears soon enough, I’m sure.

“You know I never feel complete until y’all are both here with me.”

“I know and we will be in a few hours. Three tops.”

“Two,” I say, bending down to kiss Henry’s sleepy face. He coos and I squeeze his little hand.

She sighs. “Fine. Two. Now let us go so we can get back sooner.”

I laugh and kiss her again. “Bye. Pick me out something good.”

“I always do.”

She walks out the door and never walks back through it again.

Choking back a sob, I open my eyes, my chest heavy. Henry’s babbling is still fresh in my mind from when Nancy carried him out to the car that day. I replay it often, so I never forget his sounds but they’re different the more times passes.

I'm losing them. The same way I lost his fingerprints from my hat.

I walk to his room, standing outside the door, still not able to go in. I rest my hand on the frame, breathing in and out. No matter how hard I try, I can never get past this point. The thought of the empty nursery is too much for me to bear. I'm worried if I stand in the middle of it, the walls will cave in on me and I'll be too buried under the rubble to walk away unscathed.

As I take a step back, the distance lessens the pressure on my heart. I remember the sound of sirens like it was yesterday. Nancy was only a few streets away. So close to being home. Then out of nowhere came a semi-truck, the driver losing control of the wheel from going too fast on the ice covered road.

I release a shuttered breath, tugging at the collar of my shirt. An overwhelming sensation squeezes at my throat, and it's hard to breathe. I tried to block out that horrible night for so long. As soon as the moment crept into my mind, I shoved it down, replacing it with better memories. Keeping those more alive than my current reality. The only problem is, once I step out of them, I'm alone again and my family isn't any less gone than before.

Turning around, I look down the small dark hallway, following the flashing lights. The Christmas tree brightens the dark corner of the room the same way Snow lit up the dark

spaces around me and the words I told him while we're decorating rush back to me.

"We can focus on all the good together and there still is so much of it out there."

There is and I'm doing everything I can to keep it out of my own reach. I don't have to be alone. I've chosen to be by myself all this time, saying no to my friends' invites, avoiding my family's questions, and now I'm pushing away Snow.

Walking closer, I snatch the wooden snowman off the tree and smile while it rests in the palm of my hand. I shove it in my pocket and rush out the door. My heart sinks when I see the stuff I leant him on the porch swing and Snow's car missing from the carport.

I glance around, and the only recent traces of him are the tire tracks from his car. My hands clench at my sides then I reach into my pocket, pull out my keys, and make a beeline to the driver's side of my truck.

The sirens of an ambulance have me starting the engine faster, my heart pounding in my chest. I follow the loud, torturous sounds, turning on the street where the blinking red lights are coming from. My vision blurs the moment I see a familiar black Mazda sticking out from a ditch.

I park my truck across the way and get out, my eyes wild, unable to focus on one particular person. Men in EMS and police uniforms blend in together. In the center of them all is a man lying on the ground. Panic chokes me as I rush toward him, shards of pain ripping at my heart.

“Snow,” I shout.

“You need to get back,” a man in uniform says. I push my way past him, not caring what it costs me. A woman helps Snow slowly sit up. He has a blood pressure cuff on his arm and a bandage on his forehead. His eyes open and he stares right at me, his face scraped up.

“What happened,” I ask anyone who’s listening.

“Are you family?” a man asks from behind me.

“Yes,” I lie.

“He was in a small accident. Says he slid on some ice and lost control of the wheel. He’s going to be okay though. Just a little shaken up. May have suffered a minor concussion from hitting his head on the glass. The airbag exploded leaving behind a few cuts on his face and neck. No broken bones or disorientation.”

“Will he need to go to the hospital?”

“Only if he wants to,” the woman kneeling on the ground responds.

Snow looks up at me, disappointment heavy in his expression and he shakes his head. “I just want to go home.” His eyes water.

“Well, you won’t be able to go in that,” the man says, pointing to the car. “We’ll have to call a tow truck to have it pulled out.”

Snow nods, going silent, resting his chin on his knees.

“I can take him.”

“Great. If he starts to feel nauseated or his pain worsens...”

“I’ll take him to the nearest hospital.”

The paramedic standing beside me nods. I give the cops my address on where to tow the car to. It takes two of us to get Snow to his feet and he hesitates before coming with me, letting me hold onto him the whole way to the truck.

“It was a rental,” he whispers, his voice shaky.

“Don’t worry about it. We can deal with it later. It’s just a car. You’re what’s important right now,” I say, helping him into the passenger side. I wipe at his tears with the back of my sleeve and tuck a blond strand behind his ear.

“I should have never left,” he says in between snuffles. “It was stupid.”

“Shh,” I say, stroking his face. “Sometimes we do things because we feel they are necessary at the time. I’m sure you had your reasons. I’m just happy you’re okay.”

I buckle him in and shut the door before rushing over to the driver’s side. Taking my time, I make our way back to the cabin. He’s clinging on tightly to the door by the time we pull up in the driveway.

“I’m sorry for being so much trouble.” He looks at me with tired eyes.

I reach over to squeeze his knee. “You aren’t. I wouldn’t be here if I didn’t want to be.”

He places his hand over mine, his fingers shaking until they're finally at rest.

"I have to ask you something before we get out."

He tilts his head, eying me carefully. "Okay."

"Did I...did you leave because of me?" My heart beats faster the longer it takes for him to answer.

Finally, he shakes his head, his gaze dropping to our hands. "I left because of me." He inhales and exhales. "I'm sorry I'm such a mess."

"You're not the only one." My lips shake as I lift them into a smile. "I shouldn't have run out on you. I guess I needed some time to work things out. Everything between us has happened so fast."

"Yeah. You never do know what life will throw at you or when it'll happen."

"I'm just happy it brought me you." Bringing his hand to my mouth. I kiss the inside of his palm and his breath catches. "Ready to go inside?" I ask, setting his hand on his knee.

"Only if you come with me."

I glance at the time and note Claire is still hours away. "Yeah. Okay."

I help him out of the truck and walk him inside, closing the door behind us. "We should get you some pain killers to stop the swelling," I say, running my thumb over his reddening skin. "But let's warm you up first." His clothes are damp from

sitting outside for too long, his hair covered in melting snow. He smells of antifreeze and other fumes from the car.

“You’ll need a shower too,” I say, wrinkling my nose when I bring it to his hair.

“Are you saying I stink?” he asks in an amused voice.

“Maybe a little.” I wink, directing him toward the bathroom.

“I hope I’m not ruining your plans.” He yanks off his sweater and a few bruises litter his neck, chest, and stomach from where the seat belt was.

“You’re not. They won’t be in until late. Claire had to take care of some things before leaving town. The house is mostly ready thanks to you.”

“I only helped a little.”

“It was more than that,” I say, witnessing him struggle to get his jeans undone.

“Here, let me help.” I replace his fingers with mine, pulling the button free before unzipping his pants. We stare at each other for too long, his eyes warm and full of want. I slowly slide his pants and underwear down his hips until they drop to his feet. His legs shake as he steps out of them, and he wobbles to the shower while I hold his naked body close to me.

I try to keep my eyes forward but occasionally they drift to places they shouldn’t go. I’ve never really looked at another naked man before. Sure, I’ve showered with them after gym class and seen them in movies, but my eyes never cared to

linger too long until now. I don't know if it's because I'm suddenly into the opposite sex or if it's because I'm simply enamored with the person next to me. I want him for everything he is, not solely based on what's on the outside.

I turn on the shower, sliding the curtain open. I hold onto Snow's hand as he steps into the tub. "You going to be ok in here by yourself?"

He nods. "I should be."

"I'll be right outside the door if you need me."

"Can you stay in here just in case?" His eyes fall to the toilet seat. "I'd feel safer if you did. I'm still a bit dizzy from the accident and all the adrenaline is causing my body to be in more hysterics than usual."

"Of course. Whatever you need." Closing the curtain, I stand in front of the sink for a few minutes before sitting on the toilet seat. Pressing my chin to my folded hands, I stare at the picture of a blue vase holding a bouquet of pink roses. My eyes stay locked on the hand painted image until the water turns off.

As the curtain opens, I stand and grab a clean towel from the cabinet above the toilet. He takes my hand, stepping onto the tile carefully, his head shaking and teeth chattering. I wrap the towel around him and hold him against me, pressing a kiss into his wet hair. "I meant what I said earlier before I kissed you. All of it. I may get in my head sometimes, but I promise I'll always come back." That's all I know how to do now.

He nods, burying his face into my neck. He lifts his face and I peck a quick kiss to his nose. His mouth presses to mine briefly and I go back for more. Something I have a habit of doing when it comes to Snow. This time my tongue wraps around his and we get lost in each other's mouths, his towel dropping around our feet.

My hand slides down his back, tracing his spine with the tips of my fingers. His skin is soft and I can't stop touching it. Snow yanks off my shirt, his mouth never straying from mine for too long. I walk backwards, being led into the bedroom and by the time my legs hit the back of the bed, my underwear are falling to the floor. We both break apart, our breathing heavy. I trace the scratch on his cheek and then the bruise on his forehead. "Are you sure you're okay?"

He nods breathlessly, his chest gleaming in the sunlight entering through the window behind me. "Everything is."

Water drips from his hair onto his collarbone, trailing past his tiny pink nipples. I run my fingers over each one, this time not by accident. His chest rises and falls heavily, his pulse bulging in his neck. His nubs harden beneath my touch and sweet moans spill from his lips. My ears beg to hear more of them. I lick everywhere his skin glistens, trailing kisses along his neck and shoulder.

My tongue laps around his pecs and down to his belly button. I press a kiss to each of his hips, swallowing nervously, not sure where to go from here. Not only has it been too long, but I also don't know what the rules are for being with a man

or how far I'm willing to go. Snow grabs my chin, smiling down at me, and lifts me to my feet. "Allow me."

He pushes me back and I land on the bed, catching myself on my elbows. Standing in front of me, he's bare and slightly a mess. He's beautiful. He drops to his knees and pushes my legs apart, moving his head between my thighs. He sucks in a breath, stroking my cock, and the longer he touches me, the harder I grow.

