



MERRY
KISSMAS
TO ME

JERICA MACMILLAN

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Merry Kissmas to Me

Jerica MacMillan

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PROLOGUE

One year ago

Olivia

Hannah, the hostess at The Filling Station, gives me a regretful smile when I walk in. “Your order’s not quite ready yet.” She gestures toward the bar, which is packed, as is every table in sight. “Normally I’d tell you to take a seat at the bar while you wait, but as you can see, we’re pretty busy tonight.”

I give her a polite smile, stifling a sigh. I just want to get my food and go. “No problem. I’ll just hang out here and do my best to stay out of the way.” As soon as I speak the words, I have to dance out of the way of the door, the bells hanging from the handle jingling as someone pushes their way through.

Just my luck, it’s Ty Daniels, my best friend Sarah’s older brother. Ugh.

He lives in Vancouver, Washington now, working as a graphic designer, so I fortunately don’t have to see him often. And you’d think that after years of only seeing him a couple times a year when he comes to visit his family in Arcadian Falls, I wouldn’t find his presence so annoying. But spending my entire childhood with him picking on the two of us has made annoyance at the sight of him a Pavlovian response.

Of course, the fact that he *still* picks on me even now that I'm twenty-two and he's twenty-six hasn't done anything to temper that response. Give him long enough and he'll probably pull my hair or ask if I got my coat at the clown store, even though my belted charcoal wool coat is slim and classy and isn't ridiculous at all. Facts mean nothing to Ty, at least not where picking on me is concerned.

Rolling my eyes, I turn to survey the boisterous crowd, looking anywhere but at him. It's cold, and Christmas is only a few days away, so everyone is in a festive mood. ChristmasFest is in full swing, the whole town getting into the spirit of the season, and The Filling Station is no exception. Decorations line the doorway and hang in the windows, with garlands draped from the ends of the booths. Plenty to keep my eyes off Ty.

He doesn't seem to notice me, thank god, as he brushes past me to get to the hostess stand, forcing me to shuffle to the side even more. *Jerk.*

Hannah looks at the chart on her podium, then glances around the restaurant and shakes her head. "It's gonna be at least fifteen minutes," she tells Ty. "Probably closer to thirty. Are you meeting anyone, or is it just you?"

"Just me," he says, his low voice more of a rumble in my belly than anything audible in my ears.

Or maybe I'm just hungry. Probably that's it.

He says something else to Hannah that I don't catch, then steps away from the hostess stand, bumping into me again. "Watch it," I tell him, not bothering to sweeten my tone or my words. To anybody else, I'd say excuse me. But with Ty, there's no reason to be polite. He certainly never feels the need to extend that courtesy to me, so why should I?

Amused, he turns to face me. "Oh, hey, Olivia. Didn't see you there."

"Sure," I respond. He obviously saw me. It's not like I'm invisible.

With his hands in his coat pockets, he offers me what would normally be a charming grin on anyone else. But on Ty, it's just salt in the wound.

"Don't you have anywhere better to be?" I ask him.

"Nope." He grins again, a dimple just visible through the scruff covering his cheeks and jaw. "Didn't you hear Hannah? They're all full up, so I have to wait for a spot." Girls I knew in high school used to swoon over his dimples. Of course, none of them ever had him put plastic bugs in their sleeping bag at a sleepover, so I can see how they could be fooled by his charm. And okay, the square jaw, straight nose, full lips, and broad shoulders certainly don't hurt anything. He's conventionally attractive, there's no doubt about it. And if he didn't insist on treating me like his annoying little sister's annoying little friend still, I might be attracted to him too. As it is, irritation is the dominant emotion I feel in his presence.

He makes a show of glancing around, his dark eyebrows lifting, eyes dancing as though it's not obvious that I'm also here by myself. "What about you? Hot date tonight?"

"Oh, definitely. Me and my TV," I chuckle, and we lapse into awkward silence.

"Look!" a voice calls out. "You two are standing under the mistletoe."

"Oh, look at that," chimes in Hannah. "You are! You two should kiss."

Ty and I both glance up, and I see the little sprig of greenery hanging over us.

Oh no. The last thing I want to do is kiss Ty. He's been picking on me since I was seven years old.

I try to back up, but there's nowhere to go since I'm standing in a corner to try to stay out of the way.

Chants of, "Kiss! Kiss! Kiss!" rise up around us, and I feel my cheeks heating. *Please let someone come out with my food right now.*

Ty looks down at me, a wicked gleam in his eye. “Come on, Livy, let’s give the people what they want.”

And before I can do anything, he bends his head, his full lips framed by dark scruff coming towards mine. When they make contact, they’re surprisingly soft and ... minty? Like he just put on lip balm.

So much better than the last guy I went out with who I kissed only once. Between his dry, crusty lips, the complete lack of sparks, and the fact he kept talking about his mom, I didn’t see him more than one time.

I kiss Ty back, more out of instinctual reaction than conscious desire. He’s a good kisser, and I can’t help myself.

My response seems to set something loose inside him. His hand reaches up, sliding under my hair and holding the back of my head, his thumb coming around to caress the skin just in front of my ear. He breaks contact for a second, and I’m vaguely aware of a few whistles piercing the din. Then he kisses me again, more firmly this time.

God help me, I kiss him back just as fervently, losing myself in this kiss.

“Olivia!” calls one of the servers, and I jump back, banging my head on the wall in my surprise. I’d gotten so caught up in our kiss that I’d forgotten where I was entirely.

Ty looks down at me, his face solemn, his eyes dark. Is his expression unreadable because he’s as thrown off by that kiss as I am, or is he just worried because I hit my head on the wall?

“Are you okay?” he asks, reaching up to caress my head.

Ducking his hand, I force a smile. “Yep. Great. Everything’s great. My food’s ready. Excuse me. See you later.” And with that, I slip past him, grateful that he doesn’t try to stop me.

But why would he? It’s Ty. That kiss was ... well ... It was amazing is what it was. But it’s never going to happen again,

because we're never going to end up under the mistletoe again.

Besides, Ty has a girlfriend, and I'm pretty sure they live together. Right? I should double check with Sarah, but either way, nothing can happen between us.

Not that I want anything to happen between us.

Hell will freeze over before he'd ever look at me as anything other than his little sister's annoying friend. I know that kiss will never happen again.

Cheeks burning, I take my food, mutter goodbye to Hannah, and flee.

CHAPTER ONE

Present day

Olivia

I step into The Filling Station, shaking off the snow from my wool coat. It's December, and we're into the second week of ChristmasFest, which lasts until the day after Christmas. Spirits are high all over town, including here. The hostess station and windows are all decorated for the holidays, the wait staff sporting elf hats, Santa hats, and holiday themed jewelry.

Glancing up, I spot the mistletoe, carefully stepping away from it so I don't get caught underneath it like I did last Christmas.

Not that I'm likely to end up kissing Ty again. Not here. Not anywhere. Not ever.

Even so, I know he'll be back in town soon, and neither of us needs a repeat of last Christmas. Though I'd be lying to myself if I tried to pretend like being here, now, with the mistletoe up again doesn't bring all the memories of that kiss flooding back.

And why the hell is the best kiss I've had in years from Ty of all people? What right does he have to go around kissing

people like that? People who aren't his girlfriend? And he has a girlfriend. At least he did the last time I checked, which was at Sarah and Shane's engagement party over the summer. Although I did find it odd that Ty's girlfriend didn't attend. What kind of girlfriend lets her serious live-in boyfriend go to his sister's engagement party alone?

Anyway. That's none of my business. Ty Daniels doesn't need me worrying about his relationship, a fact he's made abundantly clear every time I've seen him since we kissed last December.

Shaking off thoughts of Ty along with the snow, I step up to the hostess stand and smile at the teenager working there. "I'm meeting some friends. Sarah and Shane? Do you know if they're here yet?"

She glances down at the chart on her stand. "We sat three people who said another friend of theirs was coming a few minutes ago. But no couples. You can go take a look if you like."

"Great. Thanks." I pull my phone out of my coat pocket and fiddle with it for a second, debating whether or not to text Sarah. Would it be faster to text her and find out if they're still on their way? Or would it be a better idea to just check and see if they're here already? It's possible that Sarah's younger brother tagged along. Or her sister. It's not like our after-work meetups aren't allowed to have extras. Shane, for example. He's been joining us more often than not for the last several months. Every once in a while it'll just be Sarah and me like old times, though. Those are my favorite.

Or maybe they brought along one of Shane's friends? It's possible they got tired of me being the third wheel and decided to try to set me up on a date.

I've sort of sworn off dating. Not formally. Not categorically. I'm just not actively trying to find someone to date these days. After breaking up with my college boyfriend and moving back to Arcadian Falls, I signed up for all the dating apps—Tinder, Hinge, Bumble, even Match, though the

demographics there seem to skew a bit older than I'm looking for.

After working my way through every eligible bachelor in a two-hundred-mile radius who uses dating apps, I'm disillusioned with the local choices. I'd like to find a solid relationship, but everything approaching that has fizzled after a few months at the most. I thought I'd try short-term hookups, but that's not my style, and I'm tired of dudes who don't know what they want out of life. Or worse, the ones who know exactly what they want, and what they want is a bangmaid. Hard pass.

Being alone has seemed like the best option for a while now. If someone comes along and drops in my lap, I'm not going to turn it down. But constantly trying is exhausting.

I'm saved from deciding what to do by my phone lighting up with a text.

Sarah: We're here. Saved you a seat.

No mention of anybody else joining them. But if she's trying to surprise me with one of Shane's friends, maybe that's why?

Mentally struggling, I offer the hostess a polite smile and walk past her to find my friends.

And freeze in my tracks.

It doesn't take me long at all to find their table—they're just around the corner. When I stop, broody dark eyes lift to meet mine. Dark slashes of eyebrows bend together as Ty raises his head, his eyes traveling down my body and back up again.

I scowl. What right does he have to be checking me out? No right at all. What would his girlfriend think?

Frustrated, angry, and a little bit turned on, I march over to the table. And of course I have to sit next to Ty, whether I like

it or not because Sarah and Shane are snuggled up on the other bench. I mean, I guess I could ask them to scoot over and let me sit with them, but I think that would only make things more awkward than they already are.

Pasting on my most polite customer service smile, I acknowledge Ty first. “Fancy meeting you here. You’re home for Christmas early. Did you just get into town?” I turn the same smile on Sarah. “You didn’t mention that your brother would be joining us.”

“That’s my fault,” Shane says. “I invited him along at the last second. You don’t mind, do you?”

Through clenched teeth, smile still firmly in place, I say, “No, no. Of course not. Why would I mind?”

Confusion flickers across Shane’s expression, but I don’t take the time to give it much thought. “Are you going to let me sit down, Ty?”

Sliding out of the booth, Ty stands and unfolds himself to his full height. He looks far too delicious in faded jeans, an old concert T-shirt that I swear he’s had since high school, and a blue and green flannel hanging open. And dear lord, he has the sleeves cuffed at his elbows, revealing muscular forearms covered in dark hair ending in strong, capable hands.

The truth is, Ty’s been hot for years. I first started noticing in high school, and when he went away for college, it didn’t get any better.

I know it’s silly to harbor a crush on your best friend’s older brother—especially when the older brother in question has always treated you like an annoying little sister—but here we are. I’ve managed to focus on his behavior instead of his looks over the years, but ever since that kiss last Christmas, that’s been more difficult.

Instead, I’ve done my best to provoke him. He doesn’t want me. He never will. And if I’m bitchy to him, then he’ll be extra awful to me, and we can both keep our distance more easily.

I shouldn't be this disconcerted by seeing him. I knew it was inevitable. He always comes home for Christmas. Always alone. Which, again, makes me question what his relationship is really like.

Still. That's none of my business.

Ty gestures for me to sit, and I make a dramatic show of rolling my eyes at his insistence I take the inside seat. Sliding my bag off my shoulder, I set it on the seat and take off my coat before sliding into the booth.

I scooch myself as far against the wall as I can to avoid any contact with Ty's clothing. He looks at me, his brow furrowing briefly, his eyes flicking over the several inches of space I managed to put between us before looking at my face again. Then he obviously dismisses the whole thing, turning to face Shane and resuming the conversation I obviously interrupted.

Sarah drums her fingers on the table in front of me, a wide smile on her face. "I'm so glad you could make it. I feel like I haven't seen you in ages."

Laughing, I place my coat on the seat between Ty and me, using it as a barrier. He doesn't even glance my way. Good.

Refocusing on my friend, I offer her a real smile. The first real smile of the evening. "It's only been like a week, Sarah."

"I know. But it's been a busy week, so it feels like it's been longer."

"Has the store been slammed? Or are you having to cover for Nora again this year too?"

Sarah rolls her eyes at the mention of her younger sister's antics. Part of the reason that Sarah met Shane, who'd moved in next door to her over the summer after getting custody of his sister and taking a job at the high school, is because last year, Nora begged Sarah to fill in as an elf last minute at the North Pole. Sarah's parents are responsible for starting up the Arcadian Falls ChristmasFest, and though they're largely retired, they still do their time as Santa and Mrs. Claus every

year. They own the Christmas Emporium that Sarah runs now, and she and her siblings have been elves at Christmastime for as long as I can remember.

Since Sarah took over as the manager of the store, she was supposed to be able to retire her elf ears and candy cane tights. But she's a sucker when Nora, the youngest, who's now a freshman in college, needs something. It's one of the reasons I love her, actually. She's always looking out for everyone around her, whether they want it or not.

Shane, for example. After overhearing his younger sister ask Santa to deliver a message to their parents in heaven, Sarah couldn't stay away from the two of them. She forced herself into their lives, bringing Christmas cheer and a healthy dose of caretaking along with it.

Now they're engaged, planning a wedding for next summer. I'll be the Maid of Honor. I've been assuming that Shane's brother would be his best man, but if he's getting this cozy with Ty, might there be a change? Am I going to have to get paired up with him at the wedding?

Ugh. I hope not. I'm looking forward to the wedding, actually. Well, more the fun surrounding the wedding than the actual ceremony itself. Organizing things with Shane's brother seems doable. If I have to work with Ty? I'm not sure that'll turn out well for anyone.

"No, I haven't had to fill in for Nora as an elf this year," Sarah tells me. "Not yet, anyway. There's still a few weeks left before Christmas. You know how she is. Anything's possible."

I fix Sarah with a stern look. "You can always tell her no, you know."

She waves that away as though it's an inconsequential fact. We both know she won't turn Nora down unless she really can't rearrange her schedule. Though with a fiancé and his much younger sister in the mix, her time is at a higher premium than it once was.

Despite Ty's presence, I have a nice dinner with my best friend and her fiancé. Ty and I exchange only a few words, and out of consideration for everyone, I do my best to keep my bitchiness toward him to a minimum. And he does his part, keeping his obnoxious behavior on lock, too.

Eventually, the waitress brings the check. There's a round of protests and arguments over who should pay, but Shane ends it definitively by sliding his credit card into the folder and not letting anyone else have it.

I lean across the table and loud whisper, "I'll send you some money later."

Sarah waves me off, with Shane looking affronted. "You'll do no such thing," he says.

I nod dramatically. "Okay. Sure." And give them a thumbs up.

To my surprise, Ty actually laughs at my antics. "I take it this is a thing?" he asks, gesturing between Shane and me.

I shrug, not feeling the need to explain to him the dynamics of my friendship with his sister and her fiancé. It's not like he's here enough of the time for it to matter.

But since he's claimed my attention, I finally ask the question that's been pressing on me all evening. "So what are you doing home so early? Don't you usually wait until right before Christmas to show up? It's barely December, and you're here already."

He blinks at me, his jaw working like he's chewing on his words before releasing them. "My girlfriend and I broke up at Thanksgiving. I'm between places right now, so I'm working remotely and staying with my parents until after New Year's. I figure it'll be easier to find a place to live after the holidays." He delivers this news quietly and without emotion.

Normally I would offer an expression of sympathy at the news of somebody experiencing a break-up. Especially a break-up with a live-in partner. That's a significant change.

But it's Ty. Expressing anything other than disdain is difficult for me.

After a beat, I manage to say, "I'm sorry to hear that." It's true, too. Because that means he'll be here for at least a month. And I'm definitely sorry to hear *that*.

His expression flickers between amusement and confusion. "Thanks," he says, like he's not sure whether to actually thank me or not. "I appreciate that."

After paying the bill, Shane and Sarah stand, and Shane helps Sarah into her coat. "We better get going. Sophie and I still have school tomorrow, and I need to get her into bed at a decent hour. Which means getting home and starting the wind-down process."

"No kidding," Sarah adds. "After spending hours with my parents, she'll be all hopped up on sugar and running laps around the house."

Shane chuckles. "At least your parents do a good job of letting her burn off energy. And the fact that she gets to go to Santa's house is one of her favorite things."

Ty grins at them both. "Growing up with Santa as a dad was a whole different experience. I'm sure having him as a grandpa will be similar." To Sarah, he says, "Hey, now that Sophie's joining the family, we have a new generation of elves getting started."

"Come on, Ty," Sarah says, ignoring his comment about more elves. "We'll drop you at Mom and Dad's and pick up Sophie at the same time."

Ty finally stands, allowing me to escape the booth. He watches me scoot out, shake out my coat, and swirl it around my shoulders, his eyes dark and full of something I can't quite figure out.

But whatever it is, he keeps it to himself. With a murmured goodbye, he heads for the door with Shane while Sarah and I hug our goodbyes.

“This was fun!” she gushes. “All four of us like this. I have to admit, I was a little worried when he tagged along. You guys sometimes like to go for each other’s throats. I’m glad you were both able to keep it together tonight. It makes me more hopeful for having you both in the same room for things like the rehearsal dinner this summer.”

“Aw, c’mon, Sarah,” I protest, tying the belt on my coat. “I’d never do anything to ruin your big day.”

She wraps her arm around me and gives me a squeeze as we head for the door. “I know. But if you and Ty can practice getting along ahead of time, it’s just one less thing to worry about.”

I guess from her perspective that’s true. But given the fact that Ty no longer has a girlfriend and that kiss from last year keeps popping up in my mind, being anywhere with him seems like one *more* thing to worry about for me.

CHAPTER TWO

Ty

I'm quiet on the way back to Mom and Dad's after dinner, feeling oddly like the third wheel with my sister.

It's strange. I haven't been single in years, and I feel out of sorts not being part of a couple. I've had a series of long-term girlfriends since my sophomore year of college, and I'd been dating Anna for over three years, living together for more than two.

In all that time, Sarah's barely gone on any dates, and even since she and Shane started seeing each other last year, I never felt like the odd man out. I was in a couple, even if my other half wasn't present, so I could just relax and be me.

But that was the problem. Anna never came with me to anything.

Oh, sure, she'd go on dates with me. We'd go to concerts and movies and arts events in Vancouver and Portland, sometimes even making the trek up to Seattle for special occasions. She'd come to my office parties too.

But never to Arcadian Falls.

"It's so tiny," she'd whine. "What's there to do there?"

Visit my family was never a good enough answer.

“Invite them here,” she’d say. “We can host.”

Somehow, I couldn’t see my parents and three younger siblings fitting into our one-bedroom apartment and crowding around our two-person table and three-seater breakfast bar. And there’s no way Anna would ever give up a seat at the table in favor of someone else.

When it came up again for the third Christmas in a row, I finally put my foot down. “Christmas is important to my family. And not just normal family holiday type important,” I explained patiently as though it were the first time and not the five hundred and fifty-first. “My mom and dad literally own a Christmas store. They started the town’s Christmas festival. They’re Santa and Mrs. Claus. My dad grows his own beard to enhance the realism and always has. He dyed it white when I was a kid.” To be honest, I think he still dyes it just to make it all uniformly snowy. He still has some streaks of dark gray and brown in there.

“Yes, Tyson, I’m aware of that,” she said, equally patiently, and proceeded once again to tell me how Arcadian Falls might as well be Satan’s Asshole, because there was no way she’d be visiting either one.

And that’s when I ended it. I naively thought she’d eventually come around. She’d eventually visit my hometown because it meant enough to me and she said she loved me.

But she never loved me as much as she loved herself. She always came first. Her. Her career. Her ambitions. Her image.

She didn’t mind the social events in town because they were classy and highbrow and went along with the aura she wanted to cultivate for herself. She liked going to my marketing agency’s office parties because it gave her a chance to schmooze.

There were no advantages to coming to Arcadian Falls. And doing it for me wasn’t reason enough for her.

My teeth clench at the memory of the way she always used my full name even though I’ve been going by Ty since I was a

little kid. She said it was more sophisticated, and it didn't matter that I never liked being called that.

I don't know why I didn't see her selfishness years ago. Blinded by her beauty, I guess, and too dazzled that she'd choose to be with me when she could have her pick of guys. So thrilled to meet her exacting standards to wonder if she met mine.

At least now I know what I *don't* want.

I don't want someone who always and only prioritizes themselves at my expense. I don't want someone who refuses to even visit my hometown, who thinks an entire family of six will fit in a one-bedroom apartment with her for a holiday meal. And whose idea of hosting is catering instead of participating with the family to prepare the meal.

Holidays are always a communal effort at my parents' house. We're all expected to pitch in. I'm in charge of the stuffing and the pecan pie like I have been since I was a teenager and decided to take those over. Mom does Christmas breakfast and the ham or turkey, whichever she decides she wants to make. I think this year she's doing turkey. Dad always makes prime rib, so he's in charge of that. He uses a sous vide, and it's tender and delicious.

Sarah's been doing the rolls and Jell-O salad the last few years, with our younger siblings taking on the mashed potatoes and a rotating variety of sides.

I wonder what Shane will get assigned this year ... Maybe I can give him the pecan pie. Mom insists that the crust be homemade, and rolling it out is always a pain in the ass. I'll happily let someone else handle that chore and just enjoy the results. Sophie will get cookie frosting duties, as is always the case for the youngest family member. She'll be Nora's assistant. She'll probably help set the table, too, like we all did when we were young. I'm sure my mom's already doing that with her when she's over.

It's funny to think I'll be an uncle soon. Or step-uncle, I guess? It's a bit of a mental puzzle since Sophie is really Shane's sister, but after their parents' death the summer before last, he took over as her guardian. So while she'll technically be Sarah's sister-in-law, since Shane acts more like a father than a brother, Sarah will be more like a mom. From what I can tell, she's already filling that role, and Mom and Dad are spoiling her like a grandchild.

They love kids, so they're thrilled to have another munchkin running around the place. I think they hoped I might be popping out grandbabies by now, but I'm not sure that ever would've happened with Anna.

If she can't even set aside her own desires so we can visit my family, I can't imagine her being willing to set aside what she wants with a kid in the picture either. And what kind of mother would she be anyway?

I shudder at the thought.

Breaking up with her was definitely the right decision, even if it did put a crimp in my holiday spirits. Honestly, being home is the best thing for me right now.

Or it was ... until I saw Olivia.

That girl. As soon as she walked in, my eyes were drawn to her like iron filings to a magnet. Her dark, almost-black hair. Cool, pale skin. Startling blue eyes.

I might do my best to treat her like my kid-sister's annoying friend, but I noticed a long time ago that she's all grown up.

She has an effortlessly sexy quality to her, especially now. Her style went through a goofy phase when she and Sarah were in high school, but now she's all sophisticated elegance with her belted charcoal wool coat and her curve-hugging skirt paired with a silky blouse. And the ruffles. They're small, but so much fussier than anything Anna would wear. A ruffle around the hem of her skirt and the cuff and collar of her top.

On Olivia it works. She looks like something straight out of a bygone era with her pinup curves and style. Anna never could've pulled it off. Not that she didn't look elegant and beautiful when she dressed up, just that she preferred a more minimalist aesthetic.

When we get to Mom and Dad's, Sarah bounces out of the car and throws her arms around me. "Thank you for being nice to Olivia tonight. I know you two don't always get along. But if you can sit next to each other without throwing down for one evening, I'm hopeful we'll all get through my wedding unscathed."

Chuckling, I pat my sister on the back. "She starts it, not me. But you're welcome anyway."

When she steps back, she shoots me a doubtful look. "You're not the innocent victim when it comes to Olivia. You've been picking on her since we were all kids. If she sometimes starts it now, it's out of reaction to a lifetime of your BS."

"I was a kid, too!" I protest, following her and Shane to the front door, salt and ice crunching beneath our boots. "You're my little sister. I'm not supposed to pick on you?" I whack Shane lightly on the arm. "Back me up, here. You've got little sisters. Even if you were out of the house when Sophie was born, you grew up with Mallory. You know how it is."

Shane wraps his arm around Sarah and pulls her close, shaking his head. "I dunno, man. I didn't pick on my sisters. I'm not sure that's as universal as you want it to be."

Laughing, Sarah pokes him with her mittened fingers. "I'm not sure Mallory would agree with you on that."

His grin turns mischievous. "Number one, Mallory's still in Portland, so she can't contradict me. And number two, even if I did pick on her—and I'm not saying I did—I didn't extend it to her friends. And I've definitely stopped by now." He casts a glance my way, eyebrows raised.

“How’m I being thrown under the bus here after I was a perfect gentleman all evening?” I grumble.

“Just keep it that way ‘sall I’m asking,” Sarah says, pulling the door open.

Warmth and light and the smell of baking cookies spills out of the door, welcoming us all home.

Shane holds the door for Sarah, and then gestures me through as well. “She’s worried about you,” he says quietly as I pass. I toss him a confused look over my shoulder, and he steps inside, sticking close to me to clarify. “Sarah. You broke up with your girlfriend, now you’re home for an extended visit—which is probably good, all things considered, and we both know that. But you haven’t been acting like yourself. She’s not sure what to make of it, and she thinks you might be depressed.”

I stifle a laugh as I slip off my boots and hang up my coat in the closet by the door. “I’m not being mean to her friend—which you both ragged on me about just a second ago, by the way—so she’s worried I’m depressed?”

Grinning, he shrugs, slipping off his boots so he doesn’t track snow inside, but leaving his coat on. He must be planning on picking up Sophie quickly and leaving, though I’m not sure anyone else will be on board with that plan. Sarah’s coat is hanging up, and she’s already vanished into the depths of the house.

He claps me on the shoulder. “I’m not saying you should start picking on Olivia again. Sometimes it’s funny when you guys bicker, but it stresses Sarah out, especially around the holidays and *especially* with the wedding coming up.” He cocks his head to the side, giving me an assessing look. “I think the fact that your hostilities seemed to increase at our engagement party over the summer, while tonight you barely picked on each other at all is concerning. She’s not sure what to expect from either of you, and she feels best when she knows what’s happening.”

Blowing out a breath, I shove my hands in my jeans pockets, considering what he's saying. "I'll talk to her."

Shane's eyebrows go up. "Who? Sarah? Or Olivia?"

"Both?"

We chuckle, and I go in search of my parents to see what's happening, Shane following behind me. Voices come from the kitchen, and my money's on everyone chowing down on cookies already.

I don't mind reassuring Sarah that I'll be on my best behavior for her wedding—though I still maintain that Olivia starts shit far more often than I do, and I don't think it's fair that I'm being held responsible for her actions—but I'm not excited about sitting down with Olivia to hammer out some kind of truce.

We managed to sit next to each other without going for each other's throats for a couple hours tonight. It seems like that should be doable on a regular basis, or at least as regular as my visits are.

But I'm not sure Olivia will feel the same way.

CHAPTER THREE

Olivia

I let myself into my apartment above my dad's dental office. It's small, just a little one-bedroom, but the commute can't be beat. The perk of being the owner's daughter, I suppose. I get a job without even having to apply and a place to live, once we got it fixed up.

I ostensibly pay a token amount of rent, but since Dad pays my salary, it all just feels like moving around Monopoly money more than real adulting.

I low-key hate it, when I take the time to be honest with myself. I try to make the best of things—at least I get to hang with my best friend on a regular basis, even if she has an entourage as often as not these days.

Her entourage normally doesn't include Ty, though. Even when he's come for visits, they're usually short, and he doesn't hang out with Sarah outside of their parents' house. Maybe he's reconnecting with Shane since they're going to be brothers-in-law soon and that's why he tagged along tonight.

I just ... ugh. That boy. He's so infuriating. Even though he didn't do or say anything obnoxious tonight, even that was somehow irritating.

Am I just not worth the effort anymore?

And what was with the way he stared at me when I first got there?

If he were a normal guy, I'd think he was attracted to me. But given that it's Ty, I know better than to think that. I checked my reflection before leaving work, so I know I don't have any stains or anything on my clothes. And when I used the bathroom before the food arrived, I double checked to make sure my hair and makeup were still in order, and they were.

So what in the world was he staring at?

Maybe he was just trying to find something in my appearance to pick at but failed. Because I look fabulous, if I do say so myself. I know because I put in effort to look this way.

Sighing, I strip out of my work clothes and change into my favorite loungewear. It might seem silly and vain to some people, but looking good makes me feel good. Even my loungewear's selected to make me look good, and by extension feel good. I prefer silky fabrics, though genuine silk is usually out of my price range. I have one cami-and-shorts set made of real silk, and they're some of my most prized items of clothing.

Normally I'd wear it on a night like tonight, but it's too cold for that. On cold winter nights, I like to pull out my jersey knit cotton modal set, plus some fleece socks and the long sweater I wear around the house. Cozy, cute, and warm. What more could a girl ask for?

Finished changing, I put the tea kettle on. My parents have an electric kettle now, and while it's definitely faster, some part of me enjoys the ritual of putting my shiny stainless steel tea kettle on the burner and waiting for it to shriek when it hits boiling. I pull out a cinnamon spice herbal tea, place the tea bag in the mug, and pick up my phone while I wait for the water to heat up.

To my surprise, there's a text on my screen.

Unknown number: This is Ty. I got your number from my sister. She made a comment to me about her expectations for us as the wedding approaches, and I thought it would be a good idea for us to sit down and reach some kind of truce. Are you free for coffee tomorrow?

Something flutters in my belly at his invitation to coffee. Nerves? Anticipation? Both?

That's silly, though. Why would I be nervous or filled with anticipation at the thought of coffee with Ty?

Because coffee is often a first date, and he's an attractive man.

Well, okay, there's that. But it's Ty, so this is nothing like a date.

Still. It's Ty. I can't just accept his invitation at face value.

Olivia: What's the catch?

Ty: No catch. What time are you off work?

I drum my fingers on the side of my phone, biting the inside of my cheek as I contemplate my answer. If my mother saw me biting my cheek, she'd tell me to stop. Good thing she's not here, then, isn't it?

Olivia: The office closes at 5, and I'm usually out by 5:30.

Ty: Do you want me to pick you up at your office, or would you rather meet at Beans?

I roll my lips between my teeth, though I'm not sure why I'm stifling my own laughter. No one's here to hear it.

Olivia: Normally I insist on meeting a man for a first date. Don't want him to get any ideas ...

Ty responds with an eye roll emoji, and this time I laugh out loud.

Ty: Good thing this isn't a first date. I'll be at Beans tomorrow by 5:30. Come when you're done with work.

I try to come up with a witty retort that strikes the right balance between agreement while still deviling him, but ultimately choose to just leave him on read. I can't think of a better way to irritate him than to leave him wondering if I'll actually show up or not.

* * *

The next evening, I lock up the office, and instead of heading upstairs like normal, I settle my bag on my shoulder and make the ten-minute walk to Beans Espresso and Ice Cream.

It's got a good mix for all seasons, with hot drinks for this time of year—and their seasonal lattes are the bomb—and ice cream for the summer high season. They're always packed in June, July, and August.

This time of year is a little more laid back. ChristmasFest definitely draws a crowd, but it's usually on the weekends, and people tend to stay in the main ChristmasFest area. Beans always has a mobile stand there with a few tables, and those are nearly always occupied. But the regular store after work on a Wednesday is only about half full, which makes it easy to spot Ty.

He's positioned himself about halfway back at one of the tables next to a window, presumably so he can watch for me.

We make eye contact as soon as I walk in, his dark eyes under thick, level brows giving nothing away. He's a little scruffy today, which is pretty common for him when he's in Arcadian Falls.

It always made me wonder what he's like when he's not here. Did his girlfriend make him shave all the time? My money's on yes. Granted, I didn't actually know her, since I think she only came to visit and meet his family one time very early in their relationship. But given the fact that she refused to visit—and if what Sarah says is accurate, it wasn't for any legit reason like being unable to get time off work or other obligations she genuinely couldn't get out of, but just because Arcadian Falls was too small for her liking—she seems to me like the type who'd insist on him living up to her meticulous standards.

I can't entirely blame her for her perception of Arcadian Falls. I've always chafed at living here too, and when I couldn't find a job after graduating, moving back home felt like the ultimate defeat. At least I have parents who have the space to let me move back home and give me a job, even if they do like to hold my reliance on their generosity over my head.

They always thought my degree was silly, even though I did well in school. Art History isn't worth studying, though, if I can't turn it into a "real job." And it's not that it's impossible, it's just that I put all my eggs in one basket way too early. I had an internship that I expected to turn into a permanent position, and it was given to the owner's nephew. I was so confident I'd get it that I didn't even apply elsewhere.

After the double blow of my serious college boyfriend dumping me and what I thought would be *my* job being stolen by nepotism, I basically gave up and resigned myself to the fact that I would die alone managing my dad's dental practice in Arcadian Falls. Of course, he'll retire before I die, and I

guess I'll just take over for whoever buys his practice from him.

Or maybe that'll be my chance to run off and see the world.

But watching Sarah work hard and achieve the life she wants makes me think maybe I could—no, *should*—do the same thing. While I love getting to see her every week, her life is moving forward, while mine has been stagnating. It's time for me to focus on myself, and not in the self-pitying way I have been the last couple of years.

I've been licking my wounds long enough, and if I want my life to change, to move in the direction I want, it's up to me to make that happen. Which is why I started an online master's program in September and have been regularly searching job boards for curator positions. I've always dreamed of working in a museum, but I need more credentials to be a serious contender. Right out of college, that was really all I even applied for.

But now?

I realize I'd rather curate for a corporation that displays artwork and company memorabilia than be my dad's glorified receptionist. Somehow that felt like selling out a couple years ago. Now it seems like a step in the right direction.

In the name of padding my resume, I've also started planning displays and exhibits for Dad's office. Obviously they're much smaller, and tailored to a dental office rather than say, nineteenth century European masters, but it scratches the itch to make the place more visually pleasing.

But no, Arcadian Falls isn't my first choice of places to live. Still. If my boyfriend's family lived in a place like this, I'd be willing to at least *visit* occasionally. The fact that Ty's girlfriend wouldn't is ...

Well. It didn't make any of us feel warmly toward her. And now that Ty's finally broken up with her? Good riddance is the general consensus.

With a fortifying breath, I give Ty the customer service smile I use on him and head toward the table. He watches me, sipping his coffee, his face remaining impassive.

Gah. This was his idea. You'd think he'd at least try a polite smile like I am.

Sighing, I plunk my leather tote on the table. "I'm going to order a coffee. Be right back."

With a grunt, he nods, and I force myself to wait to roll my eyes until I'm no longer facing him.

Whatever. If he wants to keep up his grumpy, annoying older brother routine, he's welcome to. I'll be polite and professional and at least treat myself a little. Normally I save my dessert splurge for when I'm with Sarah, but since I had a salad at the bar and a hard seltzer, I can afford one of the giant gingerbread men to go with my Christmas spice latte.

Gingerbread man in hand and latte in the works, I return to the table and take the seat across from Ty, moving my bag to the chair next to me. I'm not sure why he claimed a four-seater table when there are plenty of two-tops available, but I'm not going to complain or criticize. His text said we're here to establish ground rules of behavior so we can survive the wedding festivities without upsetting Sarah.

As surprising as it is that he's concerned for Sarah's feelings, *I'm* not going to be the one to fuck everything up.

I offer him another smile. "Good evening, Ty. How was your day?"

He grunts and shrugs. "Fine. Did some work. Hung out with Mom and Dad until it was time for them to go to the ChristmasFest. Watched a movie."

"That sounds like a nice day. I take it your work isn't too demanding right now?"

Another shrug. "Nope." He pops the P.

I hum, trying not to broadcast my annoyance. But failing. "Well, it seems like this is off to a productive start. Apparently

we're incapable of carrying on a polite conversation, so I guess we can cross that off the list. Shall we just do our best to avoid one another at Sarah and Shane's upcoming events?"

His eyes sparkle, and he leans closer to me, his full lips framed by that dark scruff twitching with amusement. "I'm not sure avoiding one another will be much of an option, considering we're both in the wedding party."

My groan comes out before I can stop it. "*Please* don't tell me you're the best man."

He chuckles, drawing out the suspense as much as he can get away with before shaking his head. "Nah. Shane's brother will be his best man. But we've gotten friendly enough since last Christmas that he asked me to be a groomsman. CJ, one of his coworkers, is the other one. And Sarah has you, Nora, and Mallory. Nice and even, don't you think?"

I hum my agreement, thankful for the distraction of getting my latte to save me from making further comment.

Returning to my seat, I slap his hand away from my cookie. "Get your own if you want one. This is mine."

He makes a show of shaking out his hand. "Ouch, Livy. That hurts."

I narrow my eyes at his use of my childhood nickname. "Good. It was meant to. Serves you right for attempted thievery. And I prefer Olivia now, thank you."

His lips twitch with suppressed amusement again. "Awww. Come on. You'll always be Livy to me."

From his tone of voice, I half expect him to try to tug one of my braids like he always did when we were kids.

Fortunately, I have no braids right now—though I do still wear my hair like that occasionally—and he was never one to just grab a handful of loose hair and yank. Thankfully.

Still, I brush my hair behind my shoulders. No reason to offer extra temptation.

Sure, at twenty-seven he should've outgrown the urge to pull my hair a long time ago. But he still likes to put Sarah in a headlock from time to time, so clearly he hasn't outgrown all of his juvenile impulses.

I survey him coolly while sipping my latte and popping the foot of my gingerbread man into my mouth, enjoying the spicy sweetness. "We both owe it to Sarah not to spoil her wedding. She's already stressed about it enough as it is. I realize you're the one who called this meeting, but as Maid of Honor, I'm going to lay down the ground rules." I hold up a finger. "One, we will treat each other with polite respect. No snide remarks. No digs. No insults."

He sits back in his chair, manspreading beneath the table and bumping into my crossed legs in the process. When I narrow my eyes, he doesn't even apologize. "I dunno, Livy. I'm not sure you can follow your own rules. I lost track of how many snide remarks you've made just since sitting down." He waves a hand at me. "Even this, you taking over the coffee meeting I set up, is a prime example."

I swear to god, this guy lives to needle me. Everything about him is irritating, from his stupid, handsome face to his stupid, aggravating personality. Fortunately—or maybe unfortunately—for me, my background in visual arts means I can appreciate an object's physical beauty despite a dislike for the artist.

Though giving Ty credit for being an artist when it comes to his appearance is maybe taking things too far. He can clean up nice when he wants to—he'll be devastating in a tux at Sarah's wedding—his day-to-day fashion sense is more lumberjack chic than anything else. I mean, it's Arcadian Falls, so that's pretty much the male standard. Does he keep it up when he's in Vancouver? Or, like the scruff, does he reserve his flannels for his visits home?

Not that any of that matters. Folding my hands in my lap, I force a deep breath to stay calm, my nostrils flaring. "I see. Would you prefer to make your suggestions first then, Tyson?"

He flinches, his eyes narrowing at my use of his full first name. He dislikes it as much as I dislike being called Livy. He's literally the only person who calls me that anymore. I stopped using that nickname by the time I was nine. A fact he's well aware of.

Sitting forward, he props his arms on the table. Then, without missing a beat, he snatches my cookie from in front of me.

"Hey!" I protest, half standing and reaching for it.

But he leans back in his chair, and rather than breaking off a piece and eating it like I've been doing, he bites the head off like a savage.

Letting out an indignant shriek, I move to his side of the table, slapping his shoulder and grabbing for my cookie. "You ass! That was mine! I already told you to get your own."

The cookie breaks apart, and I throw the gingerbread arm at his chest. "You owe me a new one."

"Aww, c'mon, Liv," he says around a mouthful of gingerbread man. "I was just playing."

"This." I point at him. "This is exactly what I'm talking about. You're physically incapable of being nice to me! This is why Sarah's worried."

All humor fades from his face, and he returns all four legs of his chair to the floor. "You're right." He takes another bite of my gingerbread man and stands.

I take a step back to give him space, but he follows me, leaning in close and glancing up, humming thoughtfully. "No mistletoe here," he murmurs. Pinching a lock of my hair, he gives it a tug, then brushes past me to the counter.

What? The? Hell?

CHAPTER FOUR

Ty

I feel bad. Probably not as bad as I should, but still. There's a layer of remorse filtering through everything.

I shouldn't mess with Olivia as much as I do. I know it. I'm a grown-ass man, and I'm still acting like a ten-year-old with a crush.

Not that I have a crush on Olivia. Of course not. I'm too old for crushes, for one thing. Once again, grown-ass man. But also, she's Sarah's best friend from childhood. I've known her basically my entire life. She's more like a little sister to me than a woman.

Or at least that's what I've been telling myself on repeat since that kiss last Christmas.

Why won't that get out of my head?

It was a one-time, stupid thing that we only did because of mistletoe and peer pressure. It's hard to resist a packed restaurant full of people chanting at you to kiss someone.

Besides, it was Olivia. It shouldn't have been a big deal. I had a girlfriend. She's my sister's friend. Ergo, entirely off limits. Our relationship has always been one hundred percent platonic, and never has it ever crossed my mind that it could or should be otherwise.

Yeah, sure, I noticed her growing up. And it was most obvious after we all went to college, and she came back to town looking like a gorgeous woman I'd happily ask out if I saw her anywhere else.

That realization had been a bit of a mind-fuck. But I got over it.

Again, she's Olivia.

But then we kissed. And it wasn't the harmless peck I intended.

No. That was a fucking *kiss*. A whole body, soul-shattering connection that I haven't felt in ... I can't even remember how long.

I'm not sure Anna and I ever kissed like *that*. Our kisses were good. I had no complaints.

Not until I kissed Olivia anyway.

But I had a girlfriend. And I kissed *Olivia*. So instead of letting that kiss change our relationship for the better, I doubled down on treating her like my kid sister. Picking on her like we were still children, even though I barely even do that to Sarah anymore. Sometimes, sure. It's kinda part of the big brother job description.

I needed to emphasize the distance and impossibility of Olivia and me, as much for my benefit as hers.

Not that it's helped. Every time I see her, I remember the way her lips felt against mine, the way she tasted, the way she responded. The electricity that arced between us.

It's still there. Does she feel it? Anytime we're in close proximity, it's like one of those plasma balls, where you touch the outside, and you can see the electricity leaping to your fingers. As soon as she comes near me, lightning passes from her skin to mine.

I ignored it as much as possible at the pub last night, choosing to focus on my conversation with Shane and my sister. But here? With just us?

It's impossible to ignore.

And I *needed* her to touch me. When I bumped her leg under the table, she immediately flinched away. Stealing her cookie, though ... I knew she'd come after it.

She's been rationing her treats for years, so if she's eating a giant cookie, she's made room in her diet for it. Which means she's mama bear levels of protective.

I knew stealing it would piss her off. I knew she'd come after it.

But the near tears level of fury on her face means I went too far.

Replacement cookie in hand, I return to the table, where she's resumed her polite mask.

"Thank you," she says stiffly when I set the cookie in front of her.

Reclaiming my seat, I watch her break off an arm and eat it. "It feels like I'm watching you commit some kind of torture on that poor gingerbread man, breaking him piece by piece and forcing him to watch you eat him."

Her eyes flash, but I don't miss the way she wrestles a smile off her face. "No apology, huh?"

I run my tongue along the inside of my cheek and squint one eye. "I got you a new cookie. Isn't that good enough?"

She scoffs and shakes her head. "While I appreciate that you replaced the cookie that you *stole*, I would also appreciate an actual apology."

I'm being ridiculous, and I know it. Why is it so hard to apologize to her?

"I'm sorry," I force out.

Looking away, she laughs softly. "Oh my god. You sound like you're the one being tortured, not the gingerbread man." She breaks off the other arm and pops it in her mouth.

Which draws my attention back to her lips. They're painted berry red today, and I don't know what kind of lip color she uses, but it doesn't appear to have faded at all.

Anna had some like that, but she always complained about the way they dried out her lips. Olivia's lips don't look dry at all.

No, they look plump and soft. Kissable.

Blinking, I force myself to look away, finding the broken gingerbread man in front of me. I hold up a piece and show it to the other gingerbread man. "This is your fate, too, buddy."

Olivia snorts out a laugh, covering her mouth with her hand, her blue eyes dancing. With her laughter, the tension seems to dissipate. Or at least it does for me.

Sighing, I scratch my jaw, my stubble rasping under my fingernails. "Look, Liv. I am sorry. You're right. If we're going to stand a chance at not ruining the wedding, we need to both put in equal effort. You're obviously willing to. I need to hold up my end."

She nods, looking relieved. "Yes, exactly. We have to work together to not make a mess." She points at me, her gaze sharpening. "No stealing my food, for one thing."

I hold up my hands in surrender. "I promise not to steal your food at the wedding or wedding-related events."

Seeming satisfied, she nods. "Okay, good. That's a start. I also need you to call me by my name."

"As long as you don't call me by mine," I grumble.

That makes her smirk. "Okay. I'll call you Ty if you call me Olivia."

I'm pretty certain that means she'll definitely call me Tyson if I start calling her Livy again, but I guess that puts the ball in my court. If I want her to use my nickname, I need to not use hers.

The real test will be whether I decide it's worth the irritation of being called Tyson for the satisfaction of calling her Livy ...

But I suppose I can hold back for my sister's sake. For those few days, at least.

"Anything else?" I prompt.

She ticks off each thing on her fingers. "No pulling my hair. No being a dick. No making fun of any aspect of my appearance or personality. Be polite and respectful." She lays her hands on the table and shrugs. "You know, basically just act like a normal human being who knows how to behave around others."

One of my eyebrows wings up. "As opposed to ..."

"As opposed to the juvenile moron you normally act like."

I have to bite my cheek to keep from laughing, and I nod sagely. "Got it."

She holds out her hand for me to shake, and when my palm makes contact with hers, there's that electricity again, zapping between us, making my small hairs stand on end. It takes everything in me not to crush her hand with mine from the force of it.

If she feels it too, she gives no sign, pumping my hand up and down once and giving me a firm nod. "Alright. If that's settled, I'm going to head home."

"You aren't going to finish your coffee and gingerbread man first?"

Picking up her coffee, she drains it and wraps the cookie in a napkin. "I'll save the rest for after dinner."

I stand along with her, wanting to find some way to stop her. To keep her here.

Being back in Arcadian Falls is boring. Anna was right that it's not the most exciting place. The only thing to do right now is go to ChristmasFest, which has lost a bit of its shine

after too many years of working at it. Plus, I've already gone more than once and checked everything out. There's only so many Christmas-themed ornaments and tchotchkes a man needs, and if I ever feel the need for any more, I can always get whatever I want from Sarah at cost. I see Santa and Mrs. Claus every night after they get home, and it's not like I have kids anyway.

My parents and siblings are all busy with work and school and their own lives. When I'm in town for a few days, it's always busy and full because my time is limited. But now? I've been here a week already, and all the initial busyness has passed. I'll be here until after New Year's at least, so there's no urgency to spend time together.

On the one hand, it's nice not to feel so rushed.

On the other hand, I'm bored.

And this coffee with Livy—Olivia—is the most entertainment I've had all day.

But no excuse comes to mind. I can't just say, "Wait, don't go," because then what will I say when she asks why? Sure, I could tell her the truth, but the most likely scenario is that she'll laugh at me and leave anyway. Which wouldn't get me what I want, and would also create an unpleasant power imbalance in our relationship.

No, that won't work.

With that polite smile she keeps flashing at me in place, she buttons her coat and reties the belt, making me aware that she never actually took her coat off in the first place, instead leaving it open but on, indicating she never intended to stay long. Stealing her cookie is probably the only reason she's stayed as long as she has.

"Good to see you, Ty," she says, in that way adults say to acquaintances they see infrequently and don't intend to see more often. "I'm sure I'll see you around."

With a wave of her slim fingers, she picks up her bag and leaves me standing there staring after her, wishing I could've

done something to change the outcome, but still unable to figure out what that something might've been.

CHAPTER FIVE

Olivia

My coffee with Ty burrows under my skin like a splinter, tender and inflamed, causing me to wince every time I inadvertently bump against it.

I try my best to ignore the strange mixture of feelings that being one-on-one with him evokes all through watching the recorded lecture and answering the discussion questions for my class, but my coursework proves to be a mediocre distraction at best. But it's the last week of classes, with my final papers due next week. I can't put it off, even if I want to.

The fact that I think of him, of our coffee, as I eat the rest of my gingerbread man after a quick dinner of chicken vegetable soup and a slice of sourdough toast doesn't help matters.

Maybe I should've just scarfed down the rest of the cookie before I left so I wouldn't have to relive that incident after I got home.

Unwrapping it provokes the memory of him snatching my original cookie and chomping the head off with one swift bite of his perfect, white teeth, the result of braces from ages twelve to fourteen.

Too bad the Danielses didn't just leave him to his crooked-teeth fate. Maybe it would've made him just a little less intimidatingly handsome.

Or maybe it would've been that thing that makes him look extra interesting, the way quirky flaws sometimes add to someone's striking good looks instead of detracting from them.

Too late now, in any case. It's not like I can *unstraighten* his teeth for him.

He was having fun, though, when he stole my cookie. My reaction is as much a part of the joy for him as anything else. I know this. I've known it for years.

But for some reason, I just can't stop myself from rising to the bait. I try. I really do. And he always escalates until I can't help it.

I'll admit that sometimes I start things too. I'll see him and immediately start in with a rude observation or quip about him. But it's not like that's entirely unprovoked either. I only do that when he got the last word in the time before.

It's not *my* fault I want to keep things as even as possible. If I just let everything go, let him win all the time, who would keep him in check?

Sighing, I realize I'm as childish as he is. How is it that I always let him drag me down to his level?

We're both adults. Shouldn't we have moved past this by now?

* * *

I manage to avoid Ty for the rest of the week, which is good. I think.

I mean, it *is* good. It means I haven't stooped to my basest, childish self for days.

But it's Monday night and the Danielses are hosting a Christmas party.

You'd think a family as busy with the ChristmasFest as the Danielses, they'd call that good, right?

But nope. They love having all their friends and family in their home, eating and drinking and making merry. Some years are too busy—like last year—but this year apparently isn't. Maybe it's because Ty's home early and they're putting him to work?

I opt for a Fair Isle Christmas sweater that I picked up with Sarah a few years ago. It's fitted and pretty, with delicate color work around the high neckline. It's not quite the ugly Christmas sweater that Sarah favors, but it works for me. I pair it with black leggings and ankle boots, grab my coat and purse, and head out.

My avoidance of Ty is likely at an end. For now. Eventually he'll leave again, and I won't have to worry about seeing him every time I go to the store or hit Beans for a coffee or some other treat. Or hang out with my best friend.

But since tonight's at his parents' house, where he's currently living temporarily, no chance he won't be there.

The drive over passes far too quickly for my liking considering I still haven't managed to pull my mind away from Ty or the way he acted like he might want to kiss me under the mistletoe again.

I've deliberately tried to forget that moment at Beans where he leaned in close, commented on the lack of mistletoe like that was a bad thing, and pulled my hair.

The hair pulling is reminiscent of our childhood, but also it seemed kind of flirty. Same with stealing my cookie. Like, that's the kind of thing a twelve-year-old does to get a girl's attention, isn't it?

It's what Brody Collins did to Amanda Sylvester in sixth grade when he had a crush on her. Of course, she couldn't

stand him. Especially when he followed her around and swiped the treats out of her lunch.

Eventually, though, we all grew past that, and Brody and Amanda eventually dated for a semester in high school.

Apparently Ty never grew out of it, though. Or maybe it's just with me.

I mean, he's had girlfriends. Surely he didn't get them by pulling their hair and stealing their cookies.

Granted, some women like having their hair pulled, but that's in an entirely different context. Not an opener.

And I've watched him with other women. He's never treated any of them like he treats me, not even Sarah.

Sure, we all say he acts like I'm another little sister, but the truth is, that's not the case. He's much more respectful and protective of his actual little sisters.

To me he's just an ass.

The street in front of the Danielses' house is lined with cars, and I end up parking almost a block away.

The cloud cover that dropped a bunch of snow last night cleared up during the day for some weak wintery sun and never came back, making it extra cold tonight. I wrap my coat more tightly around me after climbing out of my car, picking my way carefully along the side of the road until I get to a driveway so I can get to the sidewalk without walking through a foot of snow in the swale.

I should've worn my winter boots, but I wanted to look cute and opted for my low-heeled ankle boots instead.

And why did I care so much about looking cute?

Granted, I put care and attention into my outfits all the time, but when I know I'm going to have to walk any real distance in snow and ice, I wear appropriate footwear. But tonight, I know I'll see Ty, the man who playground flirts with

me and apparently needs mistletoe to muster up the courage to kiss me again.

Will there be mistletoe there tonight?

It's possible. Jake and Mara Daniels are big fans of all traditional Christmas things. Pickle ornaments. Gnomes. Old World Santas. Wreaths and lights and candles and garlands and mistletoe for sure.

CJ and Maryanne Baker come from the other direction, waving and smiling as we meet up in front of the Daniels' house. "Hey, Olivia," Maryanne says. "How's your night so far?"

I smile warmly at them. "Cold! But good."

"Let's all get inside and warm up. I'm sure Mara has hot apple cider available, and Jake usually has some brandy to spike it with if you need extra warming." CJ gestures for me to precede them, and I do, quickly stepping out of the way and taking off my coat once I'm inside.

Mara Daniels, cheeks rosy from the heat of the kitchen and possibly the brandy-spiked apple cider CJ mentioned, greets me. "Olivia! We're so glad you made it. Here, let me take your coat."

Chuckling, I accept her hug, but shake my head. "Oh, come on. It's me. I can deal with my own coat."

She gives me a motherly kiss on the cheek and another squeeze. "Of course you can, dear. Make yourself comfortable. You know your way around."

Wiping my shoes as much as possible on the interior doormat, I step out of the way so CJ and Maryanne can come in behind me, and Mara greets them, taking their coats.

"Let me take those, too," I tell her, reaching for the coats.

Mara beams at me. "You're such a sweetheart. Thank you. When you're done, help yourself to the food. There's plenty!"

Grinning, I nod, winding through a few people with nods and smiles and heading to Sarah's old room, where they're likely keeping the coats. The coat room rotates somewhat, but with Ty already here and Dylan and Nora just back from college for Christmas break, Sarah's old room is the only one not housing a member of the Daniels clan.

As I head down the hallway, Nora comes out of her room, smiling when she sees me. "Hey! Did you just get here? Why do you have so many coats?"

With a laugh, I shoulder through the partially open door to Sarah's old room and deposit my load on the bed. "Right place, right time."

Nora gives me a knowing look. "Mom put you to work already, huh? You're basically part of the family anyway, so that's no real surprise."

"I offered, actually. Your mom's busy enough with all the people here. I can deal with my own coat, and I took a couple others who came in at the same time too. But how are you? How's school?"

Nora hooks her arm through mine as we head back into the party. "Busy! Exhausting. But so much fun."

I grin at her enthusiasm. I remember that first semester of college too. So many changes all at once. "Good. I'm glad you're enjoying yourself. You're getting along with your roommate?"

She nods. "My friend Bree and I are rooming together. We get along super well, so no roommate drama."

"Not yet, anyway."

Laughing, she shakes her head. "Hopefully not ever. It's good to be home, though, even if Mom and Dad are making me be an elf yet again."

"I'm not sure you'll get out of that job anytime soon."

She shrugs, releasing my arm. "At least I can earn some money for next semester." Distracted, she waves at someone

across the room. “I’ll catch up with you more later, okay?”

“Okay,” I reply, but she’s gone before I can even get the word out. Nora’s always been a social butterfly, so I’m not surprised she’s found other friends to hang out with.

Scanning the party, I look for Sarah, but it doesn’t look like she’s arrived yet. With a fiancé and kid in tow now, it seems like it almost always takes her longer to get places. I make small talk with a few people on my way to the table. Working in my dad’s practice means I know almost everyone in town on some level. And whatever faults Arcadian Falls might have, everyone here is friendly, and I’ve known many of the people my whole life.

Jenny Thomas follows me to the food table, her very pregnant belly preceding her, and a dark-haired preschooler with his finger in his mouth tagging along behind her. “Hey, Olivia. Merry Christmas!”

“Merry Christmas to you too!” I pass her a plate and gesture for her and her little boy to go ahead of me. “How are you doing?”

She rubs her belly and looks up in an expression of frustrated exhaustion. “Hanging in there. This one likes to turn cockeyed and push on my opposite ribs and hips at the same time, which is really unpleasant. But she’s growing and healthy and should be here in about a month!”

I paste on a smile to cover my wince. “Wow. That sounds terrible, but I’m glad you’re otherwise okay.”

She grabs another plate from the stack, balancing both in one hand and checking with her son about what he wants to eat. I watch her in awe for a moment. We graduated the same year, and she’s already married with a three-year-old and another on the way.

Meanwhile, I’m still entirely dependent on my parents for my livelihood.

Jenny stayed in Arcadian Falls, married her high school sweetheart, and has been working ever since. While I went to

college, got a degree, and still ended up back here. Maybe I should've just settled down with one of the pimple-faced boys I went to high school with. Maybe I'd be happier, in a home of my own, popping out babies while working at ... well, I'd probably still be working at my dad's office. Why not? I am now. Clearly the job is mine for the asking no matter what else I have in the works.

I don't want Jenny's life, though. Not really. I'm just feeling left behind.

With a plate full of food in hand, I station myself on the fringes of the party, suddenly feeling less up to socializing than I did when I got here. Sarah's not here yet, wrapped up in her own life. Everyone here seems to be ensconced in family and friends, happy and festive, while I'm ...

Not exactly regretting my life choices, but wishing they'd led me to a different place, at least.

With my eyes on the door willing Sarah to arrive—because even though she'll be as ensconced with family and friends as everyone else, I can tag along with her without feeling as awkward—I don't notice someone coming up on my other side until they pull my hair.

Letting out an indignant squawk, I whirl to find Ty propped against the wall next to me, his dark eyes dancing with merriment. I scowl at him. “What happened to no more pulling my hair?”

He shrugs, unrepentant. “That's just for the wedding and wedding -elated things.” Gesturing at the party, he shakes his head. “This isn't about the wedding at all. Sarah's not even here yet.”

I growl in frustration, which just makes him laugh. “Seriously, Tyson. Don't you have something better to do? Someone else to bother?”

“Nope. Sorry, Livy. You're the most entertaining thing here.”