Earlier today, standing in front of the fireplace next to him, I knew what I wanted more than anything. It was him and now I crave this. All of it. Snow licks along the inside of my thighs, nipping at my skin, his fingers sliding up and down my long length. His mouth moves closer to my groin, his nose rubbing into my pubic hair as he breathes me in. My arms shake and I watch as he licks his way up my cock, swirling his tongue around my tip.

He lightly sucks on my head before swallowing me down, my tip hitting the back of his throat. He works his way back up before going back down to my base again, repeating the same actions a few times, gagging and making incoherent sounds. My eyes close as I focus on the warmth and tightness of his throat as I buck my hips, chasing my pleasure. I don't even realize I'm moving until he holds me in place. I run my hands through his hair, my heavy breathing filling the small space around us.

My cock twitches between his lips and warmth spreads throughout my limbs. The built-up pressure is overwhelming,

and I feel like I could combust at any moment.

“Wait,” I say. He keeps going and I push his head away, tensing up. “Stop,” I say almost too loudly. He pulls off me wide-eyed, worry taking over his expression. I sit up, grabbing at his hands as he steps away.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean...”

I shake my head and drag him beside me on the bed. “It’s okay. It just felt too good, is all. I wasn’t ready for it to end.” I rub my nose over his and claim his swollen mouth. He tastes of me and him mixed together. What a wonderful combination.

We both lie on our sides, scooting up higher on the bed and his body presses to mine. Continuing to chase each other’s mouths, our hips rock forward. We moan in unison as our cocks come in contact. The stimulation of his head brushing over mine lights a fire inside me.

“You feel so good,” he says in between kisses. “I...” His words get cut off by his moans and he cups us together, stroking us at the same time. Who knew something so simple could cause an explosion of tiny sparks throughout my body, the sensation spell binding.

He thrusts upward, his skin hitting all my sensitive nerve endings, rubbing over all the right places. My cock leaks and he mixes our precum with his thumb, our kisses growing sloppy. Fuck. Something about his last action is so sexy, my pleasure spirals, my bones igniting. I rock forward a few times and fuck up into his hand until I’m coming between us, my tongue moving lazily beside his.

Groaning, I chase my release, grabbing onto his hips, frothing hard against him. His body tenses, cock spilling over mine, the warmth hitting different parts of my skin.

Our lips break apart and we both gasp for air, my head spinning. Holding him closer, I kiss the corner of his mouth. He was wrong. Everything isn't okay. It's perfect.

"You thinking about running away again?" he asks, running his fingers up and down my back.

"No. I was actually wondering when we could do that again."

His laughter tickles my lips, and he kisses me. "Maybe after a much needed nap."

"I'm not so sure you should be sleeping quite yet."

"How about a nice rest then?"

"Okay," I say, and sit up to bring a blanket over us. "We'll have to get clean soon. We made a mess everywhere."

"Five more minutes. It's all I need to remember how to use my legs again."

"I can always carry you with me to the bathroom."

A puff of air hits my neck. "If you do that, I might expect you to do it all the time and I don't think your sister-in-law will be too accepting of you carrying me into each room of your house."

"Shit," I say. "I forgot all about her. She'll be here in a few hours. I lost track of time again."

“I thought you said you like wasting time with me?”

“Yes, but that doesn’t mean everyone else will.” I chuckle, rolling away to get off the bed. I return with a warm washcloth and get him clean before walking back in the bathroom to clean myself.

“You stay here and relax. You’ve probably done way more than you should as it is. I don’t need you overexerting yourself.”

“Will you be coming back today?”

“Maybe. If there’s time. If not, I’ll see you tomorrow. I really hate leaving you by yourself like this though. I’ll probably worry all night not knowing if you’re okay or not.” I sigh, searching for my clothes, my stomach knotting at the thought of me not being here when he needs me.

“Then when everyone else is settled and sleeping, come check on me.”

I smile, sliding on my underwear and pants in one go. “I think I can manage that.”

After putting on my shirt, I lean over the bed and press a chaste kiss to his lips. When I’m pulling away, he grabs my face, keeping me from going anywhere. “Come back to me,” he whispers, his forehead rubbing over mine.

There’s nowhere else I would rather go.

Thirteen

Snow

Trying to keep my eyes open, I eventually lose the fight. Giving in to the warmth of the blanket wrapped around me and the satisfaction left behind from my recent orgasm, has me drifting off.

My car skids on the road and I can't get it to stop no matter what I do. It keeps going, nothing slowing it down. It continues to spin around in endless circles down the never ending road. A large tree comes out of nowhere, widening and shooting up in the sky. Right as I'm about to hit it—

My eyes snap open. I sit up in bed, wrapping my arms around my knees. I rock back and forth in the dark room, cold air nipping at my uncovered skin.

My heart races in my chest and it doesn't matter how much I tell myself it was only a dream; my body won't settle. I close my eyes, breathing in deep before slowly releasing a shaky breath of air.

Slowly reaching my hand out, I feel for the lamp on the nightstand. The moment my unsteady fingers touch the metal switch at the bottom, the small area beside me lights up. I glance around and I'm alone. Malcolm hasn't come back and I'm not even sure how long I've been asleep.

My head aches and I reach for the bottle he left on the nightstand, swallowing down two pills using the water sitting next to them. I grab my phone; the screen is cracked but I'm glad it mostly survived. There are a few new notifications and

as much as I want to ignore them, I know it won't make them go away.

Running a hand through my hair, I click on the YouTube app and not only are there hateful comments, but a few of my followers are also offering their support. A lot more people than I expected want to hear my side of the story and an explanation of everything that happened. Was I ready to speak about it? I wasn't yesterday but today I'm not as scared to face my truth.

Malcolm was doing it and I could too. Gripping hard onto the bed, I take my time getting to my feet. Everything aches and the muscles in my back lock up making it hard to move. I put on a new shirt and a pair of flannel pajama pants before sitting again. I fix my hair the best I can with my hands and lift the phone up, hitting record.

“Hey, everyone. I know it's been a while since I've posted a video. One that I actually recorded for the world to see. Many of you have witnessed me in my most private moments on here and if it was up to me, that would have never happened.” The phone shakes in my hand and I use my other one to help steady it. “Someone hacked my account a few days ago and uploaded that video without my consent. I don't even have a recollection of it ever being made.”

I take a deep breath, struggling to keep my eyes forward. “I met a man a few months ago. Someone I thought I could trust. I fell hard and fast for him. Y'all knew him as Mr. Frosty, the man who used to bring me a Wendy's Frosty whenever I was

in the library studying late.” I force a smile and continue talking. “We went on a few dates before taking things to the next level, mostly keeping our relationship a secret because he’s a professor at the college I’m studying at.”

I go quiet for a few seconds, sitting up straighter. “Things kind of went wrong real fast after our first getaway together. Turns out he wanted to keep our relationship a secret for other reasons.”

I swallow the lump in my throat, wishing I had another way to hold my phone up. “He was married and didn’t tell me. I would have never...I wouldn’t have agreed to ever date him to begin with if I knew. He never wore a wedding band or had pictures of her. Even after all the damage she has done to my life and property, I’m still sorry for all the pain I unintentionally caused her.”

I shift in the bed, unable to get comfortable. “I never wanted to hurt anyone.” My eyes grow heavy and my face throbs. “I really mean it from the bottom of my heart. So many of you have followed me for a long time and I hope most of you choose to stay. If you do end up leaving, I want to thank you for sticking around for as long as you have. I have to go but I hope to talk to you all again soon.”

I lift my hand in a short wave, slightly tilting my lips. “Bye for now and Happy Holidays, everyone. Stay you.”

I end the video and upload it to YouTube before setting the phone down on the bed. Now we wait. Only a few minutes go by before the starts pinging like crazy. I turn my phone off and

get out of bed, heading for the kitchen. All the new comments can wait. I don't need to see them now. Knowing I got my side of the story out in the world already has me feeling lighter.

I make a sandwich and place some cinnamon rolls in the oven. I'm too wide awake to go to bed anytime soon and I could use something sweet to nibble on while I read. I grab my Kindle out of my bag—Malcolm was sweet enough to grab my stuff from my crushed car, leaving it on the couch.

Plopping down on the soft cushions, I click on the last book I was reading and get lost in the pages until the oven timer goes off. Placing a few cinnamon rolls on a plate, I cover the rest and leave them in the stove for Malcolm. I go back to reading again, switching between several positions on the couch, hoping Malcolm keeps his word.

Two hours into my book, my eyes start closing and I'm randomly hit with exhaustion again. The next time I open my eyes, I'm being carried by a large pair of warm arms. Malcolm smiles down at me before setting me on the bed. "You didn't look very comfortable all scrunched up on the tiny couch."

"Enough to stay sound asleep," I say in between yawns. "Your in-laws make it?"

"Yeah." He sighs, sitting on the edge of the bed next to me. "They were already arguing the moment they walked in the door. It usually doesn't start until the next morning." He chuckles, pinching between his brows. "Good thing it's only for a few days."

“I’m sorry. You can always hide over here if it gets to be too much.”

“What do you think I’m doing now.” He winks, leaning over to kiss my lips. He tastes of coffee and gingerbread.

“Someone’s been eating the wrong cookies.”

He laughs and climbs over me, lying on the empty side of the bed, staring up at the ceiling. “Claire made me try one. It was the only way I could get her to leave me alone about it.”

“Sure,” I say, pretending to not be convinced. “Is everyone sleeping now?”

“Yup. Her husband was the last one to turn in. He’s quite the talker when he wants to be. He liked your work on the tree by the way. Said the ceramic snowman ornament reminded him of one he’s seen before.”

“Oh yeah? There’s probably tons of them out there.”

“More than likely. He thought it was one of Nancy’s, assuming we had it on our tree the Christmas before last. Then after he asked, he froze up and was surprised I didn’t get upset about him mentioning her name. I was taken back myself and also relieved.”