Another growl escapes me. “Look. I’m not having that great of a night anyway. Can you please just go away?”

“Aww, Liv.” He turns to face me completely, propping his shoulder on the wall, eyes still dancing, though there’s something else tingeing his expression besides amusement. “What’s the matter? Let me help.”

“I’d love to let you help,” I grit out between clenched teeth. “The biggest and best help would be for you to go somewhere else. *Anywhere* else.”

He scoops up some spreadable cheese with a cracker and pops it in his mouth, chewing thoughtfully and looking around. Then he moves closer to me.

Brows wrinkling together, I inch away.

He does it again.

We repeat this little dance several more times until I’m forced to move away from the wall by the furniture placement, and he follows me, his hand on my elbow to guide me in a specific direction. I jerk away, but apparently still end up where he wants me.

He glances up again, a smirk playing on his lips. “There,” he says. “Perfect.”

I follow his gaze. And there, dangling from the ceiling, is mistletoe.

CHAPTER SIX

Ty

What am I even doing right now?

Well, I know what I'm doing. I'm maneuvering Olivia Banks under the mistletoe at my parents' Christmas party so I have an excuse to kiss her again.

But why exactly do I think it's a good idea? That's the real question.

To be honest, I don't think it's a particularly good idea. The last time we kissed under the mistletoe, it took our semi-antagonistic relationship to full-scale antagonism. She's come at me harder ever since, and because I can't just take it lying down, I have to give it back.

Yes, it's childish. I'm aware. And if I weren't, my younger sister has made me aware on more than one occasion. Hell, she's even gotten her fiancé to try to talk to me about it.

Every time, I promise to do better.

And every time, here comes Olivia with her sassy mouth and barbed comments, and every time I rise to the occasion.

Well, there's one way I know to silence a sassy mouth.

She glances up at the mistletoe, then meets my eyes, her gaze wary. "Seriously, Ty?"

At least she's not calling me Tyson.

I shrug as though helpless to change reality. "I don't make the rules, doll face."

"Doll face?" she splutters, but at least she's not upset like she was earlier.

A lopsided grin on my face, I shrug again. Then I tip her chin up with my fingertips and place a kiss on her lips.

Someone wolf whistles, the piercing sound silencing the crowd for a half a second and making the Christmas music playing from the TV seem extra loud. A few people clap, someone else whoops, and then everyone continues with their conversations, ignoring us.

It's not the same type of kiss as last year. She doesn't meet me with hunger like she did then, provoking some latent animal part of me to want to claim her.

While she kisses me back and electricity sparks between us like always, this time there's a melancholy sweetness to it, and when we both pull back, I notice she drops back on her heels. Meaning she'd gone up on her toes to meet me.

I raise my eyebrows at her, but she just looks down, swiping a thumb over her lower lip and taking a step back.

"Hey," I say quietly, hoping she hears me through the noise. "Are you okay?"

When her eyes meet mine, they're glittering with tears, and she shakes her head. Without another word, she spins on her heel and flees.

* * *

Well, shit.

That didn't go at all how I'd planned. Or hoped, anyway.

I thought we could recreate that initial chemistry. It's there. I'm single. She's single. Why not explore it?

Of course, she might not feel that way. Which is fair, all things considered.

But after our encounter at Beans, I haven't been able to get the feel of her out of my head. The way those sparks zing over my skin.

I like it.

I haven't felt anything like it in years. And I've spent too much of the last few years prioritizing someone else's wants and feelings over my own. I let Anna dictate how often I saw my family, and for how long, because she didn't want to come with me, but she also didn't want me to be away for too long.

"What if you decide you don't ever want to come home," she'd say, poking out her lower lip in an exaggerated pout. "You might find your high school girlfriend and decide to reignite the flame. You told me you only broke up because you were going to different schools."

And no matter how often I'd try to lay those fears to rest, she could never let go of the idea that I might choose something—anything—over her.

Of course, when we finally broke up, she broke down in tears because I was doing exactly that. "You never loved me," she sobbed. "There's always been someone else, hasn't there? You were just using me until you could find something better."

By then I was tired of trying to constantly reassure her, so I said nothing. Nothing I said ever mattered anyway, and if it made her feel better to think I was moving on to someone else rather than choosing to be alone instead of with her, well, who was I to take that from her?

But now, I don't have to worry about what anyone else thinks, really. I can do what *I* want.

Within reason, of course. And if Olivia really hates my guts—all this time I thought it was playful banter, but maybe it

actually pissed her off?—then of course I'll leave her alone.

But she responded to my kiss last Christmas. You don't do that to someone you hate. Do you?

I don't. But hell, maybe she does. I don't really know her all that well on her own. She's always just been Sarah's friend.

Or maybe that's the problem? Maybe she thinks this is just me messing with her?

Glancing around, I try to see if I can find her. But she's nowhere.

Until, wait, there—and of course, she's with Sarah. Huddled together with my sister and her fiancé, they're all casting looks my way, and I see Sarah glance up at the mistletoe still hanging over my head.

Shane covers his mouth with his hand when he meets my eyes, but not before I see the smile he's hiding.

I want to find out what she's telling them, but when I take a step closer, Shane shakes his head at me.

Dammit.

When another woman comes toward me, a gleam in her eyes, I realize I'm still standing under the mistletoe like I'm just waiting for this to happen.

Aaaand that's my cue to leave.

* * *

“What the hell, man?” Sarah asks, arms held wide as she barges into my room.

“Nice to see you too, Sarah. Thanks so much for knocking,” I respond coolly as I pull my T-shirt down over my torso.

She doesn't even flinch at the fact that she walked in on me changing, or the fact that had she come in earlier, she

would've seen much more than just my bare midsection.

“Ha ha,” she says, crossing her arms. “I thought you and Olivia met up last week to clear the air. She told me you'd agreed to stop picking on each other. And now this?”

Mimicking her posture, I cross my arms as well. “Please elaborate on what exactly ‘this’ is?”

“You kissed her.”

I can't decide whether to react with surprise or satisfaction, but it appears that my reaction doesn't matter right now.

“What is this?” she continues without giving me a chance to respond. “What are you trying to do to her? You know she's had a long run of bad luck with dating, so you're—what? Rubbing it in her face that she can only get someone to kiss her when it's required by holiday tradition? And then ...” She rolls one hand to indicate I'm supposed to fill in the blanks. “What? What's your game? What are you playing at?”

Pressing my lips together, I shake my head. “Nothing, Sarah. I'm not playing at anything.” When she narrows her eyes at me in disbelief, I drop my arms and sigh. “There was mistletoe above us. Would it be better if I recoiled in horror?” Of course I'm leaving out the key fact that I maneuvered us beneath it—at least this time. It's possible Olivia left that out, which is confirmed by Sarah's reaction.

She frowns, thinking. Then she sighs, heavily. “Fine. No. That would be way worse. Still, though ...”

I cock an eyebrow, and her eyes turn into little more than slits. She holds up a finger menacingly. “Don't mess around with my best friend. She has enough problems without you making things worse.”

Olivia has problems? This is news to me. “What kind of problems?”

Sarah waves that away. “None of your business. I'm not going to tell you anything, because you can't be trusted.”

“Hey!”

She shushes me. “Honestly, Ty. You only have yourself to blame. You’ve been awful to her since we were kids, and even worse since last Christmas for some reason. Did she put fake spiders in your eggnog or something?”

“What? No. Don’t be ridiculous.”

She laughs. “Sure. *I’m* the one being ridiculous. Uh-huh. Okay.” She shakes her head, pulls in a deep breath, and releases it in a gust, propping her hands on her hips. “Alright. Anyway. That’s actually not the main reason I wanted to talk to you.”

Chuckling, I sit on my bed. Apparently I have more fun with my sister to look forward to. “It’s not? And why are you still here anyway? Didn’t Shane leave already?” I lean sideways, peering past her as though Shane’s in the hallway waiting to jump out and yell, “Boo!”

“Of course he did. It’s late, Sophie has a bedtime, and it’s a school night.”

I refocus on my sister. “Uh-huh. Why didn’t you go with them?”

Color rises to her cheeks. “I’ll have you know, I don’t sleep at their house *every* night.” Just most of them, from the sounds of it. “And anyway, I’m here still because I was talking to Mom, catching up with Nora and Dylan, and I also wanted to talk to *you*.” She uses her whole hand to gesture at me, her voice dripping with condescension like I should’ve been able to figure all that out if I’d thought about it for half a second.

I nod knowingly. “I see. You don’t sleep with Shane *every* night. Good to know.”

Her cheeks get even redder, and I have to work hard to hold back my smile. She tilts her head back to look down her nose at me, her attempt at a cool look spoiled by the fact that she’s obviously flustered. “Are you *really* interested in the details of my sex life, Ty?”

My nose involuntarily wrinkles in disgust. “Ugh. No. Of course not. I assume you sleep in your own room with the door

locked when you're there."

That makes her laugh. "Sure, Ty. Keep believing that if it helps you sleep at night."

"It does. Thanks. But I'm getting tired." I'm not, really. I'll be up for hours. I have a work project I need to finish up since I spent today helping get the house ready for the party and did very little paid work. I need to make a few more tweaks on the black and white logo design for a client who hired us to do a rebrand for him. Once that's signed off on, I can go in and add the color. Plus I have a freelance project I picked up over the weekend.

I got antsy and bored and started bidding on projects, and someone picked me. It's a new logo for a vampire romance author. Not my usual thing, but it sounds like something fun to do that's way different from the usual projects I work on. Mostly it's dental offices and lawyers wanting simple text-based designs and a nice color scheme to go on their websites and letterhead. Our web designer does most of the heavy lifting on those projects. This one gives me some leeway to have some fun, and I've already started sketching out ideas to give the client a few choices. Once she picks the concept she likes best, I'll develop it more and give her a full package of logo sizes to use wherever she wants.

See what happens when there's no girlfriend getting jealous of how I spend my time? I get to make more money.

And talk to my sister, apparently.

She steps farther into my room, glancing at the sketches scattered on my desk. There's one that's playing around with fangs that has her raising her eyebrows and looking at me.

I shrug. "Work stuff. But seriously. What did you need, Sarah?"

"Right. Sorry." She holds up her hands in surrender, transforming from the obnoxious little sister I know and love to the sweet girl next door she shows everyone else. "I'm not trying to bother you. But remember how you used to always

paint a mural on the store windows at Christmastime when you were in high school?”

I nod slowly, spotting where this is headed a mile away.

“Would you be willing to do that for me again? I can pay you,” she adds in a rush. “I’m not asking for a favor. I just ...” She shrugs, wrapping her arms around herself again. “I always loved those murals growing up. It’d be nice to have one again since you’re in town for longer than normal.” She glances at my sketches again. “I mean, I know you’re still working remotely, so if you’re too busy—”

“I can do it,” I say before she talks herself out of a mural. “I don’t have enough to do here anyway, hence the vampire logos. I don’t mind painting your windows for you.” I give her a grin. “I’ll even give you the friends and family discount.”

She laughs. “And how much off is that?”

“I’m sure we can figure something out. Tell you what, I’ll come by the store tomorrow around closing and scope out the windows, see what I can come up with, okay? Once I have an idea, I’ll give you a quote.”

Sarah beams at me, holding her arms wide and giving me a big hug. “Thanks, Ty. You’re the best.”

Patting her back, I chuckle. “Just remember that the next time you’re mad at me about something to do with Olivia.”

Straightening, she wrinkles her nose and squints her eyes. “Don’t think you’re off the hook that easily. Whatever’s up between you and her, you need to put it to bed. It’s getting old.”

Yeah. I wouldn’t mind putting the thing between us to bed, either. But not in the way Sarah means. In fact, she’d probably try to beat me up if she knew ...

CHAPTER SEVEN

Olivia

I wrinkle my brows as I watch Sarah dealing with one of her few remaining customers. Her face is pinched in an unusual way, like she's annoyed at the older couple for nattering on about their Christmas plans. It's weird because normally Sarah *loves* hearing about those kinds of things.

Why does she look like she wishes these people would just shut up and leave already?

It's probably not obvious to them, because Sarah's a pro, but I've known her long enough that I can tell.

"Oh, that sounds lovely," she says quickly. Carefully, but rapidly, wrapping their purchases and placing them in a bag. This is her *the line is long but I still give good service* attitude. Only, there's no line. I'm the only other person here. And while I know that I rate pretty highly in Sarah's estimation, she's not going to rush customers out on my account.

When they finally take their bag and head for the door, Sarah turns to me with wide eyes. "Olivia. I'm so sorry. I got my days mixed up, and I thought we were getting together tomorrow."

"It's fine," I reassure her, a little thrown off by how flustered she seems right now. I know the Christmas season is

more stressful for her, but this seems a little extra.

“No, you don’t understand. I asked Ty to paint a mural on the windows. He’s going to be here any minute. But I also promised Shane that I’d go with him and Sophie to ChristmasFest to see Santa tonight. Since I was there last time, it’s a whole thing. She’s been refusing to go unless I go with her, and now that we’re in the second week of December, she’s starting to freak out that she won’t have time to get her list to Santa.”

As her explanation spills out of her, my stomach sinks. After Ty kissed me under the mistletoe yesterday, I ran off, told Sarah he did it just to mess with me—because maybe it’s true?—and then left the party early.

I spent the rest of the evening replaying the kiss in my head. The way he gently tipped my chin up, the way his lips felt pressed against mine—soft and lush and warm. The perfect kiss, really.

Heat washes over me at the memory, goosebumps rising on the back of my neck. Why is he such a good kisser?

Why can’t any of the lackluster guys I’ve dated kiss like him?

If I’m being honest with myself, that kiss last Christmas is part of the reason I gave up on dating over the last year. I just couldn’t keep doing it—putting myself out there and trying again and again only to have no one even come close to measuring up to the bar that Ty set under the mistletoe.

And the worst part is that it wasn’t even a real kiss!

I mean, it was, obviously. But it wasn’t like he kissed me because we were attracted to each other and were on a date and it was the right time to take that step.

Nope. It was Christmas tradition, peer pressure, and being in the wrong place at the wrong time—or maybe the right place at the right time?

I still haven’t been able to decide which.

And now he comes back, prods me under another sprig of mistletoe and does it again.

What is that about?

“I’m really sorry to do this to you,” Sarah rushes on. “I have to leave like *now*.” She checks the time. “Actually, I needed to leave like five minutes ago. Can you stick around and let Ty in for me? And stick around in case he needs any help? I tried to get Dylan to be here, but he’s being a punk and says that he’s doing enough with being an elf while he’s home, he’s not my unpaid labor anymore.” She rolls her eyes. “Honestly, you’d think he’d be more grateful that I feed the kid and cart him around town as much as Mom and Dad do.”

Laughing, I lean over the counter. “Sarah. Calm down. It’s fine. I know your older brother and I aren’t on the best terms, but I can deal with him for a half an hour so you can go be the best soon-to-be-stepmom-slash-elf a second grader could ask for.”

I sound much more convincing than I feel, and it’s a relief when Sarah smiles with gratitude. “Thank you so much, Olivia. You’re seriously the best. What would I do without you?”

“Browbeat Nora into helping out since you’ve covered for her countless times?”

She gives an exasperated sigh. “Don’t I know it. Anyway, I’ve gotta run.” She pulls her phone out of her purse, her eyes widening at what she sees. “Shane and Sophie are already in line, and apparently Sophie’s on the verge of a meltdown because the line’s moving fast and I’m still not there.” She jogs around the counter and gives me a quick, fierce hug, then throws her coat around her shoulders and heads for the door. “I’ll catch you later. It’s all locked up. Just make sure it latches behind you when you leave!”

And with that, she’s gone.

If Ty will need me to let him in ...

A devious smile spreads across my face.

No, no. I can't *really* leave him locked out. Not for long anyway ...

He's here to help out Sarah. I'd be a bad friend if I got in the way of that. And I'm nothing if not a *good* friend.

But I also need to get revenge on Ty for last night.

I settle myself on the stool Sarah keeps in the back room and pull out my phone, scrolling through my socials and watching silly videos while I wait.

The door jingles like someone's pulling on it, but of course it's locked already, so they can't get in.

I stay put.

Another jingle, harder this time. Then a knock. A muffled, "Sarah! It's me!"

A pause.

Another jingle, followed by more knocking.

I count to twenty, then hop off my stool, strolling through the store, in no rush. I make a big show of surprise. "Oh!" My hands on my cheeks. "Oops!" Exaggerating my mouth so he can easily read my lips.

Ty crosses his arms and watches me make my way to the door, his eyes narrowed, the scruff back after he was clean-shaven last night.

What would that scruff feel like if he kissed me again?

Not that I'll ever find out. The only mistletoe here is on a sale rack, not hanging where unsuspecting shoppers would get stuck beneath it and have to kiss one another.

And apparently mistletoe is the only thing that can induce Ty to kiss me. Which is fine. Great, even. I don't want him to kiss me.

Except I do, because he's a fantastic kisser.

What I really want is more of those kisses, just from someone *else*. Kissing my best friend's older brother has never

been something I've wanted to do. Especially since he's always picked on me.

Who wants to kiss the guy who picks on them?

Me, apparently. But not without torturing him a little more first.

He's scowling by the time I sashay over to the door, making sure my wool skirt swishes around my knees for his benefit. And I know he notices, because I watch his eyes tracking down my body.

Yeah, buddy. Eat your heart out.

One advantage to making the effort to look good regardless of the fact that there are no eligible men who live in Arcadian Falls—or at least none I haven't already dated and rejected—is that when people like Ty come back to visit, I always know I look fantastic.

He wants to mess me around with his mistletoe kisses?

Fine. Two can play at that game.

I finally pull the door open, my air of innocent surprise still in place. “Oh, Ty! I'm so sorry! I got distracted in the back room and didn't realize you'd arrived already until I heard you pounding on the door. I hope I didn't keep you waiting long.” As he passes, I fake a shiver. “Brr. It's so cold out, too.”

“Uh-huh,” he says flatly, crossing his arms and staring me down. “I'm sure you're just beside yourself.” I have to fight back a grin at his dead-pan sarcasm. He looks around the store. “Where's Sarah?”

I drop the innocent act and go back to normal, straightening so I'm not cocking my hip out to the side quite so much. “She had to take Sophie to see Santa with Shane. She said she got the days mixed up because everything's been so crazy and asked if I'd hang out to help you if you needed anything.”

He gives me a flat stare for a moment, then grunts, turning away to walk the perimeter of the store with his arms crossed. “Did she tell you what she has in mind?”

Shaking my head, I move back to the front counter. Following him around would be weird. “Not really. She’s mentioned wanting something more festive and eye-catching in the windows, but she’s been really swamped this year and hasn’t been able to come up with a good window display. Or at least, not one she’s satisfied with. I personally think what she has is good, but you know Sarah.”

He hums, whether in agreement or not is unclear, and continues to walk slowly as he examines the windows.

I realize that it maybe sounds like I don’t think she should have him paint a mural. “Not that I don’t think you should paint something,” I rush to add. “Of course your murals were always good before. Unless you don’t want to. Then you should tell Sarah no. She’ll be okay.”

Pausing, he turns to face me, his eyes twinkling. “It’s okay to stop talking, you know.”

With my mouth hanging open, more words poised to spill out, I stop. When I snap my mouth shut, mind whirring with some kind of scathing comeback, Ty chuckles and resumes his perusal of the windows. “Normally I’d let you talk yourself out,” he says softly, “But I’m trying to come up with ideas, and you’re making it difficult.”

“Oh.” Oops. I let my face relax from its expression of irritation, and I settle against the counter to wait for him to finish. I don’t really know why I need to be here, but Sarah asked me to, so ... here I am.

But being here with Ty makes me antsy, and while I normally would have no problem sitting still and minding my own business while waiting on Sarah to finish something, waiting on Ty feels like torture.

It can’t have been more than thirty seconds since he told me to be quiet, but it feels like an eternity.

Pulling my phone out of my bag, I try to distract myself, but it's not working. No new emails of interest, no messages from anyone, I deleted all my dating apps a while ago so that's out. I try all the games I have downloaded, but none of them hold my attention for long. And I'm acutely aware of Ty's slow progress through the space the entire time.

Back. And forth. Back. And forth. He paces along the windows, silent but for his slow, measured steps.

Eventually I put my phone down, unable to keep up the ruse that it's holding my attention. I watch Ty pace in front of the shop windows, one arm held across his chest, his other elbow braced on it, his hand held in front of his mouth. This is the most contemplative I've ever seen him look, and without the distraction of his personality, I have to admit, he's enjoyable to look at. He hasn't shaved today, and dark scruff grows thick along his jaw, framing the lush lips mostly hidden by his curled fingers. Ty isn't just nice to look at. He's actually gorgeous. And it really isn't fair for a boy to have such pouty, perfect lips.

"I can feel you staring at me, Olivia."

His voice, though quiet, seems loud in the silent space, and it startles me enough that I straighten away from the countertop I've been leaning against.

He turns to face me, his hands propped on his hips. "Do you need something?"

I shake my head. "No. Sarah asked me to stay in case you needed anything."

He nods, then shakes his head, letting out a soft chuckle. "Oh she did, did she?" He surveys me appraisingly. "And what does she think I might need?"

I shake my head again and shrug. "She didn't really say. If you want, I can go, though. Sarah and I were supposed to hang out, but clearly she's busy. I'll have to reschedule with her anyway."

He studies me a moment longer. “You can stay. If you want,” he adds quickly. “What were you and Sarah going to do?”

“Just grab some dinner. Nothing fancy. We usually go to Lumberjacks. Sometimes we have ice cream sundaes at her house afterward, but these days not as often.”

A smile plays over his lips. “Oh yeah. I remember your guys’ ice cream sundae tradition. You’re still doing that, huh?”

“Like I said, not as often these days.”

He nods his understanding. “A fiancé with a kid will have that effect I suppose.”

“Yep.”

He seems about to say something, but hesitates. Then, “If you want to hang around, I can go to Lumberjacks with you afterwards. We could even do ice cream sundaes. I know I’m not Sarah, but I don’t have any plans, and yours seem to have fallen through.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

Ty

I hold my breath as I wait for Olivia's answer.

Her eyes narrow. "Is this a pity ask?"

I huff out a laugh, shaking my head and spreading my arms. "When have you ever known me to take pity on you?"

She seems to consider that for a moment. "Good point." She still looks suspicious, though.

Crossing to the counter, I go behind it to rummage for some paper and a pencil. I want to sketch out my ideas and leave them here for Sarah. While she did tell me I could have free rein to paint whatever I want, she's the one in charge of the store, so I'm not going to paint anything without her approval. Finding what I'm looking for, I place the paper on the counter and start sketching, roughing in the window shapes and the basic ideas for what will go into each one. "So what is it? You'd rather be alone than spend time with me?"

Olivia doesn't answer for long enough that I glance up at her. She regards me solemnly, her eyes a deep blue in the low light of the shop after closing.

With her arms crossed, she takes a few steps away, giving me the opportunity to take in her backside. She has on a close-fitting, emerald green turtleneck sweater and a pair of wide-leg

black pants. I'm sure she's wearing the ankle boots she favors this time of year. I've seen her in them a few times already. Her clothes show off her hourglass shape, the sweater skimming her curves, and the pants draping around her hips and plump ass.

When she turns back to face me, she wears the same solemn expression. But at last she answers. "It's not that," she says slowly. "It's more that I can't figure out why you want to spend time with me. When have you ever willingly sought out my company?"

I gesture around us. "I wouldn't say I willingly sought out your company tonight either. But you're here. I'm here. We both need to eat. You were already planning on going to Lumberjacks and having ice cream for dessert. Might as well keep your plans, right?"

"There's no mistletoe at Lumberjacks."

The statement is delivered with a forced lightness that has me looking up from my sketch again, my eyebrows raised. "Is that a problem for you?"

"No," she scoffs. "I thought it might be for you, though."

I shrug, returning to my sketch. I put the finishing touches on it, scribbling out a few details so Sarah has a clear idea of what I'm thinking, then I place it in the center of the counter where she can't miss it. Pulling out my phone, I shoot her a quick text letting her know I've left the sketch for her. That way if she wants to swing back by and pick it up, she can. But if she wants to wait until tomorrow, the choice is hers.

Placing my phone in my pocket, I move to the other side of the counter and pick up Olivia's jacket, holding it out for her. "I've never had a problem about a lack of mistletoe before. I don't think I'll start now. Now that that's settled, shall we go to Lumberjacks?"

She stares at me a moment longer, her eyes flitting between my face and her coat before she finally steps closer and slips her arms into the sleeves. She pulls her curtain of

long, dark hair out from under the collar as I settle her coat on her shoulders. Turning around, we face each other in a silent staring contest that finally ends when she gestures at the counter. “I need my purse.”

I step to the side, only to find myself blocking Olivia’s way again. We do this goofy little dance where we’re both trying to move in the same direction at the same time before I finally grip her by the arms and spin us around so we switch places. “There,” I say, giving her a small smile.

She returns the smile, hers tight and nervous, then picks up her purse and settles it on her shoulder. Tucking her hair behind her ear, the light glints off the sparkly snowman earrings dangling from her lobes.

“Cute earrings.” Pivoting so I’m next to her, I place my hand on the small of her back and guide her toward the door.

Surprised, she looks at me, one hand going to her earring. “Oh. Thanks. Sarah got them for me.”

I hold open the door for her and make sure it’s closed and locked behind us. “Somehow that doesn’t surprise me.”

This time her smile is more genuine and relaxed.

“Should we take my car?” I pull my keys out of my pocket before she answers, gesturing toward my late-model pickup.

“Unless you’d rather walk,” she answers. “I walked here, so I don’t have my car with me.”

Glancing at her shoes, not that I can see them, I shrug and say, “Let’s just take my truck.” Lumberjacks is only a five minute drive, so it wouldn’t be a long walk, but it’s cold, and even if it hasn’t snowed in a couple of days, there’s bound to be ice on the sidewalks by now.

With a shrug like it doesn’t matter to her either way, she follows me to my truck, giving me a funny look when I open the door for her. I give her a nonchalant smile in response and move to the driver’s side. We head to Lumberjacks in silence. I’m not sure if it’s a good silence or a bad silence.

With Anna, silence was usually bad. I don't really mind silence myself, but without knowing if Olivia is upset or angry or some other negative emotion that I'm responsible for, this silence makes me nervous.

I've never noticed Olivia having difficulty coming up with something to say before. Not that I think of her as a chatterbox. It's just that we're usually together in group settings with Sarah, and the two of them together are excitable and talkative.

When we get to the restaurant, we're seated right away, and the waitress, Regina, gives Olivia and me a surprised and appraising look. "Hey there, sweetheart," Regina says to Olivia. "Where's Sarah?"

Olivia waves a hand, as though Sarah's whereabouts don't matter. "Oh, you know how it is. She got caught up with Shane and Sophie. Plus it's the holiday season, so she's extra busy anyway. I'm sure we'll get back to our usual routine soon."

"I'm sure you will too," Regina says, giving Olivia a sympathetic look. "At least you found someone to keep you company," she adds with another analyzing look at me. "I'll just give you two a minute to figure out what you want."

This time, at least, when the silence resumes, it can be blamed on the fact that we're both studying our menus. But the menu at Lumberjacks hasn't changed in twenty years, so it's not like it's a difficult choice. We've both grown up eating here, and we both know what we like.

Once our menus are down, there're no excuses for the lack of words between us. Olivia looks around the restaurant, tapping her fingers on the table.

I rest my elbow on the table and prop my face on my fist, watching Olivia for a moment. "Are you nervous right now?"

Her head jerks back to face me, and an incredulous laugh leaves her. She spreads her hands on the table, palms up. "Yes? Aren't you?"

Technically, yes. But I'm not going to admit that. "Why are you nervous?"

Another laugh, and she looks away. But before she can answer, Regina returns to take our order. Unfortunately for Olivia, I'm not that easily distracted. I look at her expectantly and she sighs, spreading her hands again. "I don't know what's going on here."

I make a show of looking all around the restaurant, then lean in close, lowering my voice. "Well, it appears that we're in a restaurant. We just ordered some dinner. The usual course of action is to eat our food, and then we can leave."

She snorts, her eyes narrowing as she glares at me. "Thank you for that succinct explanation. I realize how dinner and restaurants work. What I'm less sure about is why I'm here with you."

Sitting back in the booth, I spread my arms wide. "I'm handsome. Charming. Why wouldn't you say yes when I invited you?"

That gets a grin out of her, and she snorts again, reaching for the water Regina brought when she took our order. "Yes, but *why* did you invite me?" She gives me that suspicious, narrow-eyed look again. When I don't immediately answer, something sparks in her eyes, and they go wide. Her lips form an Oh, and she nods. "Okay. I get it. You're bored. You broke up with your girlfriend not too long ago." She leans her face on her hand, her expression interested. Avid. "Has it been a while?" She asks just above a whisper.

My brows wrinkle together, my eyes darting from side to side as I try to figure out what she means. "Has what been a while?"

She gives me a meaningful look, her cheeks getting a little pink. "Since ... you know. And now you're home, staying at your parents' house. You're used to female company on a regular basis. And here I am, available. You're just bored and

horny, aren't you? Is that why you kissed me at your parents' Christmas party?"

Clearing my throat repeatedly, my eyes darting to see if anyone overheard her, I lean in close. "We were under the mistletoe," I say defensively.

"Uh-huh. And *you* put us there. On purpose. Why?"

So I could kiss you again. I can't say that to her, though. Especially not after that question. She thinks I just want to kiss her because I'm bored and horny.

And while I *am* a bit bored being in town for so long, I don't want to kiss her just because I'm horny.

I want to kiss her because our kisses are electric, and that's not just from horniness or it having been a while—which it really hasn't been that long. Things with Anna were fine until they just weren't. It wasn't like a long, slow, painful death where we slowly stopped having sex or spending time together and just bickered all the time.

No, we were chugging along in our usual pattern with sex at least twice a week until I realized I couldn't stay with someone who held my hometown and family in such contempt.

It'd eaten at me every time it came up, but since it was only a couple times a year, tops, I could ignore it most of the time.

But we were living together, building a life together, and I came face-to-face with the reality that I didn't want to have the same argument every year for the rest of our lives. Or at least the rest of my parents' lives. Since they're healthy and not *that* old, I suspect that'll be a solid twenty to thirty years, at least.

Did I want to have the same argument about where and how to spend the holidays every single year? Having to always choose between my parents and siblings and her?

No. I didn't.

So I chose me.

While I can admit that Arcadian Falls, while charming, has its drawbacks—the boredom being one of them—it's still home. Maybe I don't want to live here anymore, but that doesn't mean I want to leave and never visit either.

My interest in Olivia has very little to do with boredom or horniness or missing “female company,” as she so delicately put it.

No. I just want more of that electricity. I've been craving it since last Christmas. And now that the opportunity is in front of me, I'd be a fool not to take it.

CHAPTER NINE

Olivia

It seems I'm not going to get much more out of Ty than "mistletoe" as an excuse for why he kissed me at the Christmas party. While he scoffed about my suggestion that he's bored and horny, I'm pretty confident that's the reason for this.

Because he's never paid any attention to me before except to pick on me. Sue me if I don't quite buy this new and different version of him that wants to fill in for his sister at our weekly dinner and ice cream meetup.

He has some kind of ulterior motive here. And I fully intend to find out what it is.

"Did Sarah put you up to this?" I ask after Regina sets our food in front of us and disappears. "Is this an elaborate scheme on her part for us to get along?" I hold my fork up menacingly, our coffee date—not date, *meeting*—where he stole my cookie fresh in my mind. "And I'm warning you, I have no problem stabbing you with my fork if you try to take my food without asking."

He holds up his hands in surrender. "I wouldn't dream of it. You almost beat the shit out of me at Beans. I don't need to relive the experience."

Nodding my satisfaction, I dig into my apple pomegranate salad with grilled chicken. “Well? Was it Sarah?”

His eyes dancing with amusement, he shakes his head, then cuts a piece of his meatloaf. “No, Olivia. Sarah didn’t put me up to this. You’re the one who told me she flaked on you. Well, both of us, really.”

I digest that while I chew my food, not sure what to say. There *has* to be some reason for this. If it’s not Sarah, then I guess it’s Ty. But what could it be? If he’s denying horniness and boredom as motivations, is this some elaborate setup to humiliate me?

That doesn’t seem like him, though. Yeah, he’s annoying, but he’s not *that* awful. He likes to pick on me, make fun of me, call me princess because I like to wear nice clothes and put effort into my appearance or just toss barbed comments my way. And I give as good as I get.

We might not like each other, but we don’t go out of our way to make each other miserable. It’s just stupid bickering when we’re in the same room. That’s all.

“Olivia,” he murmurs. “Relax. We’re just having dinner. It’s really not that serious.”

“Okay,” I breathe, deciding to let it go. For now, anyway. Maybe Sarah knows what’s going on with him. “You didn’t hit your head or anything recently, though, right?”

Laughing, he shakes his head, holding up three fingers on his right hand in the Boy Scout pledge. “I swear I don’t have a head injury. Scout’s honor.”

“Oh, that’s right. You were a Boy Scout, weren’t you?”

He nods. “Made it all the way to Star, which is a couple of ranks below Eagle Scout, but in high school I decided girls and football were more interesting.” He shrugs. “I can’t say I’ve ever regretted that choice.”

Nodding too, I set my fork down and sip my water. “Plus, if you weren’t in Boy Scouts anymore, you didn’t have to

worry about Sarah and me trying to mess with your pinewood derby cars or taking your scouting books to learn to tie knots in your bandanas.”

“Oh my god,” he says around a mouthful of mashed potatoes. “You two were a menace.” He shakes his head, reaching for his drink. “I’d forgotten about that.” His eyes twinkle over the rim of his glass as he sips. “Or maybe I just blocked it out.”

Giggling, I nod. “I couldn’t blame you if you did. We really did make your scouting adventures impossible. What was that one badge you were working on that we kept messing up?”

His eyes grow wide. “Fuck. That’s right. It was the orienteering badge in eighth grade. It was the last one I needed to move from Second Class to Star. God, you guys were awful. You kept stealing my compasses and maps every time I tried to practice. You know, you two are a big reason why I decided to quit.”

“What?” I gasp. “Seriously? That’s terrible.”

He nods solemnly. “It is pretty terrible. You guys were terrible. I never understood why you hated me that much.”

Snorting, I shake my head. “We didn’t hate you.”

He laughs in disbelief. “Uh, I find that incredibly difficult to believe. You did everything in your power to ruin my life.”

I tilt my head to the side and shrug my shoulder. “Mmm, that’s not how we saw it.”

“Oh? Enlighten me please. If you weren’t trying to ruin my life, why did you do all that shit to me?”

“Well”—I point at him with my fork—“at the start we wanted to be cool like you. That was the deal with the knot tying. And we didn’t *mean* to mess up your pinewood derby car that one year. We thought we were making it better.”

“By covering it with so much glue and glitter that the wheels wouldn’t turn?”

I shrug, fighting back a grin. “We were like five. We thought we were making it pretty, and everyone knows that pretty cars are fast cars. We were trying to help.”

He stares at me for a moment, his face completely blank. Then he clears his throat and sets his fork down, blinking. “Please enlighten me about how everyone knows that pretty cars are fast cars.”

“Well, sports cars are all pretty. And they’re fast. Therefore ...”

He’s trying to stifle his laughter, but it escapes anyway as he shakes his head and picks up his fork again. “Oh, man. I guess coming from two five-year-old girls, that is reasonably sound logic.”

“Gluing the wheels like that was a complete accident.”

He’s grinning. “I believe you. But that doesn’t explain messing up my orienteering badge. You weren’t five-year-olds trying to make my car pretty and fast. You were ten, and I’m pretty confident you knew exactly what you were doing.”

Shrugging, I focus on stabbing chicken, apple, and lettuce together. “You’d stopped playing with us altogether by then.”

“So that was revenge?”

I shake my head, but stop and screw up my face, then give another shrug. “Maybe a little. It was more of an attempt to get your attention again. But if we got a little revenge in the process, well ... that was an acceptable side benefit.”

That provokes full-throated laughter, and I smile at the way he throws his head back, giving himself over completely to the hilarity of the moment.

“Oh man,” he says, wiping his eyes with the heel of his palm. “Wow. I had no idea.” He meets my eyes. “Thanks for clearing that up, though. I always wondered what I’d done to make you guys sabotage me like that. Good to know it was just because you loved me so much.”

“Well, Sarah did anyway. I was just along for the ride.”

He nods amiably. “Sure, sure. Of course. For you it was more about the revenge?”

I press my lips together, but I can’t keep the smile off my face. And that’s my only answer.

Chuckling, he shakes his head. “I see. Well, now that you’ve had your revenge, can we call a truce? At long last?”

“Didn’t we do that at Beans already?”

“That was just for the wedding. This is for good.”

I study him for a moment, gauging his sincerity. But there’s no hint of subterfuge, his expression open and expectant. “Yes. A truce at last.”

His smile is warm. Open. Charming, and not in the put-on charming way of a guy who’s doing it on purpose, but in the guileless way of a guy who has no designs on your panties.

Which, now that I think it, is unfortunate. After our two mistletoe kisses, some part of me hoped for more, even if the rest of me cautioned myself that Ty’s nothing but trouble.

But maybe he’s not so much trouble after all.

“Alright,” he says, scooping up a bite of mashed potatoes, “now that we’ve cleared the air about our childhood antics, fill me in on what you’ve been up to. I know you went to college and got a degree in something art related, right?”

I nod, pushing my salad around, picking at the candied pecans and pomegranate seeds. “Art history.”

He looks impressed. “But you missed Arcadian Falls too much?”

Snorting, I shake my head. “God, no.” He grins. “No, I just ...” Sighing, I set my fork down and place my hands in my lap. “I desperately wanted the junior curator job at the small gallery where I interned in college. In the end, they gave it to the owner’s nephew, though.”

He makes a sympathetic face. “Oof. Ouch.”

“Yeah. And after that, I needed a job right away. My parents told me to come home, that I could work for my dad until I got back on my feet, but ...” I spread my hands. “I don’t know. Maybe coming back was the wrong choice. I could’ve found something in my field, even if only tangentially related, but I thought that would make me a sellout. At least I’d still be dealing with art rather than keeping people’s dental charts updated.”

Ty’s silent, his eyes full of sympathy and understanding. “It’s hard making a living in the arts without doing some kind of commercial work,” he says after a few moments.

I nod, realizing that Ty would understand better than anyone.

He straightens in his seat. “I had dreams of becoming a famous painter. But I can barely remember the last time I picked up a paint brush.” He glances to the side, focusing on the other restaurant patrons while he speaks. “To the point that I almost told Sarah I couldn’t help her when she asked me to do the mural.” Refocusing on me, he shrugs. “I feel out of practice. Out of my depth. But then I realized that it’s Sarah. She’s not an art critic. She thought my murals in high school were good.”

“They were,” I interrupt.

His brows jump up his forehead, but he gives no other acknowledgment of that statement. “It doesn’t have to be perfect to work for her needs. And what better way to get back into painting than on the store’s windows? In a way, it’s like coming home. Not just physically but—not to sound corny—spiritually.” He shrugs. “I dunno. Maybe I’m getting overly sentimental, but painting murals for the store was the first big painting job I ever had. Maybe if I do it again, I’ll come back to myself in more ways than one.”

“I think that sounds great. And hey, if you ever decide to paint on something more portable, I’ve been doing little curated gallery walls in Dad’s office. I could add something of yours into the mix if you want.”

His eyes brighten, a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. “Really? You’d want to do that?”

I shrug. “Sure. Why not? I could tag it as made by a local artist, and that would make people even more interested.”

He rubs a finger across his lips. “I’m not actually local, though. Not anymore.”

I tilt my hand back and forth. “Ehh, I’m not sure I buy that. You might’ve moved to Vancouver, but you’ll always be a local boy.”

“Okay, fine.” He grins. “You win. Call it local art if you want to.”

“So it’s a deal, then?” I hold out my hand to shake on it.

He looks between my hand and my face, his eyebrows raised. Then he slowly places his hand in mine, his palm sending zings of electricity surging through my veins. “Deal,” he says, his voice low and gravelly.

Why do I feel like I just made a deal for something much dirtier than a painting for my dad’s dental office?

CHAPTER TEN

Ty

I pay the bill after waving off a pro forma protest from Olivia that she could cover her meal. “Where do you and Sarah usually go for ice cream sundaes?” I ask as we rise from our seats and put our coats back on.

“Her house.”

I stop, letting my shoulders fall. “Oh. Bummer. Hmm.” I think over Mom and Dad’s schedule, but even if they’re not home, there’s a good chance either Nora or Dylan will be. While that might not matter either way to Olivia, I’m enjoying this one-on-one time with her, and I don’t want to give it up to any of my other family members. Not even Sarah, at this point. She had her chance to spend time with Olivia tonight, and she blew it. If she wants to swoop in and try to take her back, she’s going to be shit outta luck.

“We don’t have to do that part of my plans,” she says, amusement clear in her voice.

Hands on my hips, I face her. “Absolutely we do. Let’s hit the store and pick up supplies. Unless your freezer’s already stocked?”

“Oh, so we’re going back to my place? You’re just inviting yourself over?”

I arch an eyebrow. “Would you rather deal with my parents or youngest siblings asking why you’re having ice cream sundaes with me rather than Sarah?”

She screws up her face in thought for a moment, like that’s something she genuinely has to consider. “Well, okay. Not particularly.”

“Good. That’s settled then. We’ll hit Meyer’s, pick up ice cream, whipped cream, and whatever else you don’t already have but absolutely need for the occasion, and then go back to yours for sundaes.”

She shakes her head, but she’s grinning. “Alright. Let’s go.”

Shopping with Olivia is entertaining. She makes little comments and observations about everything we come across, pointing out good deals, grabbing some cans of soup because they’re on sale, her eyes going wide over the discounted price of her preferred microwave meals as she stacks several in the cart I’m pushing. I’d almost grabbed a hand basket, but the cart was easier to get on the way in. Now I’m glad I made this choice.

“I thought we were here for ice cream,” I grouse lightly.

She sticks her tongue out at me. “We are. That doesn’t mean I can’t get a few other things I need, though. You’re the one who decided we should go grocery shopping.”

“I didn’t decide we should go *grocery* shopping. I decided we should go ice cream sundae shopping. So far, we’ve gotten zero ice cream sundae supplies, and our cart is nearly half full!”

“Oh, hush. It’s nowhere near that full. And we’re almost to the ice cream.” Without conferring with me, she reaches in and grabs a carton of vanilla from a northwest creamery. Near the end cap is a display of syrups, and she gets chocolate and caramel. “Whipped cream is this way,” she says, grabbing the front of the cart and tugging it around so we head toward the back of the store again.

Dutifully, I follow along, taking advantage of the opportunity to watch the sway of her hips. I mean, if she's going to order me around and march in front of me—okay, fine, she's just walking, not marching—I might as well get to benefit from the view.

In some ways, she reminds me a little bit of Anna. They're both high-maintenance. Both have definite opinions about things.

But Olivia's more relaxed, deviating from the plan and going with the flow. I might tease her about the extra groceries she's picked up, but I'm not sure Anna would've ever done something so practical as stock up on sale items because we happen to be at the store. She just liked to spend money—anyone's money: mine, hers, her parents', whoever would be willing to foot the bill—as much and as often as possible.

While Olivia's outfits are well put together and suit her body beautifully, she doesn't seem to engage in the same type of mindless trend following as Anna. Not that there's anything wrong with being trendy, I guess. It just felt exhausting to me. She dedicated so much time and energy and money to staying up on the latest and greatest trends. It made me tired just watching her.

Whereas I'm happy in my flannel and band tees and worn-in jeans. She always wanted to dress me up, and when we went somewhere that being dressed up mattered, I let her. She'd buy me nice clothes for work too, and I wore them because one, I needed to look decent for work and two, it made her happy. Mostly.

As often as not, she'd get annoyed that I paired the wrong things together, or that I didn't wear them the way she wanted me to. That always drove me nuts, but as it only came up at the end of the day, since she left for work before me, I'd just shrug and change, because at that point what else is there to do?

Would Olivia want to dress me if we were in a relationship?

Screech. Whoa there, tiger. You like kissing her and checking out her ass. You're moving back to Vancouver soon. Even if she doesn't really want to be stuck in Arcadian Falls forever, this is where she lives at present. If you feel like kissing her more and seeing what else she might be game for, that's one thing. That does not equal dating, though.

Unless you both want it to, whispers that same voice that wondered about Olivia wanting to dress me.

It's a bit of a toss-up, in my opinion. Whether she'd want to dress me, I mean. She has a bossy streak, for sure. And I wouldn't mind encountering that in the right arena. But she also has a live and let live approach to life that makes me think she'd mind her own business as far as my fashion sense was concerned.

Not that it matters anyway.

Once we've collected the rest of our sundae toppings, Olivia steers us to the checkout lane. She loads all of the groceries onto the conveyor belt, chatting amiably with the cashier as she pulls out her wallet.

I push the cart past her so we can put the bags back inside, then stand behind her, reaching for my own wallet out of habit. But before I can even offer to pay, she's handing the cashier her card, buying everything without batting an eye.

See? Further proof that she's not really that much like Anna. Anna would be hanging off me, giving me puppy dog eyes, and expecting me to pay for everything.

I place the groceries back in the cart as the teenager bagging them finishes, pushing the cart back to the entrance and grabbing the bags on our way out of the store.

"Here, let me take one of those," Olivia says, reaching for the bag in my right hand. She has a hold of it before I can register a protest, and instead of insisting on doing it myself, I decide to let her help.

I probably shouldn't be so surprised at Olivia's independent streak. For one thing, this isn't a date. She has no

reason to expect me to pay. We're not together.

It does *feel* like a date, though. I invited her out to dinner, even if it was as a replacement companion for her original plans. Still. I invited her, I drove, and I paid for dinner.

Does she not think this feels like a date? Or maybe she's one of those women who prefer splitting costs?

I scan her out of the corner of my eye, sizing her up. Yeah. I could see that being true.

It's kind of refreshing.

Obviously, nothing with Olivia and I can go anywhere, but maybe in my next relationship, I can find somebody who prefers a more even split rather than someone who just expects me to pay all the time because I'm the man.

Pulling out my keys, I hit the button to unlock my truck, but Olivia reaches her door before I do, pulling it open and climbing inside without hesitation.

I stop in my tracks for just a second, mesmerized by the way this woman is so comfortably herself. Climbing in my side, I pass her the grocery sack in my hand, and she places it on the floor next to her feet, tucking it in before buckling her seatbelt.

"So where are we headed?" I ask as I start the engine.

"My dad's dental office. You know where that is, right?"

"Of course." I give her what I'm sure is a funny look because she starts giggling. How have I never noticed how charming her giggle is before?

"Don't worry, we're not eating ice cream sundaes in the dentist's chair." She gets a thoughtful look on her face and holds up a finger. "Although, that might be entertaining. No, I have an apartment above the office now. That's where we're headed."

Backing out of the parking space, I give her an amused look. "Rough commute, huh?"

That makes her laugh some more, and I grin, enjoying the moment. I don't think things have ever been this easy between Olivia and me, and I have to say, I like it much better than our usual barbs.

Those have never actually bothered me before. I think we both just expected that was the nature of our relationship and never thought it was even possible to change it.

But look at us now. Who would've guessed we could have a nice dinner together followed by a trip to the grocery store and ending the night at her apartment?

That's probably why Regina kept giving us so many strange looks while we were at Lumberjacks. Everybody who knows us knows that Olivia and I don't get along.

Except I always thought people were making a bigger deal of it than it really was. It's not like we hated each other. We just enjoyed insulting each other. Maybe more than normal. It's not that we didn't get along. It's that that was how we got along.

I have to admit, though, it's nice to be able to relax and not have to constantly plan out how to defend myself against her attacks and figure out counter offensives. Instead, we get to eat ice cream together and laugh.

A few minutes later, I park in front of her dad's dental office. Olivia hands me one of the grocery bags, grabs the other, and hops out of my truck, her keys already in hand. She leads me up a narrow staircase on the back of the building, stopping at a small landing to unlock the door. She's decorated for Christmas with red tinsel garland and warm, white twinkle lights wrapped around the banister and a poinsettia wreath on her front door.

Stepping inside, she flicks on the lights, moving in far enough so I can follow her in. She closes the door behind me, sets down her grocery bag, and takes off her coat, hanging it on one of the hooks drilled into the wall next to the door along

with her purse, then sets her keys in a tray on a little table that stands next to the row of hooks.

Turning to me with a smile, she holds out her hands. “Here, let me take your coat.”

I set down the bag in my hand and remove my coat, handing it to her before bending to untie my boots and slip them off. She unzips her ankle boots—I knew she was wearing those—and sets them on a rubber mat obviously designed to catch mud and water from wearing shoes in bad weather.

“That’s a clever setup,” I comment, admiring how neat and tidy everything is.

She gives me another small smile and murmurs, “Thanks,” while smoothing her sweater across her midsection, picking up her bag, and heading into the kitchen.

I follow her, bringing my bag as well, checking out the space as I go. It’s compact, the entryway opening into her dining area, with a small table pushed against the wall, a potted poinsettia in the middle with bottlebrush trees in a grouping in front of it. To the left is the living room, dimly lit by the entryway light. She has a small tree on a side table next to the couch—unlit since she hasn’t been home all day—a coffee table covered in stacks of books and magazines, and a small bookshelf acting as a TV stand against the opposite wall. Her walls are covered in artwork, but I don’t have the time or lighting to check them out right now.

Placing the bag on the counter for her, I step back into the entryway, propping myself against the wall in the threshold of the kitchen so I’m out of the way. In a tiny galley kitchen like this, there’s no room for her to be putting things away while I’m looming over her.

She flashes me a tight smile as she puts her various extra groceries away, then pulls out two pearly china bowls with a floral motif around the rim and an ice cream scoop before setting the ice cream and toppings on the counter. “Do you want to scoop your own, or would you like me to do it?”

“You seem to have sundaes down to an art form, so why don’t you make me one the way you like them so I can be inducted into the ritual?”

She rolls her eyes but grins as she shakes her head at me. “I’d hardly call it a ritual.”

“I dunno,” I contradict. “You and Sarah have specific and exacting requirements of your sundaes. Seems pretty ritualistic to me.”

She tries to scowl, but her smile still pulls at the corners of her lips. “You make it sound like we have some kind of cult built around sundaes.”

Dipping my chin, I nod. “And now you have a new acolyte.”

Giggling, she scoops ice cream into the bowls, putting the lid on the carton and sticking it in the freezer before continuing. She drizzles chocolate and caramel sauces over the mounds of ice cream, shakes the can of whipped cream before piling a mountain on each one, then rinses off the nozzle. She puts the whipped cream in her fridge, rummages around a moment, then comes out with a jar of maraschino cherries. With a spoon, she delicately fishes out two cherries, depositing one on each sundae. Then she reaches for the cabinet above the stove, her sweater lifting to show a delicate strip of skin above the flat waistband of her pants. Smiling, she comes back down with two containers of sprinkles. “Rainbow or chocolate?” she asks.

I shake my head and gesture to her. “Dealer’s choice.”

Another scowl, but she uncaps the rainbow sprinkles and shakes a generous amount over both bowls. Spoons complete the sundaes, and she presents one bowl to me with a flourish.

Taking the bowl, I give it an admiring inspection. “So fancy.”

She grins as she picks up her bowl, scooping up a large bite. “It’s better out of fancy bowls.”

“If you say so,” I murmur, scooping up my own bite. She watches me avidly, clearly waiting for my verdict. “It’s good.”

That makes her scoff. “It’s not just *good*. It’s the *best*.”

Keeping my mouth closed while I laugh isn’t the easiest thing to do, but I manage. “Alright,” I mutter once I manage to swallow. “It’s the best.”

She rolls her eyes and pushes past me, heading into the living room where she switches on a lamp and plugs in her Christmas tree. “I should’ve known you’d be a troglodyte.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Olivia

I keep my back to Ty, taking extra time fussing with the Christmas tree, making sure the ornaments are hanging just so to hide my grin. Having him here feels strange for so many reasons.

Number one, it's *Ty*. He's four years older than me—not that the age difference matters that much now, but it did when we were kids. I've dated guys older than Ty. So why Ty being four years older should matter is beyond me, but for some reason it seems like it does. I guess because it always has. That age difference when we were kids meant our friend groups didn't overlap really at all—we didn't even go to the same school after he left elementary school—except that my best friend is his little sister.

But that's the thing. My best friend is his little sister. He's always been completely off limits and out of my league. He and I have never been friends. We've never even really been friendly.

Which I guess is actually mine and Sarah's fault, I found out tonight. All the times we "helped" with his projects, which really just messed him up, made him dislike us more than anything.

Calling him a troglodyte makes me feel like we're back on even footing, though. Familiar territory. Because everything else about this night is completely unfamiliar.

We're getting along. Joking, laughing, having fun.

How is this even possible?

At least Sarah will be relieved to know that we can spend time in each other's company without it devolving into a schoolyard insult match.

When I turn around, he's parked himself on my couch. Though couch is a generous term. It's a loveseat. In my tiny apartment, there's not room for much more than that. Plus, I got a good deal on this one when Samantha Castor was helping her mom sell off her grandparents' furniture when they moved them into an assisted living facility over in Inglewood. It's a little frilly for my taste, but I've gotten a good mix of feminine and edgy decor to go with it, and I think it actually works really well.

"A troglodyte, huh?" Ty asks, scooping up just a bit of ice cream.

Scoffing, I sit next to him. "Yes. And you're doing it wrong. You have to get some of everything on your spoon. Wait, where's your cherry?"

He laughs. "I ate it already. Isn't that what you're supposed to do?"

"No! You save that for last."

He spreads his arms, the bowl cradled in his palm. "How was I supposed to know that?"

"See what I mean?" I point my spoon at him. "Troglodyte."

"That sounds like some kind of fossil," he mutters into his bowl.

I shake my head. "You're thinking of a trilobite. A troglodyte is someone who's deliberately backward."

That makes him laugh some more. “You’re the one with special ice cream eating rituals, and *I’m* the one who’s backward? Okay, sure.”

Scowling, I want to stamp my foot, but I restrain myself, instead curling my feet under me and taking a deep breath. “It’s not my fault I’ve refined sundaes into an art form and you’re just shoveling it into your mouth like it’s nothing.”

Resting his bowl in his lap, his eyes bright with amusement and mischief, he sets his spoon in his bowl and gestures at me. “Please enlighten me.” He lays his hand on his chest. “Educate this lowly troglodyte into your refined sundae-eating ways. I told you I wanted to join your cult.”

I snort when he calls it a cult again. “If it’s a cult, shouldn’t I be trying to gain more followers?”

He roars with laughter. “Babe, I hate to tell you, but you’re recruiting one right now. And I’m pretty sure I walked in on plenty of slumber parties with you and Sarah and your friends where you were trying to boss everyone into eating ice cream like you. I think the problem is that you’re bad at convincing people that you know the one true way to eat ice cream.”

Giggling at the rest, I gloss right over the fact that he called me babe. Because what the hell?

Nope. Not even going there. Not touching that one. That’s too dangerous.

Ice cream is safe. Let’s stick to ice cream.

“Touché. I did try to convince my friends to eat ice cream my way all along, but I’m apparently terribly unconvincing. That must be why I can only get a job working for my parents. I can’t convince anyone else I’m worth employing.”

“Hey, now,” he murmurs, setting his bowl on the coffee table and placing his hand on my leg. His thumb strokes lightly up and down my outer thigh. “I’m sure you’ll be a kickass curator soon enough. You said you only applied for the one job, and when you didn’t get it, you came home. I don’t

think you've put in enough effort to make any kind of statement like that."

Blinking rapidly to keep the sting of tears from my eyes, I stare at my bowl, carefully gathering ice cream, whipped cream, sprinkles, and dragging it all through the chocolate and caramel. "That's not the only job I've applied for, though. I started applying again a few months ago, and I can't even get a call back."

He hums thoughtfully, giving my leg a squeeze and taking his hand away. "That sounds more like a resume problem than a you problem. Or, like the other job, they're only advertising it as a formality but it's basically promised to someone already."

I nod, feeling marginally better from his reassurance, even though he's probably talking out of his ass. "Yeah. Most places prefer a master's too. I'm working on mine, but I still have a ways to go. Since I'm working full time, it takes longer to complete all the coursework."

He nudges me with his leg, and god help me, I really like how comfortable he is touching me. "See? You're already taking steps in the right direction. It'll happen. I mean, look at this place." He gestures around my living room. "You know how to pull a space together. Your gallery wall over there is amazing. Once you get your foot in the door somewhere, you'll be great."

Nodding, I look up, hating that I'm near tears in front of Ty. This isn't sexy. Not that I'm trying to be sexy, but ...

Oh, hell. When did this turn into a date?

I'm not even supposed to be dating right now. I'm focusing on me, on finishing my master's and achieving my goals. Dating someone here would only throw a wrench in the works because I can't stay here if I want to be an art curator. There's no art anyone wants curated here. The library and city hall have dusty collections that haven't been changed in years, and

when I suggested I might update them—purely on a volunteer basis—I was scoffed at and told they were just fine, thanks.

The gallery wall I've created downstairs is the most art curation I'm able to do in Arcadian Falls. Even that was done without permission, and my dad gripes about it nearly every time I change it.

“Why don't you put up one of those inspirational cat posters,” he suggested once. “Everyone likes those.”

I managed to stop myself from physically recoiling in horror. “Your clients seem to enjoy the artwork I've assembled,” I told him. “Geneva Sumner told me how much she likes it just last week.” Or at least she commented on how striking it was. I had a pretty eye-popping collection of neon sunsets up in honor of summer at that point. I'm not one hundred percent sure she meant striking in a good way, but that's not what mattered at the time.

“Thanks, Ty,” I whisper.

He gives my leg another squeeze, his hand heavy and warm on my thigh, then reaches for his bowl again. “Alright. Educate me, High Priestess of Ice Cream Sundaes. What is the correct way to consume the Sacred Sundae?”

Laughing, I lean forward so he can see into my bowl as I scoop up the right amounts of everything. “You have to get the right amount of each thing to balance the flavors. We save the maraschino cherry until the very last bite.”

He blinks at me solemnly. “Since I already ate my cherry, does that mean I'm not allowed in the Secret Sundae Society? Or is there some kind of penance I can do to make up for my transgression?”

Shaking my head, I take a bite of my ice cream. “You're taking this cult business a little too far.”

He grins, staring into his bowl as he carefully scoops up his next bite of ice cream. Holding up the spoon for me to inspect, he meets my eyes, his still bright with merriment. “Is this correct, oh Sacred One?”

Rolling my eyes, I examine his spoon anyway. “Yes, I think you’ve finally managed to do it right.”