I set my hand over his. “How are you now?”

“Still good,” he says, turning his face toward mine. “Great actually.” He traces my bottom lip with his thumb.

“How are you?”

“Hurting a little and I feel like I can sleep for days. Other than that, I’m good.”

He yawns, dragging the blanket over us. “Let’s sleep then. Hopefully you’ll feel better in the morning.”

“I’m sure I will.” I snuggle in close to him. “Will you wake me up before you leave?”

“Will you remember if I do?” he asks, stroking my hip.

“Depends.”

“On?” His nose falls in my hair and I press my face into his neck.

“How you do it.” I wiggle against him and he laughs.

“I’ll definitely keep that in mind. Night, Snow.”

“Night.” I close my eyes and relax in his hold.



My eyes blink open when a hand squeezes at my cock. I buck forward, moaning as a thumb slides over my slit.

“Morning,” Malcolm says groggily.

“Mmm,” is all I manage to respond with.

“You think this is memorable enough?” His warm breath heats my ear and I shake my head against the pillow.

He tugs harder, his fingers sliding up and down in longer strokes. “What about now?”

“No.”

His lips find mine and his tongue thrusts into my mouth. I trust my hips, fucking up into his hand, my body getting closer to the edge. Everything’s still sensitive from last night and each touch of his hand is too much but at the same time I need more. “Turn around,” he says, and I do. His hand never leaves my cock as I face away from him.

He’s scoots closer to me, his cock hardening against my ass. My hole twitches with need but I know we aren’t there yet. Will we ever be? What if he realizes later today it was all a mistake, and he doesn’t really want me?

My thoughts vanish when he rolls each of my balls between his fingers. He caresses my scrotum, working his way back up my long length. Malcolm scoots down low enough to slip his cock between my closed thighs, sliding it so far it rubs under my cock.

A whimper escapes me and he increases his thrusts, his hand meeting the speed of his hips. I reach my hand behind me, grabbing at his face and he kisses me, intensifying my pleasure. Ecstasy spirals through me, my cock throbbing and balls growing tight.

He continues rocking forward, his moans mixing with mine. “You awake now?” he asks, his words strangled, a loud sound coming from his throat.

“Almost,” I rasp.

His cock rubs against my balls in quick, swift moves, and his hand goes off rhythm as his whole body shakes. The sensation of everything he's doing to me is both overwhelming and explosive. His teeth clamp down over my shoulder. The soft bite sends tingles up and down my neck. I move with him until we are both coming, my orgasm earth shattering. I've never done this with anyone before.

"I think I'll remember that enough for the both of us." He breathes heavily into my neck, his sweaty body sticking to mine

"Don't worry. I'm definitely aware of everything happening now."

"Good," he says, stroking my belly. "But if you do forget, I'm sure the cum covered sheets will remind you of my goodbye this morning." He kisses my neck and then my face. "I'll be back before you can miss me."

"Impossible."

"How so?"

"I already do and you haven't even left yet." I stretch out my legs and arms. He ruffles my hair and rolls away. The space beside me is already growing cold.

"Be sure to make brunch for two," he says as his footsteps head out of the room.

I sag into the mattress, burying my face into the pillow, my body still vibrating. I'm going to miss this when it's gone. Probably way too much. I would have been better to never

have known what it was like falling asleep and waking up in Malcolm's arms. It's harder to miss something you've never had and now my body knows what to yearn for. A dull ache enters my chest when I think of being back in my empty apartment and not seeing Malcolm walking around outside when I look out the window.

When I came out here to rid Brian from my mind, I was never supposed to replace him with someone else.

Fourteen

Malcolm

“There you are,” Claire says as I enter the kitchen. “You weren’t in your room when I woke up.”

“Let me guess, you let yourself in without knocking again?”

She huffs, filling three plates with pancakes. “No. I did knock and after you didn’t answer, I checked to see if you were still sleeping. Did you get up to get some work in?”

“I actually went to visit a friend.”

“This early in the morning?”

“I uh went to visit them last night after everyone went to sleep.” Not that I owed her any explanations, but I hated lying when it involved Snow and it’s better she knows I won’t always be here at night. It makes leaving before they all go to bed easier. She will be spending most of her time going through Nancy’s things anyway.

“Something tells me this is no regular friend.” She glances back at me with a curious expression.

“I’m not sure what it is yet, but I rather keep it between us for now.”

“I see. I’m glad you’re finally getting out there again. My sister wouldn’t have wanted you to spend your life clinging to her ghost.”

I grit my teeth. This woman does know she doesn’t always have to say what’s on her damn mind, doesn’t she? “It smells good in here,” I say, changing the subject. “Where’s everyone else?”

“Getting changed and washed up. They’ll be out here soon. Will your friend be joining us for Christmas dinner on Sunday?”

“Yeah.” As long as she doesn’t scare him off first. I thought about asking him to come over to eat with us today so he got acquainted with everyone beforehand, but I worry it’ll be too soon.

“Good. I can’t wait to meet her.” She smiles, brushing a strand of brown hair behind her ear.

“Actually—” Before I can tell her Snow’s a him, her son, Cameron, enters the kitchen, running to the table.

“Are you ready to eat?”

“Yes,” he says. “Can I have chocolate syrup on my pancakes?”

“I don’t think your uncle has any, sweetie. We might have to put an order in at the grocery store.”

“I got everything on the list you sent me over a week ago.”

“Yes, but I assumed you’d also have basic things in your house already.”

Don’t roll your eyes or scoff. She can’t know she’s getting to you already. “I wasn’t aware chocolate syrup was a basic need.”

“It is for me,” Cameron says with a chocolate smile.

“Something does smell good in here,” a deep voice fills the kitchen. “Morning, everyone.”

“Morning,” I say, walking to my coffee pot. I pour in the water at the top after placing coffee grounds into the filter and hit the on button.

“You don’t have any cream,” Calire says, looking into the fridge.

“I don’t usually use it. I can see if my neighbor has any.” Yes, I’m using any excuse I can to see Snow earlier than discussed.

“You have a neighbor?” She arches her brow, bringing two cups of orange juice to the table.

“Temporarily. He’s only renting the cabin across the way for a few more days.” He’ll be going back home soon, and I’ll be staying behind in a house that will be way too quiet and empty. Maybe he can stay a little longer than planned. If only he didn’t have to leave at all.

We've barely had much time together. Then again if he stuck around too long, he might realize what a bore I am and end up wanting to leave to get away from me. No one could fully want me as I am now. I was lucky enough to ever end up with Nancy.

"Oh well, can you see if he has any Splenda while you're at it?"

"And chocolate syrup," Cameron adds.

I laugh, ruffling his hair. "Don't worry, kiddo, I have a feeling he sees it as a staple item as much as you do."

"So you know him well then?" Claire asks.

"Yeah, he helped me pick out the Christmas tree and leant me the ornaments."

"Well, I'm glad he decided to vacation here then. Where's he from?"

"Somewhere warmer than here that's for sure. He didn't really come prepared. I had to lend him a coat."

"Most people usually research the place they're vacationing at. He should have planned better."

"It was a last minute decision I think."

Her eyes widen. "So close to Christmas? Who comes all the way out here except to visit family?"

"People who like the peace and quiet." Oh, and Snow.

"I can only bear it for so long."

"I'm well aware," I say without meaning to.

She waves me off. “So are you going to ask him or not?”

“Oh sure. I’ll uh be back in a bit.”

“Don’t take too long,” she calls after me as I head for the door.

I release a rough sigh while heading out into the cold. The air is dry today and each breath of the thick air tickles my throat.

I jog to Snow’s and the knob twists easily, opening the door. My body welcomes the warmth of the cabin as I step inside, and I smile when I hear the shower running. Someone didn’t go back to bed after all. I lock the front door, stripping out of my clothes, ignoring what Claire said about not taking too long.

Steam fills the bathroom, fogging up the mirror. When I approach the shower, I open the curtain quietly, stepping inside while Snow is facing forward, washing his hair and humming “All I Want for Christmas” by Mariah Carey. Why am I not surprised of him liking that song?

I slide my fingers down the back of Snow’s neck and he jumps, turning around too quickly, almost tripping on his own feet. I grab him, keeping him steady. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to scare you.”

“You sure did a horrible job at trying.” He relaxes, releasing a rushed out breath.

“I was trying to surprise you.”

“Same difference,” he says, shampoo dripping down the side of his face.

I swipe it away with my hand and rub it in the suds still in his hair. “Thought you could use the help and I haven’t had time to shower yet. You know, two birds with one stone and all that.”

He laughs. “You sure that’s why you’re in here with me?”

“That and I might be hiding.”

“I take it your sister in-law is already awake?”

“More than I can handle.” I reach for the soap, pouring some into my palm.

His lips bunch together. “Well, I can be your place to run anytime you need me to be.”

I smile, rubbing suds into my skin with my hands. “Sounds promising.”

“There are other washcloths in here if you need one. You don’t have to go the caveman route with everything.”

I huff. “I’d rather not use someone else’s towels.”

“So, you’re a germaphobe? I wasn’t expecting that. You sure are full of surprises, Mr. Mountain Man.” His eyes trail my body, moving everywhere my hands do.

“You are aware I don’t live near any mountains, right? It’s more like Mr. Country Man.” I slide my fingers over my cock, stepping under the water. I don’t miss the heat in his eyes as it twitches between my legs.

“Yes, but I like my name better. Has more of a ring to it,” he says, cocking his head as he forces his eyes to meet mine.

“Sure it does.” I rinse the rest of my body off before washing my hair and just when I think our conversation has been overtaken by awkward silence, Snow opens his mouth again.

“I was thinking...” he begins before trailing off.

“About?”

“Maybe staying a little longer.”

I pull him into my arms, our wet bodies pressing together. “I’d like that.”

“Really?” Hope lights up his eyes and I don’t want to be the one to ever take it away again.

“Yes. Really. It’ll give you more time to drive me crazy and me more opportunities to roll my eyes at you.”