He lets out a dramatic sigh. “Oh, thank heavens. I was beginning to worry I was a lost cause.”

I arch one eyebrow. “Who says that you’re not?”

He laughs, and we continue eating our ice cream in companionable silence. Who would’ve thought I could feel so comfortable with Ty?

Normally by this point on a date—no, wait. This isn’t a date, I remind myself sternly. It doesn’t matter that by this point on a date, I’d be desperately looking for an out.

Maybe that’s why this is going so well. It’s not a date. There’s no pressure. No expectations. No wondering if he’s going to make a move. There’s no mistletoe here, so the odds of him kissing me are virtually nonexistent. I don’t have to be interesting or *interested* or anyone other than me.

Noticing he’s nearly to his last bite of ice cream, I get up and get him another cherry. “Here. You need this in order to have the full experience.”

He looks up at me, a small smile playing over his lips. “After this, will I be fully inducted into the Secret Sundae Society?”

I shake my head solemnly. “No. This is a trial visit. Nothing more.”

We’re both fighting back our laughter at this point, and he lays a hand over his heart, feigning pain. “All this work, and it’s only a trial run? What do I have to do to become a member?”

“Well, there has to be a meeting of the full current membership before any new members can be considered,” I say as I resume my seat on the couch.

He raises his eyebrows at me. “And then?”

I hum thoughtfully. “We’ve never had a new member application before. Sarah and I will have to determine the appropriate process.”

“Really?” Surprise colors his tone. “Shane isn’t even part of your Secret Sundae Society?”

Shaking my head, I scoop up my next to last bite of ice cream. “No. This is something that Sarah and I have always done by ourselves. He’s never asked to be a part of it.” Leaning closer, I lower my voice. “I’m not even sure he knows about the existence of the Secret Sundae Society. And besides. Sarah says he puts *popcorn* on his ice cream.” I let out a delicate shudder.

Ty snorts out a laugh. “The horror!”

I giggle, though I have to admit, having tried the popcorn thing, it is pretty good. Especially on chocolate ice cream. It’s not the same as the sundaes, though, and that’s my preferred go-to.

Wrestling the smile off his face, Ty does his best to look solemn. “Well, I have to say that I’m honored to have made it this far. And if you consider me for a membership, it will be one of the greatest achievements of my life.”

I almost choke from laughing at his statement.

“No, no, seriously,” he protests. “I’ll even include it under the special honors section of my résumé.”

“You would not.”

He nods. “I would.”

And something about the way he says that makes me think he might be serious. “There’s an idea,” I say lightly, scooping up my last bite and making sure to include the cherry. “I can include High Priestess of the Secret Sundae Society as a special honor on my résumé. That might help me to stand out from the crowd.”

“It might,” Ty agrees. “I dare you to try it.”

I'm laughing so hard I can't take my last bite of ice cream. "Oh my god, can you imagine? If I got an interview, I'm sure they'd ask me all about that one. And they'd have to be incredibly desperate to interview someone calling themselves a high priestess of any kind of secret society."

Ty's shoulders shake with laughter. "You should make yourself a certificate, so it's all official. You know, like they do for professional organizations and fraternities."

"And what would be the logo? A sundae bowl with ice cream in it?"

He's still grinning, but a calculating gleam lights up his eyes. "Oh, I'm sure we could come up with something good." Glancing over at my bowl, he refocuses on his own, scooping up everything. "It looks like we're at the end of our sundaes. So now I get to eat the cherry?"

Nodding, I hold up my spoon to show the cherry balanced on top of a blob of ice cream and whipped cream complete with chocolate sauce, caramel sauce, and the last few sprinkles. He does his best to get his bite to look like mine, then clinks the handle of his spoon against mine like we're toasting. "To the Secret Sundae Society."

Laughing, I repeat, "To the Secret Sundae Society," and we both take our last bites together.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Ty

After we finish our ice cream, Olivia takes our bowls to the kitchen and washes them right away with me propped in the doorway like I was when we first got here.

Once she has them dried and put away, she turns to face me, once again smoothing her sweater down her hips. It looks soft, and I'd love the opportunity to smooth my hands over it as well.

But as much as this feels a lot like a date, I know it's really not. Both parties need to agree that a meal is a date in order for it to be one, right? That's always the standard I've used.

Straightening, I clear my throat. "Well, I should probably head out and let you enjoy the rest of your evening. I'm sure you have to get up early in the morning for work."

She crosses her arms, rubbing one arm with her hand, and ducking her head in an awkward nod. "Yep. Pretty early. We have our first appointment at seven, so I have to be down there by six thirty to get everything ready."

"Oof. Too early for my taste. But at least you don't have to travel far."

She chuckles softly. "I know. Tell me about it, right?"

I know I should leave. But I really don't want to. Not yet. I clear my throat again. "Well, uh, thanks for the ice cream sundae. And the introduction to the secret society. I hope to have proven myself worthy of an invitation for full membership."

A grin takes over her face, and she giggles. "I'll have to check with the other high priestess."

I shake my head. "Come on, Liv. You're the high priestess. You can't even make yourself the supreme leader of your own ice cream cult? Make Sarah your assistant priestess or something."

She bends at the waist, laughing, and I'm loving the fact that I can put that smile on her face. "Alright, alright. She's the assistant priestess. Still, her approval is necessary before an invitation for full membership can be extended."

Stepping closer to her, I nod. "That sounds fair."

She straightens, the smile sliding from her face as I move closer. "Thank you for dinner," she says softly.

"My pleasure." A quick glance around reveals no mistletoe hanging in a strategic location. Darn. If I were braver—or more certain of my reception—I'd just kiss her anyway. But this isn't a date, so I content myself with a hug.

She looks at my spread arms for a second like she doesn't understand the gesture, then she carefully closes the distance between us and wraps her arms around my torso.

It's a quick hug, over almost as soon as it begins, and I barely have time to place my arms around her, giving her back a quick rub. Her sweater *is* as soft as it looks.

I don't let my thoughts run away with me about the softness of her sweater and how it would compare to the softness of other things, like her skin, though. She looks like the kind of chick who takes good care of her skin. I bet her skin is really nice.

But I won't find out tonight.

She steps back, once again tugging her sweater into place, and gives me a smile. “I had a surprisingly nice time with you tonight, Ty.”

Laughing, I move to where my boots stand on her doormat. “A surprisingly nice time, huh?”

She follows me into the entryway, standing in the space I occupied while she was in the kitchen, and shrugs. “Well, you and I don’t exactly have a history of getting along very well. The last time we met in anything resembling a restaurant, you stole my cookie and bit its head off.” She spreads her hands, palms up. “I’m just saying, it was nice to be able to enjoy a meal without having to tackle you to get my food back.”

Grinning, I bend to tie my boots. “While you tackling me sounds kind of fun, actually, I had a nice time tonight too.” Straightening, I reach for my coat. “Maybe we can do it again sometime?”

“Yeah,” she says faintly. “Maybe.”

After my coat is on, on impulse I take a step closer, lean down, and kiss her on the cheek. “See you later.”

At the door, I glance back to find her standing rooted to the spot, her hand covering the cheek I kissed, her lips parted in surprise. She drops her hands to her side and straightens. “See you.”

Back at my parents, I head straight for my room, not indulging in much small talk with my parents or Nora. If Dylan’s around, he doesn’t give a shit what I’ve been up to, and right now, I really appreciate that about him.

Tonight’s events replay in my mind in little flashes, a highlight reel of the best parts—Olivia smiling at me across the table at Lumberjacks, her laughter when I called her the High Priestess of the Secret Sundae Society, the feel of her cheek under my lips ...

I have projects I’ve been putting off, both from my real work and also from my freelance gigs. But instead of working

on any of those things, I sit down at my old desk and begin to sketch out ideas for a logo for the Secret Sundae Society.

Is it completely ridiculous?

Yes.

Is it a waste of time?

Also yes.

Will it make Olivia laugh when I present her with a certificate proclaiming her the High Priestess of the Secret Sundae Society complete with a logo, fancy fonts, and—if I can swing it—gold lettering?

Based on our conversation tonight, absolutely.

The gold lettering might be over the top, and if it's too expensive, I won't do it. At the very least, it'll be on fancy paper with a fancy font, though.

And getting that reaction from her makes the effort one hundred percent worth it in my opinion.

I sketch a handful of different ideas, then take my top three and digitize them, spending far more time tweaking each of them than I normally do for client mockups. The whole time there's a voice at the back of my mind telling me I should really be spending this kind of energy on paid work, but I'm too far down this rabbit hole to back out now.

After a while, there's a soft knock on my door. When I call, "Come in," my mom pops her head in.

"Hey, honey. Dad and I are going to bed. Do you need anything first?"

Rubbing my eyes, I shake my head. "I'm good. Thanks, though. But you know I can take care of myself, right, Mom?"

She grins. "Of course. But I'm still your mom, and old habits die hard. Love you. Goodnight."

"Night. Love you too."

Stretching, I check the time and realize I've been working on Secret Sundae Society logos for over two hours. I'll have to let them rest, do some real work, and mess with them more later.

* * *

By late afternoon, I'm tired of being alone in my parents' house. I stayed up late working, then got up and did more work. Now I've showered, shaved, and I'm ready to not stare at a computer screen or see the four walls of my bedroom.

And I want company. Specific company.

It's not quite four, though, so I drive to the ChristmasFest and wander around, checking out the booths and stopping by the store to check in with Sarah about the sketches I left for her.

She's slammed, though, so even though she sees me right away, she only has time to wave her acknowledgment before refocusing on her customers. After finishing up with the woman in front of her, she calls Dylan over to take over the cash register and comes to find me, stopping to answer someone's question briefly on her way over.

Her face bright, she lets out a big sigh when she reaches me. "Hey. How are you?"

I grin at her. "Good. Bored. Figured I'd come check in with you and see what you thought of my sketch."

Laughing, she crosses her arms. "I can't even imagine what it feels like to be bored in December."

"Yeah, well, this is your busy season. The same isn't true for me. And working remotely at home while everyone's gone ..." I shrug. "It gets tedious. It's fine for a while, but I like the social aspect of being in an office."

She nods her understanding. “I can see that. But about the sketch, I’m pretty sure I said you could have free rein to paint whatever you want, as long as it’s seasonally appropriate and family friendly. Santas and reindeer and elves and snowmen all look perfect to me.”

“You did say that, but since it’s basically your store now, I wanted to have your official stamp of approval before I started painting.”

She mimes stamping something on her opposite hand. “Official stamp of approval granted. When do you want to get started?”

Looking around, I scratch my chin. “Tonight? I could go buy some supplies and be back after dinner?”

Her grin grows wider. “Sounds perfect.” She makes a happy little squeak and launches herself at me for a hug. “This is going to be great!” Then she’s off, back into the fray of helping customers find the thing that will make this Christmas that much more perfect.

I watch her for a minute, my kid sister a mini whirlwind directing the flow of traffic and business like a maestro in front of an orchestra. She’s completely in her element, and I can’t help smiling.

At one point, years ago, Mom and Dad talked about me taking over the store one day. I think Sarah and I were equally horrified by that prospect. Me because I had no desire to do that, and her because it was her life goal already.

Fortunately, our parents didn’t seem to mind the switch. There was a brief moment of them readjusting their expectations—having thought since my birth that they’d leave the business to their oldest—and while I was still expected to work for the family business just like we all have, it was a regular part-time job, not training to take over one day.

Sarah’s the one who got that training when she became old enough, taking on more and more responsibility over the years until Mom and Dad made her manager over a year ago. This is

her second Christmas season running the shop without their help, and she's killing it. The shop is doing as well, if not better, as it did under their joint management, and I know they're thrilled she's doing so well. It makes it easier for them to enjoy their retirement the rest of the year.

An older woman bumps into me. "Oh, excuse me! I'm so sorry!" she exclaims before returning her attention to the little girl trailing after her, a floppy stuffed reindeer clutched in her arms.

And that's my cue to leave. I'm just taking up space, and I'm not here to shop.

Wandering outside, I pull my keys out, looping my finger through the ring and flipping them around into my hand while I meander away from the ChristmasFest.

It's close enough to five now. Right?

Sure.

My meandering isn't actually without purpose. I'm headed, slowly and indirectly, toward the dental office. Olivia should be getting off work soon. And then ...

I'm not sure, exactly. Dinner, maybe? But where?

If I had my own place, I'd invite her over. We could have something simple for dinner and maybe watch a movie.

But I don't. I mean, I guess I could invite her over to Mom and Dad's? That seems lame, though. It would be weird hanging out with her in the living room, because when someone inevitably gets home, they'd want to know where Sarah is and why she's not around if Olivia's over ...

And hanging out in my room seems even worse. Like there are expectations—which there aren't, even if I wouldn't object to eventually getting to that point. Or worse, we're reverting back to childhood. In which case, once again, the question of *where's Sarah?* would inevitably come up.

So my place is out.

And I'm not uncouth enough to invite myself over to hers

...

With no plan yet formed, I'm at the door to the dental office. A wreath hangs on the front door, bells jingling from the inside handle when I push it open. Inside, the empty reception area feels warm and cozy with nice, upholstered armchairs rather than the stiff seating in most medical offices.

Stockings and garland adorn the reception counter, and Olivia's head lifts above it, her customer service smile fixed in place. Her smile warms when she sees I'm the one in the waiting room.

"Hey, Ty. Need to schedule a cleaning?"

Crossing to the desk, I grin and shake my head. "Nah. I'm good. Just seeing if you have plans after work."

Her eyebrows climb her forehead, and she rests her chin on her hand as she looks me over. "Not particularly. I usually go wander the ChristmasFest, spend more money than I should, and drop by to see Sarah for a bit until she rushes off to whatever she has planned."

"Sounds like fun. Want company?"

She giggles. "You offering to join me?"

I shrug. "If you don't object."

Her eyes narrow. "And if I do?"

Stepping back from the counter, I hold up my hands in a gesture of surrender. "Just say so, and I'll leave you alone."

She shakes her head. "My dad's finishing up with his last patient. I have a few more things to do, and once they're out the door, I can lock up and head out. Do you want to wait here or meet me at the ChristmasFest when I'm done?"

"I can wait here if that's okay with you."

"Works for me."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Olivia

Ty settles in one of the chairs, his profile just visible when I sit up extra straight and look over the counter.

He shaved today. Pretty recently, from the looks of it.

Is that for my benefit?

Don't be ridiculous, I scold myself. He's probably just bored. That's what last night was about too, even if he tried to pretend otherwise.

He's in Arcadian Falls for longer than normal. He's bored and maybe a little lonely. I'm available, and he knows me. And apparently, we can stand to be in the same room as each other without bickering after all.

But he's not *interested* in me. If he were, he would've done more than kiss me on the cheek when he left. And he wouldn't need mistletoe as an excuse to kiss me on the lips.

Although he did maneuver us under the mistletoe at the party. Last Christmas was an obvious fluke, but that time wasn't.

Still. That's not proof he's anything other than bored and lonely either.

Distracted by thoughts of Ty and why he's here, I have to enter the new patient information into the system three times before I get it all in there correctly. When I finally do, Shannon, the hygienist, comes out of the exam room and hands me the rest of the forms for the new patient intake exam Dad's still finishing up with.

I swear I feel Ty's eyes on me as I talk to Shannon, then finish up with the new patient. Dad comes out as I finish processing the new patient's copay, his brow furrowing when he sees Ty in the waiting room. "I thought that was my last patient of the day." He pulls out the schedule. "Is this an emergency appointment? Why didn't you knock and let me know when he came in?"

"No, Dad. Ty's waiting for me to finish, then we're going to walk through ChristmasFest together."

Dad grunts and replaces the schedule in its customary slot on my desk. "Oh. Well. Have fun, then." He raises a hand to Ty, who climbs to his feet and waves back, then Dad disappears into his office. A moment later, he reappears with his coat on, pausing to give me a kiss on the cheek. "See you tomorrow."

"Have a good night, Dad. Say hi to Mom for me."

He acknowledges my comment with a wave, and then he's out the door. Keys in hand, I follow him, locking it behind him.

"All done?" Ty asks.

I shake my head. "Not quite. I have to finish a couple of things for the last patient. It's easier if I just do it all right away, then I have a clean desk to start from in the morning."

He nods, stuffing his hands in the pockets of his jeans. "Makes sense."

Now Ty's presence seems to spur me on rather than distracting me, and I make short work of the last few things I need to do before shutting down my computer for the night. Pulling my purse out of my locked drawer and grabbing my

coat off the coat rack, I come around and into the waiting room. “Alright. Let me put my coat on and we can go.”

When we get to the door, Ty tries to push it open for me, but it won’t budge since I just locked it.

Laughing, I get out my keys to let us out, and he gives me a sheepish grin. “I appreciate the effort,” I tell him as he passes through the door I’m holding for him.

“You’re showing me up, Liv—opening doors for me. What’s next, paying for my meal?”

Chuckling, I shrug. “I could, if you want. You paid last night. It would only be fair if I pay tonight. Especially since it’s not like we’re dating. After this, we can just split it and each pay for our own food.”

His brows draw together in a frown, and he grunts, but I’m not sure if that’s agreement or something else. “Are you dating someone?”

The abrupt question catches me by surprise. “Uh, no?”

He raises his eyebrows. “Are you asking me?”

Laughing, I shake my head. “No. And no, I’m not dating anyone. Why? Would it matter either way?”

“I mean ...” He shrugs. “Kinda, yeah.”

Another laugh from me because this seems like a ridiculous turn of conversation. “It would? And why’s that?”

He gives me a look like I’m being deliberately obtuse, but I’m not. I really don’t understand why he’d care one way or the other. He hasn’t seemed to care before now. Why now?

“Why not?” he barks. At my confused look, he clarifies. “Why aren’t you dating anyone?”

Sighing in exasperation, I stop. “And what kind of question is that?”

He stops too, turning to face me. “A serious one. Is there a particular reason you’re not dating? Look at you. You’re

gorgeous. Smart. Witty. You shouldn't have any trouble finding a guy. Assuming you want to date guys," he adds quickly.

Rolling my eyes, I keep walking. "Yes, I date guys. And while all that may be true—and thanks for the compliment by the way—you may have noticed that Arcadian Falls isn't a particularly large town."

He snorts. "You don't say."

"Exactly. And even including the surrounding area, pickin's are slim. I've dated probably every eligible bachelor within my age range in a two-hour radius—and a few outside of my preferred age range when I got really desperate—and I decided that I was happier on my own. Besides, if I'm looking for a curator job somewhere, I'll have to move. What's the point in starting a relationship here? It'd either be doomed from the start, or he'd be upset I want to leave and guilt me into staying. Neither option sounds appealing, thanks."

"I suppose that makes sense," he murmurs, gesturing for me to precede him through the ChristmasFest entrance.

Large candy canes flanked by animatronic snowmen stand on either side of the entrance, welcoming us to ChristmasFest.

"I'm surprised you haven't been through here already," he says so close to my ear that his low voice makes me shiver involuntarily.

"Oh, I have," I say lightly, putting enough space between us so I can avoid that reaction again. When I glance over my shoulder at him, he's stopped, a frown stamped on his face.

"So why are we here?" he asks, sounding flummoxed.

I grin. "You asked what my plans were. This is what I usually do, and you invited yourself along. If you'd like to do something else, you could ask."

Rubbing a hand over his mouth to hide his smile, he shakes his head. "You're impossible."

I shrug a shoulder, not bothering to hide my smile. “Only for you.”

Chuckling, he steps forward, snags my hand, and turns back to the door, towing me behind him.

“Hey!” I protest halfheartedly, unbothered by the fact he’s dragging me along. Neither of us are wearing gloves, and his fingertips are chilly, but his palm is warm against mine.

I could get used to this. Well, not being dragged around. I’d put a stop to that if it happened too often. But the hand holding for sure.

I rather like the way his paw engulfs mine.

“Are you hungry?” he asks once we’re back on the sidewalk and away from the ChristmasFest crowd. It’s not too bad since it’s barely after five, but more people will start showing up soon. Still, there’s always a healthy amount of foot traffic.

“I could eat,” I answer noncommittally.

He growls, not releasing my hand. “Are you being difficult on purpose?”

Laughing, I shake my head. “No. This is just my natural state.”

He gives me a dubious look, but doesn’t question my response. “Would you rather have a snack or meal?”

I lay my hand on my chest dramatically and gasp. “Why, Ty. Are you asking me out?”

Eyes narrowed, he examines my face. Finally he gives a decisive nod. “If it gets you to make a decision, then yes, absolutely I am.”

Looking away, I shake my head. That’s not a real answer. Which I guess means no, he’s not actually asking me out. He’s just trying to get me to make a decision. “If you’re asking *me* out, shouldn’t you be the one to decide where we go?”

When he growls again, I just start laughing. “What about you?” I ask. “Would you rather have a snack or a meal?”

With a grunt, he starts walking again, pulling me along behind him. “Let’s just go to The Filling Station,” he tosses over his shoulder.

“Oooh, The Filling Station. If there’s mistletoe, are you going to kiss me again?” I make it sound light, like I don’t care about the answer. Like it’s more of a matter of idle curiosity rather than something I desperately want to know.

Either he doesn’t hear me or he chooses to ignore me because he doesn’t respond. When we arrive at The Filling Station, he holds open the door for me, his hand on my back as he follows me in.

A quick glance reveals the mistletoe hanging in the exact same spot as last year. It’s off to the side of the entrance, a little out of the way so people aren’t routinely forced under it. You’d only end up beneath it when it’s crowded—like last Christmas—or if you decide to step under it on purpose.

Ty makes no move to position us beneath the mistletoe, instead heading straight for the hostess stand. He’s scanning the place before he says anything. It’s already filling up, most of the tables are occupied, but a few are still empty, and there are several spots at the bar.

Ty jerks his chin at the bar. “We’ll just sit there,” he says to the hostess before turning to me. “If that’s okay with you?”

“Sure,” I say amiably, but I’m not feeling entirely amiable. Between the questions about my dating life, his sudden streak of bossy behavior, the reminder of our kiss last Christmas, plus his dedicated avoidance of the mistletoe here, I’m more than a little out of sorts.

I step away from where his hand still rests on my back, needing to break contact. He gives me a questioning look, but I ignore it in favor of choosing a place to sit. I hook my purse on the back of my barstool before sliding into the seat and

taking off my coat. Ty grabs the seat next to mine and removes his coat as well.

Jonah, the owner, is manning the bar today, and he steps over, placing coasters in front of us. “Can I get you folks something to drink?” he asks. “Or do you need a minute to decide?”

“I’ll need a minute to decide,” I tell him, but Ty orders a seasonal ale. Amused, I look at him. “How fitting that the son of Santa and Mrs. Claus orders seasonal beer.”

He rolls his eyes and scoffs. “I’m sure some people would argue that the son of Santa and Mrs. Claus shouldn’t order any kind of beer.”

I dismiss that argument with a wave of my hand. “They can mind their own business.”

Laughing, he accepts the beer and takes a sip before holding the glass out to me. “Want some?”

But I shake my head. “No, thanks. I’ll just have the house white,” I tell Jonah.

“Here are a couple of menus. You folks let me know when you’re ready to order.” He pushes the laminated sheets toward us, then pulls down a wine glass and fills it from a bottle stashed under the counter.

For some reason, the easiness Ty and I have had between us the last couple of nights seems to have evaporated.

After a moment, he sets his menu down with an exasperated sigh and faces me. “What’s going on? Are you pissed at me or something?”

Blinking, I hold up my hands. “Me? You’re the one barking orders and dragging me around.”

He scrubs a hand over his face, and I don’t miss the way Jonah hides a smile by turning away, busying himself with one of the many tasks always waiting for a restaurateur.

“I’m sorry,” Ty mutters.

“Alright. Now that that’s out of the way, why does it bother you if I go to the ChristmasFest repeatedly?”

He glares at me from under his thick, dark eyebrows. “It doesn’t *bother* me, but I assumed you needed to go for a specific reason, not just to wander around and see all the things you’ve seen before. Plus, I just went through there like an hour ago. I don’t need to go back already for no reason.”

“I see. But you’d have gone again if I hadn’t been yet?”

“Of course!” He says it like the mere suggestion that he wouldn’t want to go back if I actually needed to go is an affront to decent humans everywhere.

Laughing, I pick up my glass of wine, still smiling as I take a sip. “Why did you invite yourself along for my evening, Ty?”

He blinks at me, his gaze solemn and owlsh. “We’ve had fun the last couple of days. I thought we could again.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Ty

That seems to be the wrong answer, because Olivia makes a face, and it isn't because of her wine. Not that the house white sounds good to me, but she's had several sips and not made that face. That face was all due to my answer.

"Do you want me to ask you out on an actual date?" I ask after bracing myself with a deep breath.

She screws up her face, like that question needs a lot of thought. But it wasn't my imagination earlier. She wanted me to give an unqualified yes when she asked if I was asking her out when we were on the sidewalk. When I didn't, she got ... well, like this.

Before, she was amused by my showing up at her office but seemed pleasantly surprised. It wasn't until she asked whether I was asking her out that her attitude changed. Because I said I was only asking her out if it would get her to make a decision.

She clearly took that as a no.

And who can blame her? It was a coward's way to answer in the affirmative. I should've just said yes.

Yes, I'm asking you out to dinner.

How hard is that? It's not like I've never asked a woman out before. I mean, I'm no player, but I've dated plenty.

And I like Olivia.

I guess that's what's hanging me up. I didn't expect to like Olivia. We've always been at odds with each other, and she's always been Sarah's friend. Never someone available for me to date.

Before she can answer my question, I lay my hand flat on the bar, palm down. "I'm sorry, Olivia. I've handled this afternoon all wrong. I should've asked if you wanted to join me for dinner when I arrived at your office. But when you said you had planned on going to the ChristmasFest, I assumed it was because you needed to do some shopping there. I should've known from the fact that you said you were going to hang out with Sarah afterward that it was part of your regular routine. I've enjoyed spending time with you the last couple of days and would like to continue doing so while I'm in town, if that's alright with you?"

She stares at me, her sapphire eyes glittering in the dim lighting of the bar. "That was quite a speech," she murmurs at last.

Huffing out a laugh, I reach for my beer. "Is that really all you have to say?"

Grinning, she shakes her head. "No. I've enjoyed spending time with you the last couple of days also. I would be happy to continue spending time with you." She holds up a finger. "However. We need to establish the parameters of this relationship. That way, we're both on the same page."

I nod in agreement, swallowing my beer. "That sounds like a good plan."

She gives a decisive nod. "Okay. First things first. The kissing."

My eyebrows raise. "The kissing?"

Another nod. “Yes. You kissed me here under the mistletoe last Christmas. And then you kissed me again under the mistletoe at your parents’ house.” She flicks her fingers dismissively. “The kiss last Christmas could’ve been written off as a fluke. It was crowded, we both got pushed to the side, so we were standing under it together. The chanting, the peer pressure ... It was arguably easier to just give each other a peck on the lips than refuse.”

“Except that was no peck,” I feel compelled to put in.

She gives me a sharp look. “Exactly. But you were still in a relationship, so it couldn’t mean anything. But then”—she holds up her finger again—“you kissed me at your parents’ house.” She levels the finger so it points at me. “That was no peck, either. And that one was by design. But then last night, you only kissed me on the cheek.” She drops her hands to the bar, then flips them over so they’re palm up. “What the hell, man?”

Laughing, I push my body away from the bar, drumming my fingers on it and shaking my head. “You’re right about last Christmas. That was a fluke. It was supposed to just be a peck, but it turned into something more.” It’s my turn to hold up an accusing finger and point it at her. “But you responded.”

Her mouth drops open, and a sound of disbelief escapes her. “Are you saying that kiss was my fault?”

I shrug. “I’m saying, if you hadn’t responded like you did, it would’ve been just a peck. Instead, it was...”

“Electric,” she finishes.

I nod, drumming my fingers on the bar again. “I wanted to see if it would happen again. That’s why I put us under the mistletoe at my parents’ house.” I spread my hands, lifting my shoulders in a shrug. “I needed to know if we could catch lightning in a bottle for a second time. Or if it was a one-off fluke born of, like you said, the crowd, the peer pressure, the chanting, something specific about that night at that time.”

“But it wasn’t,” she says softly.

I shake my head. “No. It wasn’t.”

“Does that mean you’ll only kiss me if there’s mistletoe?”

Grinning, I consider the best way to answer her question. “Would you like me to kiss you again? With or without mistletoe?”

She screws up her face in thought again. “I think if I got to pick, I would choose without mistletoe. You’ve given me kind of a complex where that’s concerned.”

Laughing, I reach under the seat of her chair and yank it closer to me.

Her eyes go big and round, and I turn us so we’re facing each other, our knees bumping into each other, until we get ourselves arranged. Reaching up, I brush her hair back over her shoulder and away from her face, then let my fingers trail down to her jaw. Leaning in, I place a gentle kiss on her lips.

She gasps, breaking contact. But then her hand finds my shoulder, and her lips press against mine. She responds like she did that first time last year in the same restaurant.

Conscious of the fact that we’re on display for everyone to see, I hold back from kissing her the way I really want to, keeping it mostly PG. Okay, maybe PG-13. Just for a second.

We’re in a bar, after all. It’s not like there are kids watching.

When we break apart, she looks a little dazed. I smirk. “How’d that work for you?”

She smacks my thigh lightly, her eyes narrowing. “Don’t be a dick.”

Laughing, I readjust our bar stools so we can eat without elbowing each other.

Strangely, that kiss seems to be what we needed to get back on even footing. Because after that, we order our food, and conversation flows just as easily as it did last night and the

night before. I tell her more about my work—both my agency work and my freelance clients.

She asks lots of questions, focusing in particular on the creation process, nodding along as I give her way more detail than most people usually want. But she seems interested the whole time, never getting that glazed-over look that lets me know I've rambled on too long about my art.

"It's interesting," she says around a bite of her chicken sandwich. "I've always dealt with high-end art, the kind that ends up in museums and galleries and held by wealthy collectors. I guess I never really stopped to think about the amount of creativity that goes into the more commercial aspects like logo design and ad creative."

Shrugging, I drag a french fry through the puddle of ketchup on my plate. "I had friends at school who thought I was a sell-out for not sticking to high art. They turned their noses up at commercial work." I shake my head. "But it's easier to pay the bills with graphic design, selling out, and making logos and ads and billboards for companies. I never really found the starving artist ethos very appealing. I want to be an artist, but I definitely don't want to starve."

Olivia chortles, covering her mouth with her hand. "Yeah, I don't want to starve either." She sips her wine and studies me. "Do you ever do art for yourself? The kind you started with when you were younger? Drawing and painting and whatever else? Or is it all logo design and commercial art these days?"

"Well," I say thoughtfully. "I just got commissioned to paint a mural."

Her eyes grow wide again, excitement taking over her face before it collapses into amused annoyance. "Painting snowmen on Sarah's store windows isn't what I was talking about. That's arguably as commercial as all your other work."

"I guess that's a good point. Then the answer to your question is no. I don't really take the time to work on other

artistic projects. By the time I'm done with my design work for the day, I'm tired of being holed up in a room staring at a screen."

"But that's exactly what I'm talking about. Painting, especially if you did a large-scale painting, would be much more physical than your graphic design work. You wouldn't be holed up in a room staring at a screen."

"Instead I'd be holed up in a room staring at a canvas?"

She giggles. "Okay, fine. I guess that's true. But you could get a space that would let you have a studio now that you're moving into your own place, right?"

I blink at her. "You're right," I say slowly. That hadn't actually occurred to me. I've been living with Anna for so long that I forgot that what I want is the only thing I have to care about when finding a new place.

I've mostly just been trying to get through the holiday season and haven't really taken the time or energy to think about what I want.

If I want to rent a two-bedroom and use one as an art studio, I can do that.

"You look like I just blew your mind," Olivia mutters.

"Yeah, well, you kinda did."

She lays her hand on the bar between us in a gesture to convey her sincerity. "Look. I was serious before about hanging your artwork in my dad's office. I think it would be really cool. So if you come up with something you want people to see, let me know, and I'll hook you up." Smirking, she picks up her wine again. "I know it's not a major gallery exhibition or anything, but who knows what strings I can pull for you once I get a job as a curator?"

Grinning, I lift my glass of beer and clink it against her wine glass. "Cheers to that. To you getting your first gig as a curator, and to me becoming a breakout star in the art world."

She raises her glass. "To us."

And we drink.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Olivia

When Ty arrives at my office the next evening, I can't keep the smile off my face. I give him a wave, and re-focus on the computer in front of me where I'm scheduling an appointment for someone on the phone.

Once again, he's arrived during the last appointment of the day. The patient's mom is waiting, though, reading a book in one of the corner chairs.

She raises her head at Ty's entrance, a small smile on her lips as she witnesses our interaction.

Ty approaches the desk, drumming his fingers on the counter as he waits for me to get off the phone. Once I hang up, I smile up at him. "Fancy meeting you here."

He chuckles. "I thought I'd come by and see what you're up to today. ChristmasFest again? Or something more exciting?"

With my chin resting on my hand, I screw up my face like I'm deep in thought. "Hmmm. Well, that depends on what else is on offer." I lower my voice to a stage whisper. "You may have noticed that Arcadian Falls is kind of a small town. This time of year, the ChristmasFest is pretty much the only thing to do."

With another soft chuckle, he lowers himself to his elbows on the counter. “We seem to have found ways to entertain ourselves the last few days without the ChristmasFest.”

I nod, humming thoughtfully. “That’s true. Did you have something in mind for today?”

He glances to the side, clearly cognizant of the fact that we have an audience. “Nothing specific. If you really want to go to the ChristmasFest again, we can. Or we can figure out something else to do together.”

My mind spins with all the possibilities of things we could do together that don’t include the ChristmasFest. He kissed me last night. Twice. That kiss in the bar, which was more of a tantalizing sample than a full meal, and again when he brought me home last night. He walked me up the stairs to my door, and when I got it open, he followed me inside, wrapped an arm around my waist, and kissed me again. With no one watching us, he didn’t hold back, kissing me deeply and for as long as he wanted. When we eventually broke apart, we were both breathing hard, hearts racing. Or at least mine was. I assume by the rise and fall of his chest that he was equally affected. With a brief smile and one last quick kiss, he said goodnight and left.

I’d hoped he might come by again today, but I really wasn’t sure. Sarah also texted me today, asking to hang out since she canceled so abruptly the other night. I put her off, saying I wasn’t sure if I felt up to going out tonight. That I was feeling tired. But really, I was waiting to see if Ty would show up again. At some point very soon, Sarah and I are going to have to have a conversation about my relationship with her older brother, but I think having a clearer idea of the nature of that relationship myself would be beneficial before trying to explain it to her.

“Why don’t you think about what you’d like to do while I finish up here? When it’s time to lock up, we can decide.”

Ty flashes me that devastating grin of his. Drumming his fingers on the counter again, he gives a decisive nod. “Sounds

good.” Turning, he heads for the chair he occupied last night, once again sitting and picking up a magazine to pass the time. Soon enough, Dad comes out of the exam room, followed by Shannon and their patient.

“Good job with the brushing, Tommy,” Dad says to his patient. “Make sure to fill out the slip for the Cavity Free Club. We’re doing our drawing at the end of the month.”

Tommy’s mom takes care of the bill, and I schedule Tommy for his next visit in six months. Dad and Shannon wait for them to leave before heading back to gather their own things. Ty stands, drifting over to my counter while I finish up the last of the paperwork and data entry. When Dad comes out with his coat on, he gives Ty a nod and waves to me before leaving. Shannon gives me a meaningful look and a finger wave before doing the same. “Have a good night,” she says on her way out the door.

Purse in hand, I stand and retrieve my coat, put it on, shut off the lights, and head for the door, Ty following closely behind me. “Have you decided what we’re doing tonight?” I ask as I hold the door open for him.

He smirks at me, but steps through. “What do you think about a night in?”

My eyebrows raise as I lock the door, giving it a jiggle to make sure it’s secure. “Are you inviting me back to your parents’?”

His smirk grows into a grin. “We could do that if you really wanted. But I can’t guarantee much privacy.”

Crossing my arms, I cock my hip to the side. “And why would we need privacy?”

His eyes twinkle in the glow from the parking lot lights gleaming off the fresh snow that fell this afternoon. Tiny flakes still drift down, dusting Ty’s dark hair and making it sparkle. “Hmm. Well. I’m not really much of an exhibitionist, especially in front of my family, but if that’s your kink, I’m willing to try new things.”

Laughter bursts out of me. “Definitely not. I’m just waiting for you to say you want to go up to my apartment.” I roll my hand in invitation. “You can’t get what you don’t ask for.”

Stepping closer, Ty puts his hands on my hips and pulls me against him. “Let’s go up to your apartment,” he murmurs, sending shivers down my spine. “We’ll order in. Have some more ice cream sundaes. Discuss the initiation and induction process into your secret society.”

“Okay,” I whisper.

Grinning, I step back and catch his hand, leading him around the building to the back stairs up to my door. Once inside, we stand in the tiny entryway only lit by the Christmas tree that I left plugged in today. When it’s snowy and gloomy outside, I like coming home to the warm glow of the twinkle lights. Some nights, I’ll gather everything I need, then spend the evening only lit with the Christmas lights and maybe a candle or two. It’s cozy and makes me happy.

Maybe Ty and I should do that tonight.

“What’s that look?” he asks. “I can see the wheels turning in your brain. Should I be worried?”

With a laugh, I shake my head and unbutton my coat. “No. I was just thinking it would be nice to spend the evening just using candles and the Christmas lights instead of the lamps or overhead lights. We can open the curtains and watch the snow fall.”

He looks surprised then thoughtful by turns. “Sure,” he says quietly. “That sounds nice.”

He doesn’t sound very convincing. “We don’t have to,” I add. “We can use lights if or when we need them. Like, we wouldn’t make dinner by candlelight. I just ...” I lift my hands and let them fall. “I like feeling cozy when it’s like this outside. It makes the dreary days better.”

With a soft smile on his face—he’s scruffy again today, and the thick shadow of dark whiskers makes all his smiles seem more prominent—he steps closer and brushes my hair

back, his fingers grazing my shoulder and upper arm on their way to tangling with my fingers. “I think it sounds lovely,” he murmurs, then drops a kiss on my lips. “Let me know how I can help with dinner.”

After hanging up my coat and removing my boots, I step into the kitchen, leaving Ty room to remove his outerwear as well. “I don’t have anything fancy, I’m afraid. How do you feel about soup and grilled cheese sandwiches?”

He laughs, and I’m not sure what’s so funny, but it doesn’t sound like he’s mocking me. “That sounds great, actually.”

Pulling out a small pot, I set it on the stove and pull a container of chicken and wild rice soup out of the freezer. After running it under hot water, it’s thawed enough to go into the pot. Turning on the heat, I leave it to warm up while I pull out the grilled cheese ingredients.

Ty stands in the doorway, arms crossed, shoulder propped against the wall, just like the other night while I was assembling our sundaes. “Need any help?” he offers when I meet his eyes.

I shrug. “I’ve got it, but if you really want to feel like you’re helping, you can butter the bread.”

Once he’s in the kitchen, I wonder if offering to let him help was a mistake. I don’t really notice the lack of space in here when it’s just me. Because it’s mostly just me. Sarah comes over sometimes, but usually I go to her place because it’s bigger. She has an actual house, after all.

Just further proof that she’s further ahead in the game of life than I am. House, useful degree with no student loan debt, dream job that’s what she’s always wanted, fiancé ...

And here I am in a tiny apartment with a galley kitchen, going further into debt to get yet another degree in hopes I might someday get a job adjacent to my dream job that might eventually lead to said dream job. Maybe.

With my best friend’s older brother crowding my kitchen.

I set the butter dish and knife on the counter next to the stove, passing him the loaf of bread as he squeezes behind me. Grabbing a spoon out of the utensil crock next to the stove, I give the soup a stir. It's still mostly a frozen block, but there's some liquid gathering around the base now.

"How long is the soup going to take?" he asks, his tone hushed like he's afraid to disturb the quiet of a chapel.

"I'm not sure," I say, a smile tugging at my lips. "Not too long. Once it starts melting, the rest of it goes pretty quickly. Five or ten minutes, maybe?"

He nods, carefully slathering butter over four slices of bread.

Once he's done, I set the cast iron skillet on the other large burner, turning it on to heat up.

He eyes the skillet dubiously. "That's a small skillet."

Grinning, I nod. "It is. We'll have to do our sandwiches one at a time. I pretty much only ever cook for me, so it doesn't make sense to have a large skillet, especially with my limited storage space."

"True." Setting down the knife, he wraps his arm around me and pulls me close while we wait for the stove to work its magic.

When I look up at him, he drops a soft kiss on my lips. "I could get used to this," I murmur, almost immediately regretting saying that out loud.

"Me too." His response soothes the panic blooming in my chest.

The problem is, neither of us ought to get used to this. Because neither of us will be here forever. And he'll be leaving sooner rather than later.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Ty

The soup is bubbling by the time the second sandwich is done.

“The plates and bowls are in that cabinet,” Olivia says, pointing to the upper cabinet to my left, her voice hushed in keeping with our unspoken agreement not to speak above a certain decibel level.

I’m not sure why it feels like we need to stay quiet. Maybe because we’re secreted away in this little hidey hole of an apartment with its back stairs leading to the door, hidden from view from the casual passerby. Even though we’ve been out in public plenty, something about our relationship feels secret.

Maybe it’s because neither of us have acknowledged what our relationship is. Are we dating? Friends with benefits? Something else that I don’t have a name for?

I’m leaning more towards the last one. Friends with benefits implies more of a friendship than Olivia and I have ever had. And fuck buddies is way too crass for how I feel about her. Not that I’m really sure how I feel about her. I’ve been avoiding the self-examination required to figure that out. There are so many reasons I shouldn’t feel anything in particular for Olivia. She’s my little sister’s best friend, I’m still recovering from my sudden break-up with Anna, and it’s been so long since I’ve been single that I should probably

spend some time by myself before jumping into another relationship. Right?

But if I'm honest with myself, how sudden was my break-up with Anna really? No, it's not something I've been planning or thinking about. But the constant need to live up to her expectations has been dragging at me for a long time. Being with Olivia feels easy. Aside from the minor complication that she's my sister's friend—and I don't think Sarah would begrudge either of us a relationship if we made each other happy—I don't see a problem with us being together. After spending the last few days with her, I can see why she and Sarah are such great friends. She's funny and kind, easy to talk to, and has an eye for beauty. She improves every space she occupies.

Her dad's dental office, for example. Given that the style of Christmas decor downstairs matches what's in her apartment, I'm one hundred percent certain that she's responsible for that. And I recognize quite a few of the decorations both in her apartment and in the dental office as Sarah's specialty ornaments that she designs for the shop, meaning Olivia is both loyal and supportive to those she cares about. She's not just blowing smoke up my ass when she says that she'll display my art in her dad's dental office. Based on what she said, and my own observations, she changes out the gallery wall to match the seasons. Right now, she has a selection of snowy nighttime scenes and Scandinavian folk art featuring gnomes and elves. It's an interesting mix but she pulls it all together in a way that works. I suspect that some of those things are from her own personal collection, because there's a cluster of Scandinavian gnome-themed art above her dining table that looks similar to what's downstairs.

Her apartment, though small and maximalist, doesn't feel cluttered or thrown together. There's a certain eclectic quality to her things, a mixture of modern and vintage styles, but she brings it together through color and line, making it feel comforting and warm rather than cluttered and overwhelming.

Her idea to use only candles and Christmas lights to illuminate our dinner feels unbelievably romantic. It caught me by surprise when she suggested it, because while we're obviously attracted to one another, I hadn't expected anything resembling romance to enter the picture.

She passes me a bowl of soup and my sandwich cut into triangles on a plate, then picks up her own, leading the way to the living room. She sets her dishes on the coffee table, gestures for me to have a seat, then heads back into the kitchen, reappearing a moment later with glasses of water that she sets on the coffee table as well.

With a flourish, she produces one of those long-stemmed candle lighters, gracefully moving around the room to light the jarred candles here and there. They're all ones I'm sure she's bought from the Christmas Emporium. Sarah has a sweet spot for these frosted candle jars with Christmas scenes silhouetted on the outside. Olivia has obviously used these quite a bit already, because the lights appear about halfway down each one, flickering cheerily in the dark.

Setting the lighter on the end table next to her seat, Olivia flashes me a quick smile before sitting down. "There. Isn't this nice?"

I nod, picking up my bowl and half my sandwich, dipping the sandwich into the soup before taking a large bite. The lighting might be romantic, but the meal itself isn't exactly the food of seduction.

It's more like comfort. Which I guess fits with the theme of Olivia's apartment. I can imagine her changing it with the seasons as well, focusing on warmth and comfort while it's cold out and changing over to light and airy when the weather warms up.

It would be fun to come back and visit in a few months to see what that looks like.

But in a few months, she might not want me to come back to visit. Or maybe she would. Maybe we could leave things in

a way that, when we're in the same place at the same time, we can be whatever we are right now, at least until one of us decides to find something more with someone else.

It's stupid, but the thought of her with someone else almost makes me choke, irrational jealousy clutching at my throat.

Pounding on my chest, I cough a few times, dislodging the emotion and managing to swallow properly.

Olivia gives me a concerned look. "Are you okay?"

Nodding, I cough a few more times. "Fine, fine," I say hoarsely. "Sorry. Swallowed wrong."

Setting down her bowl, Olivia reaches for one of the water glasses and hands it to me. With a nod of thanks, I take it and drink deeply, finally recovering. "Sorry about that," I say again.

She waves off my apology, picking up her bowl and spoon again. "So, um ..." she starts, but trails off.

I raise an eyebrow. "Yes?"

She glances at me, then refocuses on her bowl, stirring the contents before taking a delicate bite. Then she straightens her back, takes a deep breath, and meets my eyes. "I'm not having sex with you."

My head jerks back in surprise. "Um ..."

She collapses back down, covering her face with one hand. "Sorry. That was too blunt. That's not what I meant. I mean, it is, but—ugh." Dropping her hand, she looks at me again. "Tonight. I'm not having sex with you *tonight*. I don't know what this is or what your expectations are, but I just ..." She shrugs. "I need more than a few kisses and you inviting yourself over to take that step."

"Oh." I realize that sounds like I'm disappointed, which I mean, I kinda am, but it's not like I was planning on that happening tonight. "Okay." I nod, swallowing and clearing my throat again. "That's fine."

“Is it?” At my nod, she lets out a relieved sigh. “Good. Some guys are complete assholes when they realize that’s not on the table.” She holds out a hand. “Not that I expected you to act that way, just that you never know until you’re in that situation, you know?”

Her nose is wrinkled in the most adorable way, and I can’t help smiling as I shake my head. “Not really, but I’ll take your word for it. And for what it’s worth, when I invited myself over, I was really only angling to spend uninterrupted and unobserved time with you. Not trying to get into your pants.” I pause a moment, replaying our conversation downstairs. “Although, from the way I phrased it, I can see why you might think that.”

She chuckles. “Okay. Good to know. But, um ... what is it that you’re hoping to get out of spending time with me?” She pauses, seeming to hold her breath, and when I don’t answer immediately, she rushes to fill the silence. “I mean, don’t get me wrong, I’m actually enjoying spending time with you too.”

“It’s a little insulting how surprised you sound right now,” I put in dryly.

Laughing, she shrugs. “Can you blame me? Aren’t you surprised you’re wanting to spend time with me? That you’re kissing me, and I’m kissing you back, and no one’s doing it as a mean prank or something?”

“I’d never kiss you as a prank!” I protest, which only makes her laugh more. “I wouldn’t,” I repeat. “But yes. I have to admit, this entire turn of events is a little surprising. Who would’ve guessed an innocent mistletoe-induced kiss last year would lead to this?”

“Exactly. But what *is* this? That’s what I need to wrap my head around. What are we doing, Ty? Just having some fun while you’re in town? Are you hoping this turns into something more serious? I’ve known you forever, remember? I know you’re a serial monogamist more than a have-fun-while-it-lasts type. And I was supposed to be taking a hiatus from men.”

“A hiatus, huh? I thought you’d just run out of people to date.”

She tilts her head from side to side. “Not much difference between the two, is there?”

Laughing, I shake my head. “I think there is. A hiatus implies a conscious choice to avoid men. Whereas running out of dateable people is something beyond your control and means you’d be willing to date someone if they presented themselves as available and interested. And interesting.”

Her gaze sharpens as she studies me. “Fine. I concede your point. In my case, though, it was a conscious choice caused by something beyond my control. I both ran out of people to date and decided to stop trying to date. To instead focus on myself, my career, and my goals.”

“And you can’t focus on your career and yourself and your goals and date me at the same time?” I don’t know why I’m pushing this, because it’s not like I’m in a good place to start a new relationship either.

She holds out a hand, palm up. “But you live in Vancouver. Yeah, you’re working remotely right now, but you’ve said yourself that you do better working out of an office than working remotely. This is a short-term solution for you, at best. That was your plan all along. After the holidays, you’re going back to Vancouver and finding a new place to live. Right?”

“Right.” The answer sounds grudging, even to me.

“Okay, then. What’s the end goal here?”

I draw in a deep breath and hold it for a beat. “Well,” I say on the exhale, “if dating is out of the question for both of us, I think that leaves fun while it lasts, don’t you?”

She examines me, her eyes seeming to glow in the candlelight. “Are you okay with that?”

“I am if you are.”

She holds my gaze for a moment longer, then nods once.
“Alright then. Fun while it lasts.”

Why does it sound sad when she says it that way?

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Olivia

Sarah: Dinner. You and me. Tonight. No excuses. No rain checks. Meet me at the store.

Smiling at my best friend's order via text, I agree, then send a text to Ty letting him know I have plans with Sarah tonight. That way he won't show up at the office only to be disappointed.

Not that I mind him showing up at my office the last few nights. But after going out to dinner with him two nights in a row, then him coming over to my place last night, I have a feeling I know why Sarah's insisting on dinner tonight.

The rumor mill is probably running at high speed. I'm sure she's heard something about Ty and I being seen together recently. Hell, we kissed at The Filling Station. Plenty of people saw. I'm a little surprised it's taken this long to get back to Sarah.

I knew this was coming, though I'd normally have preferred to be the one to tell Sarah myself instead of letting her find out from town gossip. But we've both been busy—her with the store and Shane, me with her brother.

At least after last night, I have an answer for her about what's going on.

Ty: Don't let her bully you. But if you're having dinner with her, that'll give me a chance to work on her mural. Come say hi when you're done.

I finish my workday with a smile on my face. I'll get to see Sarah at last, which will be good since we haven't had a one-on-one dinner in over two weeks now, which is a long time for us, and I'll still get to see Ty afterward.

When I arrive at the Christmas Emporium, bag in hand from my circuit of ChristmasFest, Sarah gives me a narrow-eyed glare. "Seriously, Olivia? You bought more stuff? How is there possibly anything that you need and don't already have?"

I open the bag and show her the delicate quilled star ornament that was calling my name. "I don't have anything like this. And there's a bare spot on my tree that it'll be perfect for."

Laughing, Sarah comes around and locks up the store. "Took you long enough. You're usually here before closing. I was worried you'd try to bail."

I put on my best offended face. "Bail? Moi? No, friend, that's your job."

"Oooh. Ouch. Touché." She turns, a pained look on her face. "I really am sorry I bailed on you last minute the other night. It was all my fault. Please forgive me."

"All is forgiven. Besides, I had a nice night after all."

Her look turns sly. "Yes. So I heard." She doesn't say anything else as she moves through the store to straighten up a few displays that she didn't manage to get to before closing, then retrieves her things from the back room. Setting her bag on the counter, she puts her coat on. "Fill me in. I've heard lots of stories from a variety of people. The first person to say they

saw you and Ty looking cozy together was old Mrs. Jenkins, and you know she's got a touch of Alzheimer's these days, so I thought she'd either manufactured it or was confused about who she saw. But then"—Sarah hits her hands on the counter dramatically—"Georgia and Hal said they saw you kissing in The Filling Station the other night!"

I can't help laughing at her antics.

"It's not funny!" she insists. "I told her she must be mistaken, but she said nope. It was the two of you, sitting at the bar, making out in front of god and everyone!"

"We weren't making out," I protest through my laughter. "It was one kiss. No tongue. Hardly a make out session."

"Ah-ha!" She points a finger at me accusingly. "So you admit it!"

I hold up my hands. "Of course I admit it. I just admitted it. If we're kissing in a restaurant, we're obviously not trying to hide anything."

Her look of triumph turns to hurt. "So why did I have to find out from everyone else instead of, oh, I dunno"—she waves her hand around—"you? I can understand Ty not wanting to tell me. It's not like he keeps me updated on who he's kissing anyway. But you? You always tell me about your dates and who you're seeing, or just talking to. Were you worried I'd get mad because it's Ty?"

Sighing, I set my things on the counter and pull her in for a hug. She doesn't return it, though, holding herself stiffly against me while I pat her back. "I wasn't trying to keep it from you on purpose. It just kind of ... happened. And you've been so busy, we've barely had time to talk." I move back so I can look her in the face. "When was I supposed to tell you? And because it's your brother, yeah, I thought it deserved more than a quick text. Don't you?"

"Fine," she grumbles. "I guess that makes sense. And while I don't want details about your make out sessions—or anything else!—I do want to know what happened. How?"

When? Why? I thought you two hated each other. You've always bickered some, but this last year you've been fighting like cats and dogs anytime you were around each other. I know I've pushed you to figure out a way to get along, but *this* is not what I expected. And what if—" She clamps her lips shut, cutting off that thought.

I raise my eyebrows. "What if it all blows up and we're back to hating each other again by your wedding this summer? Is that what you were going to say?"

She grimaces, but nods. "I'm sorry. I'm not trying to make everything all about me. But you have to admit, it's not a ridiculous thing to be concerned about."

Pausing, I try to find a way to reassure my friend. Because it's not a ridiculous thing to be concerned about, and I'd probably worry in her shoes too. And the reality is, Ty and I won't be a thing anymore by this summer. With his track record, he'll have another relationship by then anyway.

Which is fine.

Toooootally fine.

Yup. The finest of the fine.

"What's between Ty and I isn't serious," I say at last.

She gives me a dubious look. "You get how that's not reassuring, right?"

Laughing, I pick up my bags and head for the door. "Come on. Let's get dinner, and I'll see if I can lay your fears to rest. Or at least drown them with food and your choice of beverage."

She grins. "Fine." Stopping at the door, she faces me, her expression solemn. "I just want you to be happy. You know that, right? If whatever is going on with you and Ty makes you happy, then I'm on board. You were never one of those girls who only hung out with me to get closer to my brother, so you don't have to be worried about me being upset about your relationship." She pauses, examining my face. "I'm sorry I've

been busy and distracted lately. I feel like I've been a bad friend and that's why you didn't tell me sooner."

I start shaking my head before she finishes her last sentence. "Sarah, you have nothing to apologize for. If you've been busy, it's because you have a life. The life you want. A life you're building with someone. It's understandable that, especially this time of year, you'd have a lot going on. I'm glad you're not upset about Ty and me, but me not telling you sooner isn't some kind of punishment or the result of hurt feelings on my part."

I place my hands on her shoulders, giving her a gentle shake to drive my point home. "We're both allowed to be busy sometimes. And unfortunately, that also means we might not keep the other person updated on every detail of our lives." I push through the door, waiting for Sarah to lock it behind us before hooking my arm through hers. "The important thing is that we make time to catch up when we can. Like now. It's your turn to regale me with all of the details that I've missed since the last time we saw each other."

* * *

After dinner, Sarah and I walk back to her store so she can get her car. She throws her arms around me and gives me a big hug. "I'm so glad we did this! Let's not wait as long for the next time."

Returning her hug, I laugh. "Deal. Maybe get yourself a day planner so you can keep track of your commitments better."

She grimaces as she pulls away, reaching up to scratch the bridge of her nose. "Yeah, so, I have one. Plus my phone calendar. Those only work if you A—write down your appointments in them and B—actually look at them again."

"That's a very good point."

With a sly smile, she gives me a nudge in the direction of the door to the Christmas Emporium where Ty is hard at work on his mural. “Don’t distract him too much. I need him to get that done by the end of the weekend or there’s not much point.”

“Ty’s an adult. He can make his own choices.”

She laughs. “Fine. He’s doing it as a favor, after all. I guess I don’t have the right to be too demanding. Have fun. Don’t defile my store. See you later!”

I let out a strangled sound of protest at her comment about defiling the store, but can’t say anything because she’s already out of earshot, headed for her car. Well, I could shout something. But I don’t want to do that.

She doesn’t know that we haven’t defiled anything anywhere yet, because she wouldn’t let me talk much more about Ty and me. She did demand to know how and where it started and was shocked when I told her about the kiss last year.

I’d kept that to myself—because it didn’t mean anything and what was the point of discussing it?—and the town rumor mill apparently didn’t think it was worth mentioning. Or if they did, Sarah dismissed it as a fabrication and forgot about it. Given that she so easily dismissed the current gossip at first, that seems like a plausible option.

After a soft knock on the door, it opens to reveal Ty’s smiling face. He’s wearing a faded navy blue long-sleeve T-shirt featuring a few streaks of white paint on the sleeves and near the hem. His jeans are equally threadbare, another streak on his thigh like he wiped paint off his finger absentmindedly.

“Hey.” He glances behind me. “Did you have a nice dinner?”

“We did. Can I come in?”

He steps out of the way quickly. “Of course! Sorry. Come in. It’s cold out there.” Once I’m inside, he heads behind the counter and drags out the stool Sarah sits on from the back,

placing it front and center near the window he's working on. He's roughed in the snow already and is adding details to the snowmen and children, a few trees and a life-sized gingerbread cottage sketched off to one side.

He hasn't started the windows on the other side of the store, but from what I remember, that's going to be Santa's workshop, with Santa and his reindeer flying overhead.

No wonder Sarah's eager for him to finish. Not that she has any trouble attracting customers, but the window murals will definitely add something extra to the ambiance of the store.

I fill him in on my dinner with his sister and her stated approval of our relationship, as well as her worry that it might eventually blow up in everyone's face.

He grunts in response, but I catch his grimace in profile as he turns to squirt more paint into the cup he's using to hold it.

"At least she's not upset," I add softly.

He nods. "That's true." Pausing, he turns to face me, paintbrush still in hand. "I ..." He looks away, swallowing. "We both know that this"—he gestures between us with his paintbrush—"whatever it is, has a time limit. Right?" He waits for me to nod before continuing. "I don't want either of us to get our feelings hurt and have that interfere with your friendship with Sarah." He gets a pained look on his face. "Maybe this wasn't such a good idea," he mutters, turning back to the window, painting too forcefully, then having to grab a rag to wipe it away before restarting more carefully.