“Can’t wait,” he says, his smile playful. “First I’ll have to see if my friend’s brother will rent me the cabin longer.”

“If not, you can always stay with me. There’s plenty of room.”

“You sure you don’t need more space between us?”

“I prefer a lot less actually.” I press a quick kiss to his mouth. “You don’t have to go back to work or anything?”

“The school semester is over, and I don’t start again until mid-January. As for my job, I’m not even sure I still have one and my apartment will still be a wreck when I get back.”

My brows bunch together and even as the water grows colder, neither of us move. “Did something else happen that you didn’t tell me about or is this all still ex-boyfriend related?”

“A little bit of both. I’m probably fired because of how the breakup went down. I’m still not even sure we were really together. Probably only in my head. According to my mom I mostly live in my own little world, ignoring most things happening right in front of my face. I was just so sure this was the one thing I didn’t get wrong.”

I frown. “Exactly what did this guy do?”

He sighs, stepping backward, and it takes everything in me not to drag him back to me.

“It’s complicated.”

“You don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to.”

“It’s not that I don’t want to. I’m worried when I do, you’ll look at me differently.”

“Doubtful.”

“You say that now but might change your mind later. I’m not sure I’m ready to put all my flaws on the table so soon.”

“We are all human and make mistakes. None of us are perfect and it’s the imperfections that separate us from everyone else.”

“Maybe I don’t want to be separated from anyone else. It wouldn’t be such a bad thing if I blended in more.”

“I personally like you exactly how you are.”

His smile is back and it's more breathtaking than before. I'm the one who put it there and the feeling is satisfying. I want to do it again and again. He steps closer and kisses me hard. Our hands are everywhere, desperate and needy. My fingers slide down his crack, slipping between his cheeks and I tease his hole. He moans and writhes against me.

“I want to touch you here more later,” I say, breaking our kiss. “But I need you to show me how you like it.”

He nods against me, his bottom lip quivering. “You mean after brunch?”

“Or before,” I say, pressing harder to his pucker.

“Why not make it during?”

“For once I like your idea better.” I lick at his mouth. If someone would have told me a week ago I'd end up right here, naked and sharing a shower with a man who not only makes me laugh but also causes me to shake my head more than anyone I've ever met, I would have scoffed in their faces and thought they were insane.

In fact, standing here now with Snow in my arms has me wondering if I'm dreaming or not.

Snow rubs his cheek against my shoulder and his smile touches my lips.

It's just hard to believe that something that has me floating off my feet and my heart dancing in my chest could be so real.

“Oh, before I forget, do you have any creamer and chocolate syrup?”

He smirks. “Are you planning to get me dirty again?”

I laugh. “No. Apparently they are items I should keep in my house at all times.”

“I do and I’d have to agree. They are definitely essential.”

“Not so much that you’ll miss them for a few hours, right?”

“If this is your way of asking me to borrow chocolate syrup and creamer then my answer is yes and don’t worry if you don’t bring them back, I’ll come get them myself. You forget, I know where you live.”

“In that case, I may never return them.”

Fifteen

Snow

Malcolm comes back for brunch as promised and unfortunately all we have time to do is eat. It doesn't stop me from sneaking a few kisses and the occasional ass grabs. Now that I'm able to touch him whenever I want, I take full advantage of every opportunity.

"I have to go, but I'll swing by again later, I promise," he says, kissing me on the mouth. "Claire needs help sorting through Nancy's things today and then they all want to go look at the trail of lights later at a farm not far from here. Like we are some big happy family or something." He scoffs.

He doesn't invite me, and I try hard not to take offense. I'm sure he has his reasons. He asked me over for Christmas dinner, so I know he's not trying to hide me. He's probably easing into things and doesn't want Claire asking too many questions. I can't say I blame him.

"Okay. If you can't make it by then I can always see you tomorrow."

"Oh, I'll definitely make it," he says and he pulls me in for a deep and intense kiss before heading out the door. He glances behind him, waving with a half-smile while he hurries back across the way.

Grabbing my phone, I call into work and my boss informs me I still have a job whenever I'm ready to come back. He agrees taking another week off will be a good idea. I still haven't heard anything from my school and the classes I

signed up for next semester have already been approved. Maybe things will continue to look up from here on out and I won't have to work as hard as I thought to pull my life back together.

My next call is to Alecia, and she says her brother is more than willing to rent the cabin to me for as long as I need. Me being here the last few days made him realize it was much better than letting it sit vacant, collecting dust.

Laughter outside has me opening the door and Malcolm waves at me, standing next to a small child who I assume is his nephew. He is showing him the snowman I made, and they are adding snow in places needed to make him appear brand new again. The smiles and light in their faces warm my heart.

A dark haired woman walks outside the cabin, staring my way and I step back inside, quickly closing the door. After I hear them walk away, I run up into the attic and grab any remaining lights I find. I toss them into a box, along with a staple gun.

Throwing on the jacket Malcolm brought back yesterday, I shove on my hat and walk outside, carrying the large box in my hands. I take my time sludging through the snow and drop the box in front of the porch when I finally reach Malcolm's house. Smiling wide, I reach for the first string of lights and wrap them around the railing. I keep going until the whole porch is covered in lights, plugging the end of the first set into the outlet outside the house.

I wrap each window in lights before moving to the door. My eyes light up when I see a step ladder resting against the side of the house and I use it to run a string of lights in front of the rooftop, only having enough for the very front. I climb down the ladder and put it back where I found it, sighing in contentment when I hook them all together, lighting up the house.

I can't wait until it gets dark and they really stand out. Unable to feel my face, I grab the almost empty box and head back into the cabin. I can't stop glancing out the window in between cooking dinner and doing a load of laundry.

The oven beeps and I carry a basket full of clothes to the kitchen, leaving it on top of the table. A knock comes to my door after I'm done eating two servings of chili and putting all my clothes away. I rush to open it and Malcolm is standing on the porch, arms crossed. His expression is unreadable. "Is that your handy work?"

"Maybe." I take a step back, nerves swirling in my stomach as I wait for his next words.

"It either is or isn't."

"Fine. It is," I say sheepishly. "I thought this street could use some lights. Even if it was only a little bit."

"So you came and put them all over my house?"

I nod, my bottom lip slipping between my teeth. I'm worried he's going to chew me out next. Instead, a smile creeps on his face and a soft sigh escapes his lips. His arms

drop to his side, and he pulls me into a kiss. “Thank you. I love it. Cameron did too. He thought Santa came early,” he says in between chuckles.

“Is Cameron your nephew?”

“Yeah. He’s a sweet kid. I think he’d enjoy all your paper snowflakes too. Maybe you can show him how to make some tomorrow.”

“But tomorrow’s Christmas Eve.”

He nods, puffing out a breath of air. “I’m aware what day it is.”

“I thought I wasn’t coming over until Christmas Day.”

“What if I want you to come over sooner?” His eyes soften and he strokes my cheek, putting a little distance between us.

“Then I guess I’ll be coming over tomorrow.”

He kisses me and my tongue chases his as he pushes me back into the cabin, kicking the door shut behind him.

“Do you have to leave again soon?” I ask between gasps.

He shakes his head, taking off his jacket, scarf, and hat, tossing them on the coffee table. “Not until the morning.”

“What time do you want me to come by tomorrow?”

“Around six p.m. Claire knows I’m expecting you.”

“You just assumed I’d say yes?”

“Why would someone who usually invites himself over say no?”

I laugh, tugging at his shirt. “Good point. Does this mean I have time to show you how I want you to touch me?”

His breath catches and his eyes heat. “Yes.”

I guide him to the couch, gesturing at him to sit down. “Wait right here.”

“Okay.”

I hurry into the bedroom, undressing to nothing but a long t-shirt, and I grab a bottle of lube from the bathroom. Walking back into the living room, I hide my hand behind my back, my stomach swirling as I see Malcolm facing the fireplace, patiently waiting for me.

He didn’t leave. I kept wanting to believe he would stay but sometimes my bruised heart takes over my mind making me wonder if I’m even worth waiting on. Malcolm sitting so close by, staring up at me with want in his eyes gives me hope that I could be.

“Hi,” I say.

“Hey. Should I get up?”

“No. You’re perfect where you are.”

He rests his hands at his sides, his eyes all over the place. “Okay.”

Walking closer, I climb on top of him, straddling his lap. “You sure you still want to touch me there?” I stare down at him, rocking forward against his hardening cock. Fuck I can’t wait to have it inside me. Will I ever get the chance? Even if I

don't, at least I'll know what it's like to have his fingers there. It's still way more than I could've hoped for.

His answer has my insides turning to mush. "Definitely."

I pop open the cap of the lube and reach for his hand, covering his fingers. "Ready?"

"More than I've been in a long time."

I lift my hips, guiding his hand between my legs and to my hole. I fold most of his fingers down, only guiding one inside me. The slippery digit breaches my entrance as I slide down, and I wiggle myself around the intrusion as it goes deeper. I rock my hips as he adds a second, moaning as my walls spread wider around his scissoring fingers. His hungry eyes watch me as I fall apart above him, moving in sync with his hand, fucking myself on his fingers. He twists his hand, angling it in different directions until he hits my sweet spot.

My breath stutters and unintelligible sounds escape me, my cock hardening between us the more arousal spreads through my body, awakening every part of me.

"Fuck," I breathe out. "That feels—" I swallow down my words, biting back a groan. He works himself in and out of me switching between slow and quick thrusts. Each time he hits my sensitive areas, my head grows foggier, a buzz escalating through me. Drunk off pleasure, I struggle to move my hips, my limbs going numb and toes curling. When he pulls back and shoves his hand upward in one thrust, slamming into my prostate, I lose all control, coming hard between us.

I've never come untouched before. I don't know if I should tell him that or not. What if knowing what he does to me gives him too much of the upper hand? I press my forehead to his, my cock twitching and my hole clenching around his fingers. He still doesn't move when I relax against him, going limp in his lap. He stays inside me while kissing the side of my face and neck.