"Nope. Don't do that." I hop off my stool and step closer. "It's too late now. We're already doing this. I don't think stopping now would make it less awkward than if we stopped in a few weeks, as planned. If we stop now, we'll just be giving each other looks of secret longing and clouding the air with our sexual tension and pissing everyone off. At least this way, we can work it out of our systems. Things might be

awkward the first time we're around each other after, but we're adults. We can figure it out."

He glances at me out of the side of his eye, his lips curling in a grin. "Clouding the air with our sexual tension, huh?"

Laughing, I nod. "Then Sarah would send Shane to tell us to get a room or something because no one could stand being around us. The tension will be a million times worse than our bickering."

He joins my laughter, having to lower his paintbrush so he doesn't mess up the mural. When he regains control of himself, he resumes painting. "I suppose you have a point."

"I do." Climbing back on the stool, I watch him paint in silence for a few minutes before asking the other question that's been weighing on me for the last couple of days. "My dad is hosting an office Christmas party at my parents' house tomorrow night. Will you come with me?"

Pausing, he faces me. "Is this a date?"

With a grin, I nod. "Yes."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Ty

When I arrive at Olivia's apartment to pick her up for her office Christmas party, I feel like a high school kid getting ready to go on his first date.

It's ridiculous. It's not like I have to talk to her dad while I wait for her to come down.

No, I just have to make small talk with her dad at his house along with the two hygienists, dental assistants, and their significant others. Do they all have significant others?

God, I hope so. Otherwise this "party" will be more of a small dinner gathering with the potential of being exponentially more awkward.

I have no idea if or what she's told her parents about us, though her dad's obviously seen me waiting for her in the office several times now.

With a deep breath, I climb the stairs to her apartment and knock on the door. She answers right away, like she was waiting for me. Knowing Olivia, she probably was.

Her eyes scan down my body and back up again, taking in my charcoal gray pants and the Christmas sweater just visible between the open halves of my leather coat. A smile tips the corners of her mouth. "You look perfect."

I smooth a hand over the front of my sweater, a warm feeling growing in my belly from her compliment. Anna never complimented my appearance. Not from my own efforts, anyway. She'd fuss and "fix" me, then look me over and give a nod of approval. It feels refreshing to have a woman like my appearance without feeling the need to pick at anything.

She pushes the door wide, gesturing for me to enter. "I'm almost ready. Give me just a minute." She disappears through a doorway on the other side of her living room, presumably her bedroom. I haven't been in there yet.

Cautiously, I follow. She turns at the sound of my footsteps, casting a smile over her shoulder while she fastens her necklace. "I like your sweater," she says.

"Sarah made me wear it." Nora was watching Sophie at Mom and Dad's house today, and Sarah and Shane came by to pick her up. And of course they stuck around for a while. When I came out wearing these pants and a simple white button down they asked where I was going. When I told them, Sarah scoffed. "Not looking like that you're not." Then she marched me back to my bedroom, dug through my clothes, growled in frustration, disappeared for a few minutes, then came back brandishing this sweater at me. "Here," she said. "Put this on. It's a Christmas party. You need to dress like it."

And because it was almost time to go and I know when it's useless to argue with my sister, I did what she said. It's a white Fair Isle sweater with trees around the hem and a red truck and trees interrupting the more traditional geometric motif around the chest. An obvious Christmas sweater, but not a hideous one, even if it is a little more Dad's style than mine. She grabbed it from his closet, so that's no surprise.

With Olivia's reaction, I'm glad I followed Sarah's orders.

Olivia looks classy in a red and green plaid skirt paired with a black velvet top with a low V neck that offers the perfect canvas to display her layered necklaces. Three different strands of gold, the shortest a simple chain, the

middle a little more intricate, and the longest bearing a garnet pendant that matches her earrings.

Her sleek wavy hair falls around her shoulders, and she looks exquisite. “You’re gorgeous,” I tell her, and she smiles.

“Thank you.”

Picking up a rollerball of perfume, she dabs scent on her wrists and collarbone before turning to me with a smile, her eyes once again taking me in. “That sweater.” She shakes her head.

“It’s my dad’s.”

“I know. I’ve seen him wear it a ton. It’s one of Sarah’s favorites of his. I’m not surprised she made you wear it.”

“Mine are all too plain, I guess. I was planning on just wearing a button down like a normal person.”

Olivia scoffs. “We both know that’s not good enough for the likes of you. A member of the Daniels clan has to look the part.” When she steps closer to me, I wrap my arm around her waist, stroking the soft fabric and bending to kiss her lightly on the lips. Since she’s just put on lipstick, I know not to kiss her too long or hard. I don’t want to muss her makeup before the party.

“Ready?” I ask when I lift my head.

She hums. “Let’s go before I decide we’re better off staying here.”

My eyebrows jump. I like the sound of that. But I follow her to the door, standing to the side while she puts on her boots—fur lined knee high lace up boots—and coat, winding a scarf around her neck and putting on sleek black gloves. She’s adorable.

She gives me a smile. “Ready?”

As I’ll ever be. “Let’s go.”

* * *

Olivia's parents live a little outside of town in a grand looking two-story white house with a circular drive in front of it. It looks like they've had it professionally decorated with white lights perfectly outlining the roof, garland and bows along the porch rails, large decorative planters sprouting ornament towers, and a giant wreath on the front door.

At least I didn't have to pick up a teenaged Olivia for a date here. I think I'd have turned around and gone home.

No. I wouldn't have. Because I'd never stand up a date like that.

I'd have wanted to, though.

Hell, I kinda want to now.

I'm not sure why this meeting-the-parents event—even though that's not the purpose, it's still happening—feels so heavy. But from the butterflies in my stomach, you'd think I were here to ask their blessing to propose or something.

Ha.

Like that would ever happen.

Maybe that's why this is so weird and nerve wracking, though. Because *I* know things with Olivia and I aren't serious, and *she* knows that, but I feel like everyone else will assume we *are* serious, either because of our individual personalities, or just because of her connection to my family. And meeting her parents, going to a work party as her date ... it just seems like something you'd take a boyfriend to, not a short-term hookup.

I guess that's how I'm defining this now. Not that we've even hooked up yet. But I'm hoping we'll get there soon.

From the way she was looking at me and her comment about preferring to stay home, I have a feeling it's likely. But Olivia doesn't like to rush into things. She's careful,

considering her choices before making them. Not running headlong into whatever feels best at the time.

Was she always that way? Or is that a product of things not working out the way she wanted in college?

I can't say I paid much attention when we were younger, but part of me thinks it's the second one. She threw herself into what felt best and expected the world to mold itself to her desires. Instead, her dream job was given to a nepotism hire, and she came home with her tail between her legs.

Even her dating choices seem to bear out that this carefulness is a more recent development. From things she's said, for a while, she went out with anyone and everyone who looked like they had any amount of potential. While it's possible she did burn through every eligible bachelor in a two-hour radius like she claims, it's also possible she dated enough to decide searching for a metaphorical needle in a haystack wasn't worth her time.

I'm glad she's starting to put herself back out there for work, though. She doesn't belong in Arcadian Falls. While I know my sister likes having her best friend close, Sarah isn't a good reason for Olivia to put her life on hold. Especially when Sarah's now building a life of her own, and that's already cutting into the time she and Olivia used to spend together. Even though Olivia attributes a lot of that to the time of year and wedding planning, I have a hard time seeing it getting any better after the wedding either.

Then it'll be the honeymoon, taking care of Sophie—which is already happening and will only become more of a thing when they're actually living together—plus being married. Living with Shane. Figuring out how to put their lives together.

Sure, she'll make time to hang out with Olivia regardless. But it won't be the same as when Sarah was single. It's already different, and it's never going back to how it was.

It's time for Olivia to take control of her life and make it what she wants it to be.

Olivia rings the doorbell and steps back, which strikes me as odd. Didn't she grow up in this house? And live here for a while after coming back?

I place my hand on her back while we wait, and soon her mom opens the door. Her silver hair is cut in a chin length bob, framing her face to perfection. She has on a sparkly white sweater and red pants that hug her hips and thighs before falling straight from knee to floor, the pointed toes of matching red shoes poking out beneath. She looks every inch the sophisticated older woman. I see where Olivia gets her fashion sense. "Olivia! Come in. And oh! You brought someone. Hello, Ty. How are you this evening?"

Stepping forward, I shake Mrs. Banks's hand. "I'm well, thank you. And thanks for having me."

She ushers us inside, and Dr. Banks raises a hand to wave at Olivia and me but doesn't break away from his conversation with a man I don't recognize. He must be here with one of the hygienists or dental assistants.

"Here, let me take your coats," Mrs. Banks says from behind us.

"Oh, Mom. I can take care of it," Olivia protests.

But Mrs. Banks is having none of it. "Nonsense. Let me have your coats, please."

Pressing her lips together, Olivia dutifully hands over her coat, and Mrs. Banks turns to me. After I give her mine, she disappears.

Olivia slips her arm through mine and leads me into the fray. "Let's get fortification first," she whispers, leading me to the table set up in the middle of the great room bearing two punch bowls and matching crystal cups. "We have a choice of cider or very boozy eggnog," she tells me, picking up a cup and the ladle in the eggnog bowl. Her blue eyes twinkle when

she looks at me. “You’re driving, so go easy on the eggnog. I, however, intend to get mildly smashed.”

Biting the inside of my cheek so I don’t smile too big, I nod. “Thanks for the warning.” Since we just got here, I figure now’s the best time to sample the eggnog, and when I take a sip, I realize she wasn’t lying. It’s smooth and tasty, but the burn on the way down gives away the hefty dose of booze that’s mostly disguised by the spices and cream.

“Pace yourself,” she murmurs, drifting away from the table. I guess we’re just getting drinks, not sampling the hors d’oeuvres yet, even though plenty of people have small plates with charcuterie and bits of food skewered on sword shaped toothpicks.

Very fancy.

I never really paid much attention to Olivia’s family growing up. I just knew she was always underfoot along with my sister. I never really considered *why* she’d choose to spend so much time at our house and so little at her own if she could help it. Why Sarah almost never came over here.

Now I’m coming up with answers to questions I never bothered asking before.

This house looks more like a showpiece, a museum display, rather than a home. Everything is clean, sparkling, and white or cream to better show off the giant, overly styled Christmas tree with its plush velvet skirt that extends way too far from the base, especially given the lack of presents beneath it.

It’s the type of tree you see at events, not the type of tree you see in a home. Where are Olivia’s grade school macaroni ornaments that we all made in Mrs. Werther’s first grade class? My parents still put up all four of ours every year. Each of us gets to hang the ornaments we made over the years if we’re around for tree decorating. I haven’t been the last several years, but even so, all my childhood handmade

ornaments—from construction paper creations to clothespins to cinnamon stick reindeer—are all displayed every year.

Olivia's tree is more personalized, featuring a variety of handmade ornaments that she's purchased either from the Christmas Emporium or from the various sellers at the ChristmasFest. A few I know are Sarah's handiwork that I'm sure were gifts specifically for Olivia.

Her parents' tree features generic balls and baubles all crowded in the branches with a giant gold ribbon bow as the tree topper, the tails trailing all down the tree.

It's pretty, I guess, but in that same impersonal way as the rest of their house.

No wonder Olivia wants to work in a museum. She feels right at home there. She grew up in one.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Olivia

I keep my smile pasted in place as Ty and I move through the living room, greeting my coworkers and their spouses. I introduce Ty, and of course everyone is immediately interested.

I've never bothered to bring a date before. I'm always the lone single person at Dad's office Christmas party. We're a small crew, so it's a small affair, which is why he goes all out with catered hors d'oeuvres and top shelf liquor in the eggnog. Mom and Dad wouldn't want a big crowded party like the Daniels have. Like most people I know have. Because then they couldn't control who does what and when and where as easily.

And control is the most important thing in the Banks household.

Everything is precisely where it ought to be, and no one is allowed to step out of line. Least of all me.

Which is why bringing Ty feels so deliciously rebellious.

I didn't give them any advance warning, either. Yet another minor rebellious act. I was always required to give advance notice for having a guest over growing up. Which I guess is pretty normal to some extent. But Sarah's parents almost

always said yes to last minute invites. My parents never did. It all had to be planned days in advance, a week was preferable. No last minute, “Can Sarah come over for dinner?” requests were ever approved, whereas Sarah’d ask her mom at school pickup on a weekly basis and she’d say, “What’s one more? Sure. Make sure it’s okay with your parents, though, Olivia.”

Then we’d skip over to Dad’s office, and he’d wave me off with a, “Sure, whatever you want is fine.”

Since they never had a problem with me going to Sarah’s house, even last minute, I always figured they preferred it when I wasn’t around as much. So by the time I hit eighth grade, I spent every afternoon at Sarah’s unless my parents specifically requested I be home by a certain time.

Honestly, not much has improved since then. They tolerated my return for college breaks, and seemed happy to see me when I came back after graduation—at least as happy as they ever seem to see me. But they seemed equally happy to get the space above Dad’s office turned into a functioning apartment for me. It was already set up, but they remodeled the kitchen and bathroom, outfitting both with new appliances and updated cabinetry, plus new floors and paint throughout. I got to choose the paint colors at least.

“It’s an investment,” they’d said at the time. “If you ever move out, then we can rent it out.”

If I ever move out. Meaning they’re planning on me living there until they die. Or they’re at least prepared for the possibility.

Everything in me quails at the thought of working in my dad’s dental office until he retires.

But that’s not going to happen. I’m making sure of it. And they’ll be able to rent out that apartment to someone else before they know it.

“Hey,” Ty whispers in my ear, steering me away from Shannon, who’s engaged in an animated discussion with my dad about the merits of getting a machine to make crowns in

office, and her husband Rob. He's a mechanic at the main shop in town, and he and Ty have been discussing car-related things that had me glazing over. "You okay?"

I turn my parent-approved smile on him. "Yup. Great. You?"

He looks at me, his brow wrinkled with concern. "That's really not convincing. You're acting weird. I've never seen you this quiet."

Hitching my smile up even more, I glance around the room. "This is who I am here."

That does nothing to soothe the concern from his face, and he glances at his wrist to check the time. I hadn't realized he was wearing a watch tonight. It's a nice one too, though I don't recognize the brand. But it has that shiny, fancy, man-watch quality. The kind people call timepieces instead of watches.

It warms me that he put in so much effort to look nice for this, even though this is the most boring Christmas party in history.

"How much longer do we have to stay?" he asks.

"Considering we've only been here about fifteen minutes? Way too long. Come on." I tug him toward the table again. "I need more booze. And we should probably eat something, at least to be polite. It'll have the unfortunate effect of buffering the alcohol, though."

He snorts, and I know I've made him laugh, which makes me smile for real. Bringing Ty was a good decision. I feel less alone in hostile territory with him at my back. And maybe I can use him as an excuse to bail.

"Hey," I whisper out of the side of my mouth as we pick up china plates with tasteful gold rims and fill them with bite-sized snacks. "Do you have any food allergies?"

Ty looks at me, eyebrows raised in surprise. "No. Why?"

Darn. I shrug. “Just thinking we could use that to get out of here early if you did. We could pretend you didn’t realize there’s peanut sauce on the Thai chicken skewers and have to get you home to get some Benadryl or something.”

He grins at me. “If we’re pretending, what does it matter if the allergy is real or not? I could also say I get migraines when I eat ... salami.”

I snort laugh. “My parents would have a conniption if they heard you refer to their high-end pancetta as salami. Besides, the two meats are nothing alike.”

My correction does nothing to dim his smile, and he shrugs, unrepentant. “They’re both cured meats. Close enough.”

I have to stifle a laugh, because guffawing is inappropriate at my parents’ house. At least for me. As their daughter, I’m expected to demonstrate appropriate and circumspect behavior at all times. Perfect and pretty and polite. The three Ps of surviving as a Banks.

“Did you notice that there’s mistletoe over the entrance to the hallway?” Ty asks quietly, indicating the greenery with a tiny movement of his finger.

“Oh my god.” I have to cover my mouth to capture my snicker. “What’s with the people in this town and mistletoe?”

He’s still grinning, his eyes dancing. “No idea. Has it always been everywhere like this? Or are we just paying extra close attention?”

I can’t help returning his grin, all my attention focused on him and this conversation like we’re the only two people in the room. As far as I’m concerned, he’s the only person here worth talking to.

Don’t get me wrong, Shannon’s lovely. So is Tina, the other hygienist, and the techs, Lilly and Violet. We all get along great. But they’re more surface level coworker relationships. Of course, I’ve met their husbands before, and they all seem perfectly nice, but they’re all a decade older than

me at minimum, and we're coworkers, not really friends. We don't go out for drinks after work. They head home to their lives, and I go about my own.

"Should we go take advantage of the mistletoe?" Ty asks, grinning.

With a laugh, I shake my head and sip my drink. As tempting as it is ... "Not here. My parents wouldn't approve."

His smile dims as he takes me in, then he crowds me, herding me toward the mistletoe. "I'd think that's even more reason to do it. That's why you brought me, right?"

I glance at him, brows furrowed. "Not really. I brought you because I wanted someone who's here for me for once."

He nods. "Same thing. You brought me because, I think maybe for the first time, you decided you didn't care about their approval. Not enough, anyway. Sure, you came, dutiful daughter that you are. It's expected. And you're part of the staff, after all. But"—he looks around—"I'm guessing this is really more for staff and significant others only. Right?" He raises his eyebrows expectantly. When I nod, he gives me a wide grin. "And we both know I don't actually fit that description. Your parents surely know as well. It's no secret I'm not in town permanently. Therefore, bringing me is an act of rebellion. Why not take it the whole way and kiss under the mistletoe? That's what it's for, after all. If they didn't want people kissing under it, they shouldn't have hung it up. Besides"—now he's not just herding me, his fingers tangle with mine and he's leading me by the hand—"it's kind of our thing now."

Laughing, I let him pull me to the hallway entrance and position me beneath the mistletoe. He looks at me for a long moment, his eyes tracking down my body and up again, heating me up everywhere his gaze touches. Then he steps in close, his front flush with mine, our fingers still tangled, and dipping his head, he grazes my lips with his.

It's a tease of a kiss, barely anything, and when I open my eyes again, he's smiling at me. "I'd kiss you more," he whispers, "but everyone's watching us, and I don't think you're that much of an exhibitionist. At least not in front of your parents."

Glancing to the side, I see that he's right, and my cheeks heat, because I'd gotten caught up in him enough that I'd forgotten everyone else. "No. You're right. Thank you."

He brushes my lips with his again, another whisper of a kiss that's over as soon as it starts, but is somehow the sweeter for it, then steps back, tugging me away from the mistletoe once more.

I catch Mom giving me a censorious look, but I ignore her, choosing instead to focus on making small talk with my coworkers while holding Ty's hand.

After an hour of enduring the most boring Christmas party ever, I'm ready to go. I normally stay for longer, but this year I can't make myself do it.

I don't know if it's Ty's influence or something in me that's ready to throw off the chains of my parents' expectations, but I'm physically incapable of pretending I'm not bored to tears anymore tonight.

Leaning in close to Ty's shoulder, I whisper. "I'm going to get our coats, then we can make our escape."

Eyes widened, he looks down at me. "Don't leave me on my own. Take me with you."

With a laugh, I tug him after me. "I wasn't going to abandon you. I'd never do that to you."

When we get to the front entryway, though, Mom's blocking our way, one eyebrow arched high on her forehead in the look that always cowed me as a kid. "And where do you think you're going, young lady?"

I glance at Ty and decide to go for broke. "Sorry, Mom. Ty and I accidentally got double booked tonight. We have another

engagement that's already started. We've stayed as long as we're able, but we really must be going."

Mom shifts her attention to Ty, not backing down. "Oh? And what engagement is that?"

Uhh ... shit. I should've had something specific in mind, because of course she'd ask that.

But Ty comes to my rescue. "My siblings and I are planning a surprise for Sophie, our new niece." Mom's brows come together in confusion.

"Sophie Elliott," I put in. "Shane Elliott's sister? You remember, he became her guardian after their parents' accident? And he's marrying Sarah, Ty's sister?"

"Oh, that's right," Mom murmurs, her face taking on an appropriate expression of sympathy. "Such a tragedy, the Elliots. How are he and little Sophie getting on?"

"Great," Ty says, even though I probably see her more than he does. Oh well. "They're doing really well, but the holidays are still understandably difficult. I'm sure you can understand. So we're putting together a surprise to brighten her Christmas and bring her into our family traditions. She might not have the family she started out with, but we're doing our best to surround her with love anyway."

Tears prickle at the back of my eyes as he talks about her. Even though I know there's nothing going on tonight—or at least he hasn't told me about anything—his affection for Sophie is clear. And it's true that the whole Daniels family has welcomed Shane and Sophie—and by extension their other siblings Brad and Mallory, even though they're both adults. Sarah told me they're all going to her parents' for Christmas dinner this year, and she's excited to have all her siblings plus her soon-to-be siblings-in-law all together.

I'm a little jealous, since I'll be here, eating a catered Christmas dinner quietly in the formal dining room.

While a Daniels family get together can be a little overwhelming—and I'm sure the addition of Shane, Sophie,

Brad and his boyfriend, and Mallory and hers will only add to that, the warmth and affection more than make up for the need to escape into another room to get a break from the noise occasionally. Home cooked food, Christmas cookies frosted by the kids—including Sophie this year, I’m sure—and Mrs. Daniels’s famous gingerbread pie ...

I’d much rather be there. But that’s been the case since I was a kid.

“Oh,” Mom says. “Well. I guess you better be going, then.”

She looks me in the eyes, as though expecting me to back down and say I’ll stay, but I just give her a smile and lean in for a stiff hug. “Thanks for understanding, Mom. Say bye to Dad for us. We’ll see you soon.”

CHAPTER TWENTY

Ty

Olivia's laughter is muffled by the snow falling softly when we get outside. "Oh my god. Thank you." She turns to me, wrapping her arms around my neck. My hands instinctively go to her waist, and her eyes sparkle in the wintry nighttime glow as she looks up at me. "That was an amazing cover story. And something Mom couldn't possibly argue against. I really hope you're actually planning something for Sophie, though, because Mom will ask about it. She'll ask one of your sisters or your mom or maybe even Shane."

Grinning, I nod. "It's true. We are. We're just not meeting about it tonight. Or at all, really. We don't have sibling meetings to plan things, usually. We just text like normal people."

She hugs me, giving me a squeeze. "I'm so glad you came with me."

"Me too." Pulling back, I find her lips with mine, kissing her like I wanted to inside but didn't because there were people around.

Out here, alone, in the Hallmark-movie-worthy snow, I can kiss her like I want to, take my time exploring her mouth. She tastes of cream and spice from the eggnog, and she melts into me like she wants this as much as I do.

She's always responded to me, but I wonder what effect the addition of alcohol is having.

Reluctantly, I end the kiss, looking down at her flushed cheeks and swollen lips, her eyes hazy. Is that lust? Or alcohol?

"Remind me how much eggnog you had," I murmur, and she laughs, slipping one hand down to pat me on the chest.

"Not that much, don't worry. I'm not drunk. I'm warm and happy, but I'm fully aware of what I'm doing and with whom." Her smile sets me ablaze as much as it reassures me, and the lust haze has lifted from her eyes enough as she answers for me to be able to tell that was more the result of our kiss than the eggnog.

Good.

"What should we do next?" I ask quietly, stepping back and twining my fingers with hers. Neither of us has gloves on, but I'm not feeling the cold, and she doesn't appear to be either.

Not yet, anyway.

"Hmm. Well, we could head back to your parents' like we said we were going to ..."

Surprised, I turn my head sharply toward her. That wasn't the answer I was expecting. "Is that what you want to do?"

Laughing, she shakes her head. "No, but it's still fun to tease you."

Narrowing my eyes, I pull her close and wrap my arm around her. If she weren't wearing a coat, I'd tickle her side in retaliation. As it is, I just say, "Watch out," in my best warning tone.

"Oooh." She's mocking me now. "Is that a threat?"

I'm grinning too. "Definitely. So *you* don't want to go to my parents', and *I* don't want to go to my parents'. Hmm. What should we do, then?"

She taps her lip, her brows wrinkled dramatically in thought. “Hmm. Such a tough decision. ChristmasFest, a restaurant, some other crowded venue, or ... I know!” Her mouth forms an O, playing it up like she just thought of the best idea. “We could go to my place.”

“Your place, huh? And what would we do there?”

Her smile turns coy. “I’m sure we could think of something.”

* * *

We spill into Olivia’s apartment, and she practically slams the door behind us. With no preamble, she pushes me against it, puts a hand behind my neck, and yanks my mouth to hers.

If a little bit of alcohol releases Olivia’s inner vixen, I might have to get her tipsy more often.

She’s ravenous, her tongue seeking mine, her hands shoving my coat off my shoulders, and her chilly fingers finding their way under my sweater and undershirt. She pulls away with a sound of frustration. “Why do you have on so many layers?”

“December.” I kiss her, dragging my arms out of my coat sleeves and wrapping them around her. “In Arcadian Falls.” Another kiss. “It’s cold here.”

She grunts. “Fine.” A fierce kiss, then she steps back and gestures at me. “Take them off.”

Laughing, I start with my boots. First things first, after all. She bends to remove hers as well, then reaches for me once we’re both shoeless. Grabbing handfuls of my sweater, she pulls me to her for another hard kiss. “Come on.” Then she’s towing me through the living room by the sweater and through the door on the other side.

She crosses the dark room and clicks on a lamp on the bedside table, suffusing the space in warm light. Her bed is made, a fluffy sage comforter covering it, with a few gold and sage throw pillows in the way of the regular pillows. Not too many, though, which is a nice change.

Anna insisted on practically covering our bed in pillows. I felt like I had to do battle with a pillow monster every night just to get in, and then our floor was covered with the casualties until morning, when we'd make the bed, pick up all the pillows, only to fight the same battle again that night.

Olivia doesn't even seem to care about her pillows, coming back for me, taking me by the hand, and leading me to the bed. She climbs on, going up on her knees to face me. With her on the bed like this, we're almost the same height.

Her fingers once again find the hem of my sweater, but this time she's more deliberate, less frenzied as she tugs it up. Like she's realized we have plenty of time.

I take over, pulling it over my head and letting it fall to the floor. As I'm doing that, she finishes untucking my undershirt—she'd managed to get a couple of inches undone by her door—and lifts it up until I also pull that off over my head.

She makes a low hum of satisfaction in her throat, her cool hands sliding up my chest. "I haven't seen you shirtless since high school," she says quietly.

"Were you hoping to see me shirtless again?" I ask, grinning. Did little Olivia Banks have a crush on me growing up?

She shrugs. "Not *you* so much as your friends. When we'd all go swimming in the summers, Sarah and I liked to sit and enjoy the sights."

A laugh bubbles out of me. "The sights being the shirtless guys?"

She meets my eyes, one corner of her mouth pulled up in a half smile. "Of course."

Nodding, I school my face. “Not me, though.”

“Oh, no, of course not. You were Sarah’s yucky older brother. And all you did was kick sand at us and tell us our swimsuits were ugly.”

“What?” I search my memory banks, trying to figure out what she’s talking about. “I never did anything like that!”

She rolls her eyes, a full smile on her face now. “Okay, fine. Maybe not. You did make fun of Sarah’s bathing suit a few times when we were younger, though. And since we had the same one that year ...” She shrugs, making it clear that she assumed I thought they both had terrible taste in bathing suits.

“Number one, you can’t hold me picking on my kid sister against me. And number two—” I forget where I was going because Olivia pulls her sweater off and she’s kneeling before me on the bed in a skirt and a lacy black bra.

“Number two?” she prompts, sounding all innocent when she’s anything but.

“Number two, I really think you should finish getting topless.”

She chuckles. “Oh, really?” But she’s already reaching behind her. The band comes loose, and I hook a finger in one of the cups, tugging gently to help her take it off, revealing more pale skin, gorgeous tits with dainty upturned nipples, hard and waiting for me to suck them.

So I oblige.

Sliding my hands up her ribcage, I support their weight in my hands, bending my head to take one in my mouth and swirl my tongue around it. Then I do the same to the other side.

Olivia’s hands slide through my hair, and she lets out a quiet gasp, her back arching to show me she wants more, making a quiet whine of protest when I stop.

I lift my mouth to hers, my hands sliding over her bare skin, pulling her against my chest. She feels so good in my

arms, all soft curves and smooth skin. I could do nothing but rub my hands over her all night.

I mean, I want to do more than that, obviously. The hard cock pressing against the zipper of my pants is proof of that. But I'd love to spend the night with her pressed against me.

Sliding my hands down her back, I find the zipper at the back of her skirt. It's tiny, though, and I can't get a good grip on the zipper pull to get it down.

With a soft chuckle, Olivia moves away, reaching behind her to unzip the skirt herself, climbing off the bed to remove it, folding it in half and draping it neatly over the blanket chest at the foot of her bed.

I let out a wolf whistle at the sight of her in stockings and cheeky lace panties that match her bra.

She turns, a blush rising on her chest and cheeks.

Smiling, I pull her into my arms. "You're so sexy, Olivia. I don't know why I never noticed before."

She hums, petting some of the fine hairs that grow on my pecs. "Well, you usually had a girlfriend, so it makes sense you wouldn't be looking for someone else." Her eyes lift to meet mine. "That's a positive quality, really. And on top of that, you didn't see me as a woman. You saw me as your little sister's friend."

"Maybe I should be grateful this town has grown obsessed with mistletoe," I muse, and she laughs. Because without that kiss last Christmas, I don't think we would've ended up here, and I'm pretty happy right now.