"You're so beautiful," he says. "Now that I know what you look like when you fully let go, I don't want anyone to experience it but me."

My heart expands, feeling too big for my chest. "Don't say things you don't mean."

"I never do. I want all of this..." He gestures between us. "To only be ours."

"I want that too and I want you."

He brings my face to his, kissing my lips. "I want to be yours."

For one more week he will be. Then we'll go back to living our separate lives, the memories of the short time I was his and he was mine following me everywhere I go.

Sixteen

Malcolm

I spent this morning sneaking in and out of Snow's house. We met outside for some kisses behind the cabin and not so innocent touches in the woods. I'd slide my hands in his pants, unable to resist the urge to have my fingers inside him again. He always feels so warm and ready for me.

Finishing up a present this afternoon for Cameron, I can't get Snow out of my head. It's so hard waiting for dinner time to be around him again so my heart leaps in my chest when he wraps his hands around my eyes, taking me by surprise from behind. His strong scent takes over my nose and I relax against the back of the chair, smiling so big my cheeks hurts.

Grabbing him by his wrist, I drag him in front of me and lift him on my desk, shoving everything to the side. I waste no time, dragging down his pants and underwear, ready to make him sing for me the way he did yesterday. I constantly need to be touching him now, in any way I can and it's better when there are no clothes getting in our way.

With the ache to have my fingers inside him again, I spread his legs and he opens up for me so willingly. I drag his ass closer to the edge and his back hits the desk, the loud thump being replaced with his ragged breath when I rub spit over his pink, twitching hole. Something about the way it tugs at me as I push past his entrance has my body bursting with excitement. Fuck I want him. He makes me feel like a fucking, impatient hormonal teenager.

My cock hardens, leaking against my underwear and my mouth salivates the more his walls spread around my finger. I spit between his cheeks, and shove another finger inside, his straining cock resting against his belly, red and dripping.

He squirms on the desk, pushing against me, biting his bottom lip to mute his sounds. I hate it. I don't like having limitations when being with him. Two more days and Claire will be gone and there won't have to be any. I'm no longer holding myself back once she does. It's more painful to stay away from Snow than it is to embrace him.

It's been a little over fifteen minutes and I still have him on his back, his pants down and my fingers inside him while he whimpers, fighting back his orgasm.

"I...I need more."

"Me too," I say, licking my lips. His hole is mesmerizing, wet and swollen. I can't fight back the urge to taste him anymore. I've rimmed my wife before, but I always enjoyed it more than she did. I hope that's not the case with him. I lift his ass higher, shoving my nose into his groin, licking at his cock.

He gasps in surprise, and I don't care about what he has between his legs anymore.

Lapping at his balls, I make my way to his hole, running my nose up and down his wrinkled skin. He smells of soap and him. Removing my finger, I replace it with my starving mouth, licking and nipping at his pucker before plunging my tongue inside. He quivers, his legs squeezing around my neck unintentionally.

He thrashes, and his sounds turn animalistic as I dive deeper, darting in and out. I pry his cheeks apart, shoving my tongue in as far as I can, swirling it around before flattening it again. He's so responsive, his body tenses as his hole tightens around my intrusion.

“Ohhh, I'm...I can't. I...”

“Come for me,” I say, grabbing his cock, stroking him through his orgasm.

I straighten my back, watching his mouth part, his face flushing and eyes rolling back in his head. He comes shaking, the muscles in his stomach bulging. I slide my hand up his shirt, pinching at his nipples earning me more moans and gasps. His head rolls from side to side against the desk, his face elated and cock softening.

“Did you know I was coming here?” he asks sounding drunk.

“I was hoping for it.” I smile, running my fingers through his release. I realized freaking out and running away doesn't

stop me from wanting this less. I'll still think about doing all this to him when he isn't around, but I'll miss the experience and joy of getting to fulfill my desires.

"I think I forgot to lock the door," he says in between laughing.

My eyes widen and I turn around to check the door. Claire's husband is staring at us, his face scrunched up in confusion. "Snow?"

I glance between them unsure how he knows his name. Snow sits up, quickly dragging his underwear and pants back up, his face paling. "Brian?"

"Why would you come in here without knocking and, wait...do you two know each other?"

"What are you doing here?" Brian asks, ignoring everything I said, his eyes focused on Snow. "And is this why you haven't been answering my phone calls and emails? Because of him?" Brian's face tenses, his eyes filling with anger.

My heart sinks after I realize what's happening. "You should go," I say, unable to avert my eyes from the ground.

"Yeah, you're right." Snow jumps off the table, fumbling with his pants, tears welling in his eyes.

"Not you," I say, grabbing his wrist. "You stay where you are and you," I glance back at Brian, "need to get the fuck out. Now."

I can tell he wants to argue but he knows it'll do him no good and leaves, shutting the door only halfway. "Look at me,

baby,” I say, pulling his face to mine. “It’s okay. I got you.”

“I...he.” Tears stream down his face and I pull him into my arms, rubbing his back. “How about I take you back to your cabin and we can have dinner together there instead?”

He swallows hard, sniffing softly. “You aren’t going ask how he knows me?”

Shaking my head, I take a step back, our eyes meeting again. “I don’t think I need to. The jealousy and anger in his eyes when he saw us together made everything pretty clear.”

He wipes his eyes with the back of his shaking hand. “You don’t think of me as some sleazy homewrecker?”

My chest tightens. “Of course not. Nancy told me Brian was a piece of shit who often cheated on his wife. I’m guessing he didn’t mention to you that he even had one.”

“No. I had no idea. He told me he lived alone. I think he rented out someone’s house when he invited me over for dinner on our first date.”

I curse under my breath, anger rippling through me. “Of course he did. How did you find out about Claire?”

His hand falls to his mouth. “Oh my God. It was her all along. They have a kid together too. I really am a homewrecker.”

“Baby, people who are homewreckers are very aware of the fact and have no guilt over it. You’re not one of those people. You were lied to and played just as much as she was.”

“Yeah but rarely anyone sees it that way. It’s easier to put blame on the single, young college student who was after nothing more than a good grade.”

“What? Where’d you hear that?”

“From different accusations all over my YouTube channel. Written on my car and apartment door. Printed out on flyers that were taped to the windows of the restaurant I worked at and college I went to.”

My skin heats. “I’m sorry that happened to you. You don’t deserve all that.”

“She seems to think so.”

“Wait, this was all Claire’s doing?” My voice raises.

“Yes. I know because she made sure to include the words, ‘*Stay away from my husband.*’ She doesn’t have to worry about that. I don’t even want to be in the same room as him.”

“I can’t blame you. It wasn’t me who he hurt, and I don’t even want him in my house anymore.”

He stares at the partly open door and back at me. “Does she ever come in here? If she sees me, she might...”

“I won’t let her hurt you, I promise. Come on, let’s get you out of here.”

He nods, allowing me to pull him out the door. We hurry across the way, watching out for Claire. She isn’t anywhere around. I’m sure Brian is making sure she stays in the house as

long as possible. He'll do anything to save his own ass, fucking scum bag. I never did like him.

Even before Nancy told me the things he's done. He was always uppity and thought he was too good for everything. He nitpicked at the smallest things. In that way he and Claire were similar.

Snow pushes his way inside the cabin, and I trail behind him, shutting and locking the door. "I have to go check on things and have a talk with Brian. I don't need him causing any more problems."

He drops onto the couch, rubbing his palms on his knees. "Yeah. I'll be here."

"You going to be okay here alone?"

"Yeah." He shifts in his seat. "It's not anything I haven't had to do before."

I collapse beside him and grab his hand, moving it between us. "You won't have to for long. Just like the last few days, I'll be back. I promise. Then we can watch Christmas movies, sing 'Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer' and whatever else you want."

His face lifts. "Really?"

"Yup."

"And you'll make snow angels with me too?"

"Only if I get to lie on top of you again when we do it."

He laughs and seeing him smile again settles me a little.
“I’ll see you in a bit.”

“Yeah.”

I kiss his mouth, hoping to reassure him some more. He leans toward me, grabbing onto my hair, lightly flicking his tongue against mine. “See you soon.”

I stand from the couch, knowing if I look back, I’ll never leave. I need to in order to keep Snow from getting more hurt than he already has.

Claire is adding stockings to my fireplace when I enter the house. “Hey, there you are. Did you go to visit your friend again?”

“I did. Where’s Brian?”

She turns around, pressing her hands to her skirt. “Out back looking for pinecones with Cameron, why?”

“Just wondering. I think I’ll be spending Christmas Eve dinner somewhere else tonight if that’s okay.”

Her brows knit together. “I thought you were bringing your friend here.”

“I thought about it but I’m not sure it’s such a good idea after all and this way you have more time to sort through the remainder of Nancy’s things.”

She pushes back the sleeves of her sweater. “I took care of most of that this morning. I wanted more time to prepare the

food. Right before you came in, I just finished packing up some of the things in the baby's room.”

“You what?” My stomach shifts uncomfortably.

“I thought it was time, Malcolm. It's a little weird to still have a nursery after your son has been gone for over a year.”

My blood runs cold. “That's not for you to decide. You had no right.”

“This will be good for you. You'll see. My therapist even said—”

“I don't give a shit what your therapist said, Claire. Neither you nor she have any business making decisions for me. This is my house, and he was my son. You need to leave.”

Her eyes widen and her jaw twitches. “What? I come here to help you and you're kicking me out?”

“This isn't for me. Admit it. Everything you do is to help yourself. To make you feel better about everything that's happened.”

“That's not fair. We drove all this way and the last time I checked, this was still my sister's house.”

I pound my fists against my thighs. “This is my house. You even said it yourself; Nancy is gone. She isn't coming back. How can you tell me to move on when you can't even follow your own advice? You coming here for Christmas won't bring her back.”

Her eyes water. “She was my sister, and she wouldn’t have been okay with me letting her husband spend Christmas alone. She would have wanted me to keep up with tradition.”

My heart pains. “You’re right. She was your sister and I’m sure you had good intentions when deciding to come here but you can’t just come in, acting like you can fix everything. You always did that. It’s time I put my foot down. I know how I’ve been living hasn’t been ideal but I’m working through that on my own. I don’t need you to come and decide when and how that should be done.”

She sighs. “You’re right. I’m sorry. I just miss my sister so much.”

I frown, walking toward her. “I know.” I rest my hands on her shoulders. “I do too. I miss them both like crazy every day and I don’t think it’ll ever stop but I do think it gets easier with time.”

She nods, forcing a smile on her lips. “I won’t interfere anymore, I promise. You can have dinner with your friend tonight and then we’ll leave first thing in the morning.”

Guilt ridden; I shake my head. “You don’t have to leave right away.” She was suffering like me. Not just from the loss of her sister but from everything else too. The way she went after Snow was wrong but she’s only human like the rest of us. She let her anger get the best of her the way I have many times. She trusted in her husband the way many people did. He told her lies and she ate them up, putting the blame on Snow to

keep from seeing the truth. It was easier to blame a stranger than the man you shared vows and a child with.

“Thank you but I do. You were right. I came here for all the wrong reasons. I do want us to stay friends, Malcolm, and in order for that to happen, I need to let you live your life the way you want. Starting now.”

I pull my hands back, running my fingers through my hair. “I’m sorry things couldn’t have been different. When Nancy died the world got darker. If I had the choice, I would have traded places with them.”

“It wasn’t your fault. I hope you know that. Nancy had a mind of her own. If she wanted to go somewhere, she was going to do it no matter what and you going with them wouldn’t have changed anything. You would have been crushed in that car right along with them.”

“There was many times I wished I was.” My feet shift and I feel myself sinking into the ground again. It happened at random. It was so unfair for them to have been taken out of the world while I was left behind to watch it all happen. To deal with the aftereffects, watching their bodies be laid to rest underground while people suffocated me in hugs, telling me how sorry they were.

“And now?” She folds her hands in front of her.

“I’m glad I’m still here to help keep both of their memories alive. I know now Nancy would have wanted me to continue living for all of us and I’m doing my best to try for her. For them.”

She smiles, reaching for my hand. “You really did make her happy, you know? And I’m grateful she had a good man in her life. Someone who both loved her and my nephew so much.”

“It’s really good to hear you say that.” I squeeze her hand.

“I’m sorry I didn’t say it sooner.”

The back door opens, and Cameron runs toward us. “Is lunch ready yet?”

Claire takes a deep breath and turns to face her son. “Is it that time already?”

“My stomach says it is,” Cameron answers.

And we both laugh. Claire guides her son into the kitchen, and I search around for any sign of Brian. “Where’d your dad go, kiddo? He coming in to eat too?”

“He said he was going for a short walk.”

“In this temperature?” Claire asks, her face tilting in confusion. “Your dad hates being out too long in the cold. I’m surprised he’s stayed out this long.”

I freeze, an unsettling sensation creeping up the back of my throat. “You two enjoy your lunch. I gotta drop something off across the way.”

“Okay. We’ll see you when you get back.”

I head out the door and run across the street. I hurry through the front when I hear raised voices from outside.

“Come on, sweetheart. You know how much I care about you. I didn’t mean for things to get so out of hand. It’s been

bad between me and Claire for a while now—”

“Wow. You’re seriously feeding me that bullshit? You almost cost me my job. I can’t even go home. Half of the town hates me. I’m losing subscribers by the thousands. You fucking broke my heart, and you want to come in here feeding me the whole ‘I wasn’t happy in my marriage line’?”

“It’s not a line,” he says, reaching for Snow, oblivious to my presence. “And I would have never done anything to intentionally hurt you. Claire was the one who acted out of anger and I’m sorry it got so out of hand. I’ll gladly pay for all the damage. I love you. I was going to tell her about us, but the timing wasn’t right. She snooped through my phone and found out anyway, and everything went very wrong from there.”

“You need to go,” Snow says, standing his ground. “There is nothing you can say at this point that will make me change my mind. I should press charges on both of you. She wrecked my car and my home.”

His eyes widen. “I didn’t know she went that far, I’m so sorry baby. I’ll take care of it all, I promise.”

“Please stop talking and just go.” Snow’s hand shakes as he brushes hair from his face.

Brian’s jaw twitches. “He’s just using you. That’s all this is. When he breaks your heart, don’t think you can crawl back to me.”

“He won’t,” I say, stepping between them. “He’s too smart for that and I believe he asked you to leave. So either walk out

on your own, or I'll drag you through the fucking door and I'll tell Claire about where you really went.”

He stumbles on his words, his lips shaking. He stares between us. “Whatever. You can have him. Enjoy my sloppy seconds. I guess he has to be good for something.”

Fuming, I get lost in my anger and ball my fist, punching Brian's nose in. He curses, falling backward, landing on his ass.

“What the fuck, asshole. You might have broken my nose.”

“Leave now and never contact Snow again, or next time I'll be sure I do.”

He quickly stands up, grabbing his face, and walks out the door, not looking back.

“You didn't have to do that.” Snow's voice shakes, his lips twitching.

“Yes, I did,” I say, rushing back to him. I wrap my arms around his waist, and he buries his face into my shoulder, grabbing at my sides with trembling hands.

“Thank you. No one's ever done anything like that for me before.”

“I wasn't going to stand here and allow him to keep harassing you while tearing you down in the process. Men like that are nothing but spineless assholes who deserve every bad thing coming to them.” Hoping to calm him, I rub his back and he relaxes against me.

He rubs his warm cheek against my neck. "I'm just glad you're here."

"Me too. I don't plan on leaving anytime soon either."

"What about Claire?"

"I have a feeling they'll be leaving tonight so I don't think she'll be a problem any longer."

He nods into my shoulder. "I'm sorry for ruining Christmas."

"You didn't. It hasn't even happened yet, and we have plenty of time to turn this weekend around. The only one who messed up is me. I thought I needed her here to keep Nancy's spirit alive. Turns out I was wrong. Continuing to live my life is the only way I am going to do that and remember why I want to keep breathing in the first place. It's moments like this." I gesture between us. "You and me. Us decorating the tree, keeping up with traditions, singing songs again, and lighting up the whole street during December."

"There's still time you know."

"For?"

"To turn this whole street into a blinding, headache inducing attraction."

I laugh. "You think so? We have less than a day."

"And we aren't going to get anywhere standing here talking about it." He stands up straight, putting his hands on his hips.

"You're right and I didn't exactly get rid of everything."

He purses his lips. “I knew you were holding out on me.”

“Maybe just a little. I’ll go get them down from the attic and meet you back here in twenty.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

I head outside, and Brian is loading the car. Claire shoots me a disappointed look. “Brian thinks it best we get going now. He’s worried the traffic will only be worse tomorrow.”

Sure, that’s why. I nod in understanding anyway, resting my hand on the roof of the car. “Makes sense. I’m glad you were able to stop by, even if it wasn’t for long.”

“Me too,” she says, her gaze unable to meet mine. “Take care, Malcolm.”

“You too.”

She reaches out to squeeze my shoulder before sliding into the passenger seat. Brian glances at me, anger still visible in his expression before getting in the car. I don’t know what he told Claire about his nose and how he injured it, but I really don’t care either. I’m just glad he won’t be bothering Snow anymore. Cameron lowers the window and waves at me. “Bye, Uncle Malcolm.” As much as I want to confront Claire about what she did, I know it won’t do anyone any good right now and it’s something I rather not bring up around Cameron.

“Later, kid.” I pat him on the head, and I pause, remembering I left his gift in the office. “Hold on, I have something for you.”

“We need to be on the road already,” Brian barks out.

Claire narrows her eyes to him. “A few more minutes won’t make a difference. I don’t understand why you’re in such a hurry all of a sudden.”

I do. He’s a fucking coward, that’s why and I don’t even know what to think about her anymore. What I assumed she had done to Snow was confirmed by her own husband. There’s no more giving her the benefit of the doubt. I hurry to the back of the house, walking into my shed. The wooden toy sits on my desk and I grab it, heading back outside into the blistering cold. Cameron beams my way when he sees the wooden truck in my hand.

“Is that for me?”

“It is. I didn’t have time to paint it but maybe you and your dad can do it together.”

Brian sneers at me in the rearview mirror and Claire is too busy enjoying her son’s excitement to notice.

“I love it,” he says, running his hand down the wheels causing them to spin fast.

“It’s a wonderful gift, Malcolm. Thank you.” Claire shoots me a smile. “Merry Christmas.”

“Merry Christmas,” I say back, tapping on the hood of the car. “Safe travels.”

The window rolls up and the car backs out of the driveway. Cameron watches me through the back window, waving at me until they are out of sight.

I enter my house and it doesn't feel as empty as usual. There's evidence of life everywhere. I grab everything I can carry in my hands before walking outside. Snow is on the porch swing, and surprisingly, it doesn't hurt to see someone else sitting there.

If anything, it makes me want to fill the empty space next to him. "Hey."

"Hi," he says, rocking back and forth, kicking his feet. "Did you make this swing?"

"I did. Right after the accident. Nancy had been begging me to build one for the longest time. Only wish I didn't wait so long."

"It's beautiful." He traces the indents on the wooden planks. "We used to have one when I was little. I sometimes fell asleep on it while reading and my mom would have to carry me inside."

"Yeah? Nancy would have done the same thing. I'd have to sometimes come out here after working long hours to make her move from her chair to the bed." I smile at the memory. "She would have loved this swing. She wanted a place where we could sit and watch the sunset. We would do it almost every day, sitting together on the porch steps."

He stares up at the sky. "Do you still do that?"

"I did for a while until all it did was make me feel more alone."

“Will you sit with me?” He pats the empty space beside him. “I’m starting to get lonely over here by myself.”

I roll my eyes. “I’d hate to be the reason for that.” I plop down beside him, the extra weight causing the swing to dip.

“It’s so beautiful outside right now.”

I wrap his hand in mine, staring into his blue eyes. “Yes, it is.”

“How long do you think we have until the sun goes down?”

I glance at my watch. “A good while. We have plenty of time to hang some lights up before it does.”

“Ready to go waste some time with me then?” he asks, hope filling his eyes.

“With you? Always.”

Seventeen

Malcolm

Two weeks later

Snow rests against me, his head on my chest while the swing rocks back and forth. I slide the flannel blanket higher, and his shivering lessens. “Ready to go inside?” I ask.

He shakes his head, staring toward the fading sky. “Not until it’s fully dark out.”

We haven’t skipped a single sunset ever since I told him about why I made the swing. I hold him tighter, releasing a soft breath. “Okay. As long as you’re warm enough.”

“I am for now.” He wiggles against me, lifting the blanket to his chin.

We lie quietly watching as the sun fade into the dark clouds. The sky holds a yellow, red, and orange hue. I smile, and it’s almost as if Nancy and Henry are here with us. I didn’t think I could open my heart again, but Snow proves me wrong the longer he’s around. My feelings for Snow won’t ever replace my love for my wife and they don’t have to. Learning to be

with someone else doesn't mean I'm replacing her. Nancy was my past and Snow is my present. Hopefully he will also be my future.

He yawns, sliding his arm around me. "We should move now before we end up spending the night on this bench."

"We'd be icicles in the morning if we did that."

He laughs and I get to my feet first before taking his hand. We walk inside and Snow carries the blanket on his shoulder. I glance behind me, breathing in the cold air one more time and smiling at the sky one last time. My phone vibrates in my pocket, and I sigh while reading Claire's latest message.

Claire: I only want to make things right between us. For Nancy's sake. Please give me a chance to.

Not ready to respond back, I shove my phone in my pocket. Claire gave me a call after her and Brian's last major fight. She agreed she acted without thinking and took it out on the wrong person. It still hasn't completely fixed things because she has yet to apologize to Snow. She wasn't the only one part of the crime. She paid a few of her neighborhood kids to help her out and she asked her hacker cousin to gain her access into Snow's account. I couldn't believe everything I was hearing when she was telling me all this. If she had time to plan this all out, then she would have time to gather the real truth from Brian or Snow. I'm only happy she is paying for the damages. It's not enough, though. Could it ever be?

Snow is already sitting on the couch by the time I walk inside and close the door behind me. I won't tell him about the

message until tomorrow. He's having too good of a night for me to want to ruin it.

"You ready for bed?"

"No yet," he says, opening the blanket enough for me to catch a glimpse of his bare legs. His bottom half was hidden beneath the blanket, and I didn't realize he'd taken his pants off. My eyes go from him to the discarded clothing on the floor and that's not all he removed. I lick my lips, my body vibrating. "I'm not tired enough."

"Anything I can do to help?"

He lifts the blanket more, parting his legs while sliding his hand beneath his long shirt, stroking his cock. "Maybe. Come here and we'll find out."

Tugging off my shirt and sliding off my pants, I walk closer to him. He yanks at my hand, tugging me beside him. Climbing onto my lap, he pulls out my cock and rubs us together. "Here's one way," he says, his voice thick and heavy with lust.

He lifts his hips, pressing my tip to his hole, rocking back and forth. "Here's another way."

"I think the second one will be better this time around."

He smiles, gripping my cock between his fingers and dragging my head up and down his crack, moaning. Me too. We've talked about penetrative sex a few times. It was the only thing we haven't done and I haven't stopped thinking

about it ever since he told me he got tested a week ago. I wanted to make sure I got it right, but why wouldn't it be?

This was me and him. Everything we've done so far has been nothing I was used to and once we were in the moment my nerves went away and my body knew exactly what to do. This would be no different.

"I came back negative but if you want to use a condom..."

Shaking my head, I shove my hand up his shirt and tug at one of his nipples. "I don't. I want to feel all of you. No barriers."

He nods breathlessly and kisses my lips, his tongue thrusting inside my mouth.

When he pulls back, he has a bottle of lube in his hand and pops open the cap.

"Where did that come from?"

He shrugs, shoving the bottle between couch cushions after lubing up himself and my cock. He impales himself on me, slowly sliding down while rocking his hips. I grab onto his thighs and he takes a deep breath, slamming all the way down.

Our moans mingle together, and he lifts all the way up, to come back down, taking me all at once. "Fuck, you feel good," he says between heavy pants.

He rolls his hips and I thrust upward, fucking inside him. Our bodies meet each other halfway, and our kisses are sloppy, his mouth sucking on mine intensifying my pleasure.

“Hold on,” I say. “I don’t want it to end yet.”

I lift him up as I get to my feet and lay him in front of the fireplace on the new rug he told me I needed a few days ago. “I guess you were right. This thing is coming in handy.”

He laughs, lifting his legs. I position myself in front of him, lifting his bottom higher and slamming back inside. His hole tugs around me and my cock throbs. Being connected to him in this way is beautiful and I’m not ready to pull away anytime soon.

His fingers dig into my thighs as I fuck forward, sliding in and out of him, increasing my speed with each movement. His head falls back, the muscles in his neck bulging. His hand falls between us and he strokes himself; my arousal spirals from the sight of him.

His skin holds a glow from the fire as he falls apart beneath me. Each time I enter him, his body’s so warm and inviting. Making love to Snow is like experiencing something for the first time and how I imagine it would feel to touch the stars in the sky.

Electricity dances between our skin, buzzing from his body to mine. He squeezes around my cock and pleasure shoots through me the more we come together. He’s so beautiful, writhing between me and the floor, sweat dripping down his chest, his pink nipples calling to my mouth.

I take one between my teeth, sucking and lapping at the center while my cock rocks into him slower before increasing my speed again. His sounds are wild and so are his eyes when

they finally meet mine. They hold onto me and so does he, with the promise to never let go.

His skin comes in contact with mine like a match striking a match box, creating a spark. The fire burns between us and we are brighter than the morning light. He continues to lose himself beneath me and I've been gone for a while. Slipping closer to euphoria, heat pools into my stomach. Unable to fight back any longer, I come inside him. His body shakes and after a few quicker strokes of his hand, his cum covers both of our skin.

His eyes are half lidded, and his face is flushed a pretty pink. I lean down claiming his shining lips. Still caught in our own little world, I forget about everything else, my mind staying wherever he is. His tongue lazily laps at mine, his body relaxing between me and the floor.

I kiss him a little longer, our heart beats syncing together. I only move to bury my face into his neck, collapsing on top of him. We don't move for a long time, trying to catch our breath and come back down to earth.

His stomach rumbles and I kiss the side of his face in between chuckles. "Not only did I help you relax, you also worked up quite an appetite. A hungry Snow won't be a sleeping one."

"Mph," is all he manages to say and I laugh louder.

"I'm going to make us something to eat while you learn to talk again."

I slowly stand up, my legs unsteady and the room spinning. Snow looks up at me with a dreamy smile, staying quiet and spread out on the floor. I put on my underwear and shirt heading for the kitchen, his gaze slowly following me everywhere I go.

I pull down a few pans, some tortillas, and cooked chicken from the fridge, along with everything else to make some easy quesadillas. While I'm cooking and flipping our food on the skillet, Snow steps behind me wrapping his arms around my waist, resting his face on my shoulder. "Hi," he says softly.

"Hey, you. You holding up okay?"

"Yeah. Maybe a little too okay."

"You were able to walk over here better than I thought you would."

"You and food are over here so it made sense for me to be too." He sighs softly, his wet lips briefly coming in contact with my skin before he pulls away. He's still naked, his lithe, muscular body pulling my eyes away from the stove. His skin is still covered in his cum and my mouth waters. It's the only part of him I haven't tasted yet. Next time for sure.

He retrieves two plates from the cabinet, wagging his ass my way. I shake my head, taking both the dishes from his hands. I fill each one and he helps me carry them to the table. "I'll get us both something to drink while you go wash up."

He stares at his stomach, smiling cheekily. "Okay."

I fill two glasses with Root Beer, and he comes back wearing one of my shirts. They don't even look like my clothes when they are on him. He sits across from me and reaches for his food without so much as a word.

It doesn't take us long to clear our plates. I place our dishes in the sink and when he starts walking into the guest room, I shake my head.

“Are we not going to bed?”

“We are,” I say, grabbing his hand. His eyes focus on mine, his head tilting in confusion, and I drag him toward the bedroom I only ever shared with one other person.

We both approach the bed and I turn on the lamp on the nightstand. He stays where he is while I drag down the covers, staring between him and the spot I've kept empty for so long.

“You sure?” he asks, his expression uncertain.

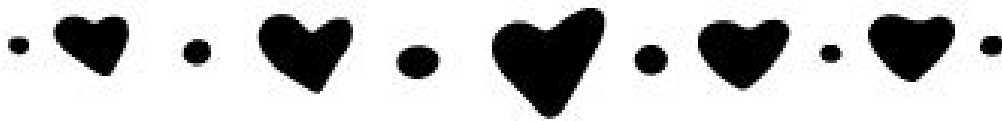
“Yes.”

He tugs on the bottom of the shirt, walking toward the bed with gentle steps. He runs his fingers over the pillow before crawling into Nancy's spot. It's been cold for too long. I'm ready to know what it's like to have the sheets warm and wrinkled again.

It doesn't hurt or feel gripping seeing Snow in her place and it's such a relief to not be overtaken by the uneasiness anymore. Freeing. He pats the other side, his eyes soft and smile inviting.

I hop on the bed and reach for the covers, dragging them over us. I turn off the lamp and Snow snuggles against me, releasing low hums. “If you need us to go back to the other room, we always can.”

I shake my head, wrapping my arm around him. “No more moving backwards,” I say. “Only forward.” It’s the only direction I want to go in when standing next to Snow.



Snow

My eyes blink open from the morning light entering the room. The other side of the bed is empty and a slight panic creeps into my chest. “Malcolm?” I call out.

No answer comes and I toss the covers off me, standing up from the bed. I say his name again and still don’t get an answer. Loud music leads me into the room next door. Malcolm is singing “Jingle Bell Rock” while slowly placing baby toys into a box. This is the first time I’ve seen this door open and the first time I’ve stepped inside.

“What are you doing?” I ask, slowly walking forward.

Caught off guard by my sudden presence, he stands up quickly, glancing between me and the box. “Claire was right. It’s time. I needed to be the one to do it though, in my own way.”

I nod, the corners of my lips gently lifting. “Do you need me to give you some time alone?”

His lips bunch together, and he shakes his head, reaching for me. “No. I think I like it better with you here.” His heavy eyes make my heart clench. I know this isn’t easy for him. It never is and no one should ever have to handle it alone.

“Then I’ll stay.” I step closer and wrap my fingers around his. We both kneel to the floor, and I never let go of him the whole time he adds the items spread out around us into the box.

When he finally gets back to his feet, I stand with him, and we finish putting everything else into boxes until the room is empty. Malcolm touches the hand painted animals on the wall, breathing in deeply. “These can stay for a little longer.”

I step behind him, wrapping my arms around his waist as I rest my forehead on his back. “For as long as you need them to.”

He looks back, smiling at me. “And you too?”

“Yes. Me too.”

Epilogue

Snow

One year later

A week out in the country hours away from my home turned into months before it became a year. I only went back for my stuff, to get out of my apartment's lease, pick up my car, and occasionally to visit my family after we patched things up. My mom eventually came around and apologized for jumping to conclusions. She saw my YouTube video explaining everything and so did the rest of my family. She and my dad are coming for a visit on New year, and I can't wait for them to see the home I've built with Malcom. Alecia's brother agreed to allow me to rent his house for as long as I planned to stay. He was almost going to sell it after his wife asked him for a divorce but decided he needed the extra monthly income more.

I only stayed there six months before fully moving in with Malcolm. He said I was always at his place anyway so I might as well be there permanently, and I wasn't going to argue.

After leaving my job, I put all my focus on my new life and YouTube channel. I transferred colleges and switched to online classes for my business degree. Claire hasn't come to visit since last year and keeps in contact with Malcolm mostly via text message. It's been hard forgiving her but hating her took more energy than it was worth. I don't know if she'll ever come around again or not. She and Malcolm haven't gotten to that point again yet, but I do know he misses his nephew. He doesn't have any nieces and nephews from his side of the family since he's the only child.

"Ready?" Malcolm says from behind me, resting a hand on the back of the couch.

"Are you?"

"More than I'll ever be. The faster we get this over with, the sooner I can wash my face off and pretend it never happened."

I laugh and rest my phone on the stand, patting the cushion beside me. My hand only shakes a little. My new medications have really helped and so has being out here. My symptoms won't ever fully go away but they can get to a tolerable point. Malcolm sighs and sits down, turning his body at an angle, facing me. "You sure you don't want to do this in the bathroom?"

"Here is fine," I say. I grab the makeup, placing it between us.

"I can't believe I agreed to this."

“My viewers are too excited for you to back out now.” I reach across and hit the record button.

“Hey, everyone.” I smile big, waving in front of the camera, pushing it back enough to get us both in the video. Malcolm is waving lazily beside me with an unconvincing grin.

“I’m here with my very sexy boyfriend and today I’ll be using him to show you one of my latest looks. This will be perfect for going to school or work. Something a little more low key but still helps give you a fresh look.”

Comments are already rolling in asking how old Malcolm is and if we are in love. Along with how long we’ve been living together and when we first made everything official.

“I’ll only be answering questions that are makeup related today, guys. We can get into all the fun relationship details later during a Q and A. I need Malcolm to stay still for me today.”

More comments show up faster than I can read them. Some ask if Malcolm is married too and if I was still in contact with Mr. Frosty. It didn’t matter how many times I answered these questions. The ones who didn’t believe me the first few times, never would.

They’ve made up their mind on what kind of person they thought I was a long time ago and blocking people from my channel was becoming exhausting. They all left eventually, growing bored and moving on to new drama. My name might not be fully cleared but for the most part life had moved on and so did a lot of my fans. So many continued to support me

the whole time, even when I disappeared off the internet with no explanation.

I wipe down Malcolm's face with toner, letting it dry before adding moisturizer. I mention my favorite makeup sponges I use for blending while I use them to blend the primer and concealer into Malcolm's skin. He closes his eyes for most of the video, staying quiet the whole time, occasionally struggling to keep a straight face during some of my conversations with my fans.

The concealer is a little too light against his skin tone. He's more tanned than me. He's also out in the sun more. It wouldn't have made a difference either way. I only burn and then go back to having basically translucent skin.

I add some blush, a light shade of eyeshadow, topping off the look with some lip gloss and a little mascara.

I glance at the camera, smiling. "And just like that Malcolm is ready to start his day looking fabulous."

He opens his eyes, cocking his head to the side. "I actually look pretty damn good. Maybe I'll make this a permanent part of my wardrobe."

I laugh, kissing his cheek, my lipstick remaining fully on my lips. "Not only did y'all get a makeup demonstration and learn about a new look, y'all also got to witness me testing my new smudge free lipstick from one of my newest sponsors." I hold up the small tube so everyone has a close up of the brand name.

“It’s a small business owned by an old friend,” I continue. “No harmful ingredients included and zero animal testing. It’s also very affordable. The link is shared in my bio for those of you who are looking for lipstick that will stay on during all activities.” I wink.

I lost two of my sponsors after last year’s ordeal but have gained three new ones since. It’s been a long road to moving past everything that happened last year. The more truth revealed, the easier it was to feel nothing for Brian. I wasn’t the only student he was seeing behind his wife’s back. Not only did he lose his job, but he also lost half of everything in his messy divorce. What I went through with him might have been one of the worse experiences of my life but in the end it’s what led me to Malcolm. I’m done holding grudges and want to only move forward with my new life.

I set the lipstick on the table and Malcolm kisses me on the side of the head, proving his lip gloss definitely is not smudge proof. I shove him away, grinning. “Easy. I don’t think my viewers are ready for another show so soon.”

Malcolm rolls his eyes, leaning back on the couch. I laugh and scoot closer to the edge. “Unfortunately, I have no tricks on covering up smoldering expressions but tune in next time on how to hide those dark circles for after those sleepless nights. Thank y’all for tuning in today and don’t stop being you!”

We both wave at the camera and I end the video. Malcolm stands up and walks to the bathroom to wash his face off. I

follow him and rest my hand against the door frame while he stares at me in the mirror. “Is it time already?”

“Yup. The tree won’t buy itself.”

He glares at me, drying his face with a towel from the rack. “If we buy a fake one, we won’t have to keep leaving the house to buy one every year.”

“What’s the fun in that?”

He grunts. “I don’t understand what’s fun about freezing our asses off in the cold while carrying a heavy tree around.”

I sigh, resting a hand on his shoulder. “That’s because you’re not looking at the bigger picture.”

“Which is?” He turns around, narrowing in on me.

“Creating new traditions and doing them together.”

He wrinkles his mouth. “Can’t that involve us staying warm?”

“We can get warm after tree shopping, and I already have the best idea on how.”

“Is that right?” He yanks me toward him. “And what will that be?”

“You’ll just have to see, won’t you?”

“You’d think by now I’d be used to you making me work hard for my answers.”

“I think you like the torture more than you let on.”

“Maybe a little,” he says, kissing my lips. He tastes of cherry lip gloss and everything wonderful in the world. “You keep testing my patience daily and I continue coming back for more.”

“I still can’t understand why either. Most people give up by now,” I say, rubbing my nose to his, never getting enough of his scent.

“It’s like finding the gold at the end of the rainbow. You’re always worth the wait.”

I smile against his lips and though our relationship isn’t always rainbows and butterflies, it’s still everything. They say you can’t always get the dream house and often settle for something close instead. With Malcolm I get so much more. Why go back to less when more waits for you in the countryside four hours from home.

He drags me to the front of the house and hands me the coat he lent me a year ago. I never did get my own. Accepting it from him each time is like some unspoken promise between us. Every time I put it on, I agree to stay where I am. Out here with him while everything he has also becomes mine.

He grabs his red hat and slides on a different jacket, grinning my way. “I hope you got in a good arm workout this morning.”

I tilt my head. “Why is that?”

“Because you’ll be the one cutting down the tree this year.”

My eyes widen. “I don’t know if I can.”

He pulls me closer, pressing his head to mine. “And I don’t have a single doubt.”

Nothing feels impossible when he’s around. He believes in me more than anyone else ever has and my confidence only grows with him around. No, I don’t need some dream house because Malcolm is real and always standing right beside me.

“Let’s go get your tree.”

“And sing Christmas songs on the way there?”

He laughs, pulling me through the door and out into the cold air I’ll never get adjusted to. “If we do, will it become part of tradition too?”

“Everything we do together is, especially this,” I say, dragging him to the mistletoe hanging under the porch roof. He glances up and back at me. “I’m going to find these all throughout the house after today, aren’t I?”

I pull one out from my pocket. “And everywhere else we go.”

He chuckles and pulls me into a long, sweet kiss. “I don’t need some plant to kiss you.”

“Are you sure?” I take a step back, lifting the one in the air above my head.

He steps forward, snatching the plant from my hand and tosses it on the swing. Forming his lips into a wicked grin, he grabs me by the front of my jacket and shoves me against the window where no mistletoe is hanging, his lips hovering over mine. “I’m sure.”

Our mouths join together in an instant the same way our hearts have.

“I love you,” he whispers, slowly pulling back.

“I love you too,” I say, my heart soaring.

We’ve said these words many times before and I look forward to continuing to use them every day. I’ve never said them to any other man before because they were only ever meant for him. And so am I.

Author's note

Thank you for taking the time to read my book and thank you to all my amazing betas readers for helping make this book the best I can. It was a nice break writing these two men. They were both so sweet and perfect for one another. I happy to be able to get their story out right on time for Christmas!

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