She lifts her head and kisses me, her hands finding their way between us to undo my pants. She has less trouble with my pants than I had with her skirt, and soon they're loose around my hips, and her hands are crawling down the back beneath my underwear to cup my ass.

She's a forward little thing when she decides to go after what she wants.

I like it.

I nip at her lower lip, slipping my tongue into her mouth on her gasp, and then I'm backing her onto the bed, laying her down and climbing on with her.

Shoving my pants down, I stand to kick them off, then reach for her pretty panties. She lifts her hip and helps me get them off, leaving her in just her black stockings. For now, I'm content to leave them on.

"God, Olivia. You're beautiful," I whisper, crawling over her and dipping my head for another kiss. Settling to one side of her, I tangle my legs with hers, kissing her and caressing her, circling her nipple with my thumb, following the line of her ribs to her hip and around to her ass, down the back of her thigh, up the outside, and returning to that pert little nipple again.

On my second circuit, I detour over her belly, and she shifts more to her back, opening herself for me to explore her neatly trimmed curls and the treasure they hide. I caress her gently to start with, learning her curves and what she likes, finding her slick and ready when I probe more deeply.

Gathering her wetness, I bring it up to her clit, rubbing slow circles. She shifts her hips, pressing into my caress as we kiss, silently asking for more.

But I stay at that pace, occasionally dipping my finger inside and fucking her with it a few times before going back to circling her clit. Eventually she ends the kiss, panting and biting her lip when I dip my finger inside her again. "More," she whispers hoarsely.

I add a second finger, curling them to find her G-spot and grinding my palm on her clit. She's rubbing herself against me and god, it's so fucking hot. Those pale thighs with the black stockings still encasing them practically glow in the lamplight.

She's ethereal, almost angelic, with her hair spread around her on the pillow, her body open just for me.

Without removing my hand, I move between her thighs, moving one of her legs to the side to make room for my shoulders. I have to taste her.

“Oh god,” she gasps, when I place a kiss just below her belly button.

I use the tip of my tongue to trace careful circles from where my fingers enter her, up and around her clit, and back down the other side. Then I lap at her like she’s an ice cream cone, which makes her sigh, but her legs were tensing up before, so I go back to that.

One thing I know how to do is eat pussy. Everyone’s a little different, of course, but I’m observant, and I know how to get my partner off. Olivia likes the more direct stimulation of a pointed tongue. Noted.

I take my time, making sure to build her up slowly, knowing it’ll be more satisfying in the end. I can tell when she’s getting close. Her thighs start shuddering, pulling closer to my head, her hips moving, like she can’t decide if she needs to push into me for more or pull away for less. *I got you*, I want to tell her, but I can’t because my mouth is occupied at the moment and stopping would have the opposite effect of what I want.

She stays there, balanced on the edge of coming for so long, I’m almost worried I won’t be able to get her there. But I move my fingers in and out then curl them up again, finding that rough patch and tapping for all I’m worth while I work her clit with my tongue.

She comes with a shout, her inner muscles clamping rhythmically on my fingers, her legs going straight and her abs pulling her head off the pillow. Her hands find my head, and she holds on for a second before pushing me away. “God. No more.”

Wiping my face on my hand, I climb up the bed, a smug smile on my face. She’s all flushed and satisfied looking, but I’m not done with her yet.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Olivia

Ty climbs up over me, dropping kisses on my torso on his way up, including both nipples. He settles next to me, pulling me to him, his hard cock pressing into my hip.

Turning, I cup his face with my hand. He shaved today, but his five o'clock shadow scrapes my hand.

I kinda like him scruffy, I have to admit. Not that he looks scruffy now, but he will in the morning, and the thought of waking up next to a scruffy Ty, his hair messy from sleep, is more appealing than I would've thought before now.

In all my imaginings, which most recently have included bedroom activities, I never figured he'd sleep over. That's more relationship-level stuff, in my mind, and that's not what we're doing here. This is just adult fun while we're both in town.

Now, the thought of him leaving in an hour or so just seems wrong. Not that we've talked about sleepovers. But we haven't talked about what we're doing now, either. We've just moved forward via unspoken agreement.

I pull his lips to mine, and he gives me his tongue, rolling me onto my back again and settling himself between my thighs, the cotton of his boxer briefs feeling like a sacrilege

against my sensitized skin. Reaching down, I push at the fabric but make little progress toward getting them off.

Chuckling, Ty sits up on his knees, shoving them down, his cock springing free, thick and proud. He kicks them off the rest of the way, but before he can lay himself on top of me again, I'm sitting up, reaching for him.

He hisses when I grip his cock, giving it an experimental tug, passing my thumb over the tip, smiling when I gather a bead of precum and use it to slick him up. Not much, but it makes my hand slide a little easier when I rub him again. He presses himself into my grip, his eyelids low and heavy when he looks at me, his eyes dark with lust.

Yesss. This is one of my favorite parts of sex. Inspiring these feelings in my partner. The heady rush of power at being able to make someone feel so good. Admiring and being admired. Giving and receiving pleasure. The back and forth, give and take of it all.

I've received, and now it's my turn to give.

Leaning forward, I run the tip of my tongue along the edge of his crown, sort of like he did to me.

"Christ, Liv," he gasps, and I smile before taking the crown in my mouth and giving it a good suck, taking him as far back as I can without gagging, and acting like I'm trying to swallow him whole.

He makes a wordless sound of pleasure, his hips canting forward enough that I have to pull back. When I do, he reaches for me, pulling me up against him, his dick hard and wet against my belly as he kisses me. "You have condoms, right?" he murmurs against my lips, sliding his fingers under my hair and kissing me again.

I laugh against his mouth. "Lucky for us, I do." Backing away, I open the drawer in my bedside table and pull out a strip, tearing one off and tossing it to him. "And you're supposed to be a Boy Scout."

Tearing open the condom, a grin on his face, he shrugs. “That was years ago.”

“Guess the ‘be prepared’ part didn’t stick, huh?”

He rolls on the condom and crawls closer. “I’m glad you’re prepared.” He kisses me again, dragging me back down to the bed. I go with him willingly, pushing him onto his back.

“Oh, I like this a lot,” he says when I climb on top of him.

Reaching beneath me, I line him up and take him inside me, sinking down slowly.

He hisses again, his head arching back into the pillow. “God, Liv. You feel amazing.”

I hum in pleasure, giving an experimental swivel to my hips. “You do too.” I’m not too worried about me, though. I’ve already gotten mine. It’s Ty’s turn.

Even though I’m not chasing an orgasm, riding him still feels good, and I adjust my angle to maximize my own enjoyment.

“You’re so sexy, Liv,” Ty mutters, his hands roaming my body, squeezing my hips, reaching for one of my boobs, sliding up my back and pulling me down for a kiss. “I can’t get enough of you.”

A quip about how he’ll have to soon is on the tip of my tongue, but I swallow it down, losing myself in his kiss instead. This is our first time together. Neither of us need the reminder that there’s a ticking clock hanging over us.

Christmas is only a couple of weeks away. This is all the time we have together. The point is to make the most of it, not gripe about how short it’ll be.

His hands on my hips urge me to go faster, and he rises up to meet me each time, his eyes scrunching closed as he focuses on his internal sensations.

This angle’s not doing much for me, but I enjoy watching him take his pleasure in my body, squeezing my inner muscles

to make it better for him, seeing the moment when he finds his release.

He shudders, gasping, holding me in place while he grinds into me. I keep rocking my hips as he pulses inside me, keeping his orgasm going until he collapses in a sweaty heap on the bed.

With my hands braced on his chest, I lean down and kiss him. It's languorous and slow and decadent, and I'm looking forward to getting my fill of this as often as possible before he leaves again.

And maybe it doesn't have to all be over for good at that point. It's not like he'll never come back.

We could pick up where we leave off as long as we're both single, right?

But that's a conversation for another time.

He holds onto the condom as I rise off of him, stretching out next to him and placing my arm across his body, his chest still heaving. He lifts a hand and rubs my arm, turning to smile at me. "That was amazing."

I smile back at him. "Especially for a first time."

That makes him laugh. "You had to give it a qualifier, huh?"

"I'm just saying," I protest, propping myself on my elbow. "The first time with a new person isn't always that great. We're just learning each other. It can take a while to really get into a good groove. If it's this good already, think how much better it'll get."

His eyes twinkle. "When you put it that way, I guess it doesn't sound so bad."

Rolling my eyes, I fall back onto the pillow. "Did I bruise your ego?"

He chuckles. "Maybe a little."

"Aww. Let me kiss it and make it better."

“You’re going to kiss my ego?”

I lift up again and shrug. “No. I’m going to kiss you.”

* * *

While Ty goes to the bathroom to deal with the condom and wash his hands, I get my robe from the hook on the back of the door and wrap it around myself. It’s warm and fuzzy, basically a wearable blanket, but it looks nicer.

“You’re not naked,” Ty says, when he comes back into my room.

“I am under here.”

He laughs. “Yeah, Liv. We’re all naked under our clothes.” After scanning the room for a second, he bends and picks up his underwear, putting it on. “Should I get all the way dressed and go?”

“Um. If you want to? Of course you can. But I’d be happy if you wanted to stay. You could sleep here. If you want.” I sound like a fumbling thirteen-year-old girl asking the boy she likes to the middle school dance, and I have to resist the urge to roll my eyes at myself.

Ty’s grinning. “Are you asking me to stay the night?”

We just had sex. He had his tongue in my vagina. It really shouldn’t feel *more* vulnerable to ask for what I want. And yet, somehow, it does.

Closing my eyes, I nod. “Yes.”

His fingers on my cheek cause my eyelids to flutter open. “I’d love to,” he whispers, then tips my face up for a kiss.

“It’s still early,” I murmur, “and I’m kinda hungry since we barely ate at the party. Do you want something to eat? We could find something to watch while we snack.”

He smiles. “That sounds perfect.”

He props his shoulder against the wall in the entrance to the kitchen in his customary pose, only this time, he's practically naked, wearing only his close-fitting dark blue boxer briefs.

I like it. And I keep stealing glances at him as I rummage through my kitchen for something good to eat. "How hungry are you?" I ask. "Like, do you want a snack or more of a meal?"

Stretching his arms overhead, he grins when he catches me checking him out. "I worked up a pretty good appetite. I'm good with either one, but I'm gonna need a big snack if you decide on that route."

"I can handle that." I open the fridge again, rattling off the options. We eventually decide on sandwiches, sliced apples, and some caramel dip I got the last time I had a craving.

Once our food is assembled, we carry our plates to the living room, where I once again light several candles to add to the glow of the Christmas tree lights.

"Your place is so cozy," Ty says as he settles on the loveseat.

"Thank you. That was my goal." I'm beaming from his compliment. It's always nice when the feeling I want to evoke translates to others.

"Mission accomplished." He looks around the room, taking in as many details as he can in the low light. "It's great. If the curator thing doesn't work out, you could do interior design on the side."

Dipping an apple slice in caramel sauce, I shake my head. "No, thanks. I've watched my mom with enough interior designers to know that the type of client who can afford to hire one is not the type of person I want to work with."

Ty's about to take a bite of his sandwich and has to pull it out of his mouth to laugh at my comment, hiding his face behind his wrist.

“What? It’s true. You’ve met her. You can’t tell me you don’t think she’d be a nightmare to work for. With the last one I witnessed, she changed her mind at least five times, and each time acted like it was the designer’s fault for not understanding what she wanted. The designer did *exactly* what Mom asked for each time, and each time, Mom would come in and tell her it was all wrong, that she’d never in a million years ask for *yellow* daisies. Why would anyone want *yellow* daisies? She asked for *white* daisies. And the next time she didn’t ask for daisies at all. She wanted roses. No, not red. That’s too gauche. Does she think this is a whore house? Pink roses. Obviously.”

Ty’s cracking up. “Wouldn’t the flowers be the florist’s job?”

I shrug, taking a bite of my sandwich. “You’d think,” I say after I swallow. “I guess the interior designer was coordinating with a florist. And of course, Mom didn’t expect to have to pay extra for any of the changes she demanded. Eventually the designer recorded every exchange, and when Mom insisted she’d *never* ask for something that she absolutely did, the designer played the recording back to her.” I shake my head. “I still can’t decide if that was brilliant or stupid. I guess it depends on how badly she needed the paycheck, because Mom fired her on the spot, accused her of invading her privacy, and told her she’d report her to the police for illegally recording a private conversation. Except, of course, the designer had said on the recording, ‘I’m going to record this so I have a clear record of what you’re asking for,’ and Mom saying, ‘Of course. Good idea.’”

“Wow. That’s ...” Ty shakes his head. “Wow.”

“I know, right?”

“Probably the designer was willing to take the risk of being fired if your mom was jerking her around that badly. I wouldn’t want to work for someone like that either. I’ve had a few nightmare clients who keep changing their mind about what they wanted, or not understanding that the grayscale

mockup is going to be colored, and they get both versions because sometimes, like on letterhead, you need a grayscale version of your logo and it needs to look good that way too. But no one that bad. They at least acknowledged that I did what they asked for but that they were changing their mind about what they wanted.”

“See?” I point at him. “Even that. That would drive me bonkers. I might be working to someone else’s brief as a junior curator, but as long as I fulfill the requirements, no one’s going to come along and tell me I have to change everything.” Frowning, I shrug. “Well, I suppose it’s possible. But it’s more about availability of the pieces on display changing sometimes and having to work around that. Which is more like a challenge and less like an annoying client messing you around. Plus, I’d rather work with art on a regular basis than couches and fabrics. Don’t get me wrong, I like doing it for my own space. But that doesn’t mean I’d be any good at designing a space for someone else’s personality.”

Ty nods, his Adam’s apple bobbing as he swallows. Is it silly that I find that sexy? Maybe so, but I do anyway. “I get that. It’s definitely a different skill set to help someone narrow down their design style and work within that. It’s totally valid to not want to do that. Sometimes I miss creating art based solely on my own style preferences.”

“You could, you know.”

He flashes me a grin. “So you’ve reminded me already. I need to finish the mural for Sarah first, though.”

“At least that gives you a little more creative license, doesn’t it?”

Focused on his sandwich, he shrugs, humming noncommittally as he chews. “Some. But it’s still not what I would choose to do. Don’t get me wrong, I love Christmas as much as the next person, and I’ve always enjoyed doing the window murals for the store. I didn’t realize how much I’d missed it until I started this one.” He leans close to me like he’s delivering a deep, dark confession. “But cutesy Christmas

scenes aren't really my personal jam if I'm making art just because I want to."

I bump him with my shoulder. "Get some paints. Make some art while you're here. And then let me display it for you."

He smiles. "Deal."

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Ty

Shane approaches me at the bar of The Filling Station and claps me on the shoulder, grinning. “You and Olivia, huh?” My smile’s almost involuntary, and Shane’s eyebrows raise. “That good?”

Clearing my throat, I swig some beer to cover. “Huh? I’m not sure—”

But he doesn’t let me finish my denial, shaking his head as he climbs onto the stool next to me. “Nah, man. Don’t even try it. I recognize that look. I know what it means. You’re smitten. It doesn’t make you less of a man to admit it.”

I huff out a rueful laugh. “That’s not the issue.”

“Then what is?” He holds up a finger. “Wait, wait. Don’t tell me. Let me guess.” His brows knit together, and he places his finger to his lips as he thinks. “Is it that you’re not good enough for her? Or ... no. It’s not that she’s friends with Sarah. If that were the problem, you wouldn’t have even gone there to start with. And besides, Sarah’s already given Olivia her blessing.”

I nod. “I know. Olivia told me.”

He orders himself a Christmas ale, then turns back to me. “I still can’t believe you had the balls to make out with her

here.” He grins. “When the rumors reached Sarah the next day, she was blowing up my phone, asking me if I knew anything, if you’d said anything to me, if I thought it was true or not ...” He shakes his head, thanking Sally, tonight’s bartender, and taking a sip of his beer. “Mmm. That’s good stuff. One of my favorite things about being able to drink this time of year in this town is the wide range of seasonal takes by local craft breweries. Someone should organize a pub crawl to sample all of them every December. You could probably make some decent money doing that.”

“Ooh, that’s a good idea,” Sally chimes in. “I’ll mention it to Jonah. Since it’s just us and one other bar, I’m not sure a pub crawl would really work. But a seasonal beer tasting event might.”

“Tell him to give me a free ticket as thanks for the idea,” Shane tells her.

She laughs. “Sure thing. Enjoy your beer.”

Shane turns back to me, surveying me over the rim of his glass. “I have to admit, we were all a little surprised to find out you and Olivia are seeing each other.” He raises his eyebrows and sips his beer, obviously waiting for my response.

“Is there a question in there?” I ask placidly, taking a sip of my own drink.

He grins at me. “How did that happen?”

“Oh, you know what they say. There’s a thin line between love and hate.”

His mouth drops open in surprise. “Love, huh?”

I shrug. “Lust anyway.”

He almost does a spit take, laughing with his mouth full before he can regain control of himself and swallow. “Whoooo. Alright then.” He finishes his drink, then sets the glass down, pulling out his wallet to leave enough cash to cover his drink and a tip. “Have fun. Just ...” He pauses, meeting my eyes, his face suddenly serious. “Don’t hurt her,

okay? She's been through quite a bit, actually, though you'd never know it to look at her. She's more sensitive than people expect her to be. And you're still on the rebound."

On the one hand, I can kind of see where he's coming from. But his warning about Olivia being a sensitive soul who needs special handling is so at odds with the Olivia I know who likes to bust my balls that I have to hold back a laugh. Shane's a good guy, and I don't want him getting the wrong idea—namely that I'm a callous asshole who doesn't care about Olivia's feelings.

I do. Obviously. I'm not using her any more than she's using me. We're mutually using each other. Kind of. Or not really. We're just enjoying spending time together.

I drain my glass and set it on the bar, setting my credit card next to it. "I appreciate the warning, Shane. I know you're doing it out of a place of genuine concern, but I don't think you need to worry that much about Olivia. She's a grown up. She knows what she's doing."

He studies me for a moment longer. "Do you?"

* * *

Shane's warning rattles around in my head the whole way to the Christmas Emporium, where I'm headed to finish the mural tonight. With Christmas only ten days away, Sarah's been bugging me for the last few days to finish it. "Next year ask me at Thanksgiving," I told her when she called this afternoon to hassle me some more.

I was being truthful when I told Olivia I enjoy doing the mural. But I also don't like that working on the mural means I can't meet Olivia at her office tonight and take her up to her apartment like we've done the last few days. It's become our routine, and knowing that it's going to be over in the not too distant future, I want to make the most of the time we have.

So I'm dragging my feet on the walk from The Filling Station to the Christmas Emporium. Plus, I'm early. I can't get started until she's finished with her last customer, and this close to Christmas, she doesn't hurry people out of the store just because it's closing time.

Sarah prides the store on its amazing customer service. She offers only the best, and expects her employees to do the same. And it's not out of a place of fear or threat, but because she genuinely cares about her customers and wants them to be happy. She told me that last year, she told Sophie she was an elf on a special mission from Santa, and that's why she gets to live here year-round and run the Christmas Emporium. And if she weren't my sister, I'd be tempted to believe it too.

But if I get the mural done quickly—without skimping on quality of course—I can get to Olivia that much sooner.

That thought has me picking up the pace, and when I get to the Christmas Emporium, it's just as the last customers are leaving.

"Perfect timing," Sarah says when I get in, crossing the store to give me a hug. "I'll lock up and let you get to work. Do you need anything before I go?"

"Nope. I think I'm good."

"You'll finish tonight, right?" She points at me, giving me her best glare, but it only makes me laugh.

"Sorry, Monkey. You can't intimidate me that way, you know."

She chuckles. "It's worth a try. But seriously. It's almost Christmas. The kids want to see the snowmen and elves all finished, not just half done. Earlier today, a six-year-old told me that it was nice I tried to do a painting, but it wasn't very good."

"Oof. Ouch. Tough crowd."

Laughing, she heads to the back room to grab her coat and purse. "Little kids have no filter and give zero fucks. They'll

tell you all kinds of things that have their parents wanting to melt with embarrassment.”

“Something to look forward to, huh? Does Sophie do that to you yet?”

She grins and shakes her head. “Nothing that I find embarrassing. Yet, anyway. She’s embarrassed Shane in front of Mom and Dad a few times, though. Maybe she’s said things about me, too, but Mom just hasn’t relayed them to me.” She shrugs and zips her coat. “But you still haven’t answered whether you’re finishing tonight or not.”

Shooing her toward the door, I nod. “I will. Or at least, that’s the plan. But you gotta lock up and leave first, since the door you go out of is the one I’m finishing first. Tomorrow the kids will all be happy about the painting, I promise.”

She points at me, then pulls her keys out of her purse. “I’m holding you to that.” She locks one door, then the other, then leaves with a wave and a, “Good luck!” that floats over her shoulder and through the door before it closes.

It’s quiet now. Almost unbearably so. I had my fill of quiet alone time while working in my room all day, which is why I ended up at The Filling Station before coming here. I knew I’d have hours more with only my thoughts for company while I finish the mural, and I needed to be around people for at least a little while.

I get out my painting supplies from the spot Sarah created for me in the back and get to work. The sooner I’m done, the sooner I can see Olivia. Being alone with her is one of my favorite things.

I’m absorbed in painting—the snowmen are done, and I’m almost finished with Santa’s workshop and just have the elves left to shade in—when a knock on the door startles me into smearing red across half of the Santa’s Workshop sign.

But when I see Olivia’s face peering into the shop above the snowman on the door, I can’t even be upset that I’ll have to wipe off the last twenty minutes’ worth of work and redo it.

Smiling at the sight of her cute little pink nose pressed to the glass, I twist the knob that lets me out when the door's locked, and push the door open to let her in. "Hey! I didn't expect to see you until after I was finished."

Her smile matches mine, and she steps past me, holding up a paper bag. "I was bored, and I thought you might like a dinner break. I got us meatball subs from Lumberjacks."

"Oh my god, you're the best." I follow her to the front counter and set down my paint, wrapping an arm around her and pulling her in for a kiss. My stomach rumbling causes us to break apart laughing.

"I see I was right on time," she says.

I wipe up my smeared paint while she pulls out the sandwiches, unwraps them, and sets them on paper plates that must've been included in the bag. She casts a glance around, then with a shrug, sits on the floor, her back propped against the counter.

"I'm not sure what Sarah would think about us having a picnic in her store," I say as I park myself on the floor next to her.

"Who cares?" she says around a mouthful of meatball sub. She swallows. "She's getting a free mural. She can deal with you taking a dinner break. You're obviously starving."

She's right, though I hadn't realized how hungry I was until she showed up with food. "I've seriously never been more attracted to you than I am right now."

She laughs, covering her mouth with her hand, her eyes scrunched closed, and she's seriously the cutest thing I've ever seen. I can't believe I've never noticed how adorable and fun she is before. How far was my head up my own ass to have missed this gorgeous, thoughtful woman right under my nose all this time?

Shane's warning echoes through my head, though. Is this just a rebound?

It doesn't feel like one, and I've had a rebound relationship once or twice before. Those were always hot and heavy and entirely focused on sex.

And while yes, this might seem that way at first glance, it's not just about sex with Olivia. I like spending time with her. I feel good in her presence. And not like she's fawning over me or going out of her way to boost my ego, but like something about her just aligns so well with me that it feels like we're in sync in a way. And not just in the bedroom, though she's right that it's only gotten better since the first time too. Even like this, when we're just hanging out. Being with her just feels ... good. In a way I didn't realize I was missing before now.

I can already tell I'm going to be sad when my time here comes to an end.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Olivia

Ty's comment about him being really attracted to me right now warms me even as it makes me laugh.

"They always say the way to a man's heart is through his stomach," I quip. "I guess in your case, we know it's true."

He chuckles, grinning as he takes another bite of his sandwich. He's eaten half of it already. Dude's ravenous, which makes me extra glad I decided to surprise him with food.

I'd gone back and forth in my head several times, even as I was picking up the order I called in on impulse. What if he didn't want me interrupting him?

But that fear was laid to rest when he saw me, and even though I made him mess up, he greeted me with a huge smile, genuinely happy to see me. Any lingering doubts that I made the wrong choice in coming were allayed by his statement.

He wolfs down the rest of his sandwich, takes a swig of the bottle of water I brought along, brushes off his hands, and stands. "Take your time. I'm going to get back to work, but I'd love it if you'd stick around until I'm done."

"Really?" I ask around a mouthful of meatball sandwich. Super attractive, I'm sure.

His laughter is all the reassurance I need, though. “Definitely. I was trying to hurry up and finish so I could see you tonight. Having you here is even better.”

I finish my sandwich at a more leisurely pace, enjoying watching him work while I eat. But eventually I start getting antsy, and it looks like he’s going to be here for a while longer.

“Um. Would you mind if I went home real quick to grab my laptop? I’ll come back and hang out still. But that way I can get some work done too.”

He turns to me, surprised. “Of course. You don’t even have to stay if you have things you need to do.”

“No,” I protest, even as I put on my coat. “I want to stay. I just want to accomplish something too.”

He grins. “Sounds good. But don’t you get a Christmas break?”

“Of course. I turned in my final papers for my courses last week. But there are a couple of jobs I’m applying for, so I need to tailor my resume for each one and write a good cover letter.” I sigh. “I hate writing those. I always feel like it’s kind of a waste of time. Does anyone even read them?” Shrugging, I settle my bag on my shoulder. “But if it helps my chances, it seems worth putting in the effort, right?”

“Definitely. Just knock when you’re back and I’ll let you in.”

“Hopefully I don’t mess you up this time.”

He laughs. “Since I’ll be expecting you, I doubt it’ll be a problem.”

Since I drove, it doesn’t take me long to get to my house and back again. I set myself up at the counter, pulling the stool out of the back room to sit on while I work, enjoying my pauses to watch Ty paint.

His focus and attention to detail is fascinating. And it’s really cool to watch the figures go from flat, single colors, to shaded, three dimensional images. He’s acquired more streaks

of paint on his shirt and jeans, and a glob of green dripped on his shoe at one point. But considering the fact that they're old and beat up with faded paint streaks on them already, I'm guessing these were his painting shoes from high school. He probably dug them out of his closet, since his parents haven't changed anything about either his or Sarah's rooms.

I asked them about it once, surprised. Because my parents converted my room into a workout room pretty much the week I left for college. When I lived with them again after I graduated, I stayed in the guest room until they got the apartment fixed up for me and I moved there.

"Oh, it's just in case," Mara told me. "If they ever need to come back home, I want them to feel like they can. I'm sure someday we'll make them take whatever stuff they've left behind, or get rid of it if they don't want it. But this is still their home too, as far as I'm concerned."

I can't even imagine what that must be like. I have to admit, I've always been a little jealous of Sarah having siblings and Jake and Mara as parents. They all care for each other so much. Which is why I've always spent as much time with them as possible.

Except Ty. Until now.

My heart squeezes as I watch him, an old ache welling up. The desire for love and belonging that I never got as a child.

Ty makes me feel accepted. Wanted. Cared for in a way I haven't felt in a while. That was the missing element I was searching for with all my online dating.

I had it—or thought I did—with Derek, my college boyfriend. I thought we were in love and had a future together. But the last semester of college, while I was caught up trying to impress the gallery where I was interning to secure a permanent paid spot, he was applying to law schools on the other side of the country.

Once he got his acceptance letter to Florida State—his top choice—he told me we should break up. We were living

together at the time, and I was completely blindsided. He covered his rent for the rest of the semester and moved in with a friend.

That threw me into a tailspin that I'm really just now recovering from. Because I couldn't ever manage to pull up and regain control. Nope. I crashed and burned.

My boyfriend dumped me. My dream job went to someone else. And I was officially lost and directionless.

So I came back home. Because what else was I to do?

But instead of the warm welcome I would've received as a Daniels kid, with my room intact and waiting for me if I ever needed it and plenty of love and support to get me back on my feet, I became a guest in my parents' house. An unwanted one at that. And with a sigh, my dad told me I'd take over the position of office manager. He'd been looking for someone anyway, so the timing worked out. And they'd be fixing up the apartment over his office for me.

Granted, all of that's definitely better than being homeless. But it was equally clear that I was a problem to fix, not a daughter to be welcomed and loved and supported.

Even now, *I'm* the one who has to do the supporting. That's literally my job, after all—support staff to the dentist.

So I threw myself into online dating, hoping I could find someone to rescue me from this life I didn't choose and didn't want, using my weekly get-togethers with Sarah to keep me limping along.

But I never could find someone to rescue me. And that's when I came to the conclusion that I needed to rescue myself.

So I deleted all my dating profiles and applied to online master's programs.

While I'd ostensibly given up on dating, this thing with Ty doesn't feel like any of my other relationships. Not even the one with Derek. Because the truth is, I expected Derek to

rescue me. To take care of me in the way I'd been longing for my whole life.

Now, I'm taking care of myself and not expecting anyone else to do it for me. Which means when Ty offers encouragement and support, it feels ... good. Not like it's a paltry offering going into a bottomless pit of need. But like a normal, healthy response from someone who's happily in pursuit of their own goals.

Yeah, Ty's breakup knocked him a little off kilter. I think that's why he came back here rather than finding a new place to live in Vancouver right away. He wanted a sort of reset.

But he was already course-correcting on his own. He doesn't need rescuing, either.

Which is why this works, I think. We're not rescuing each other. We're supporting.

Yay growth.

He turns to find me staring at him, my laptop closed, my chin propped on my hand. His eyebrows lift. "What are you staring at?"

"You," I answer simply, dropping my hand and sitting up straight. "I enjoy watching you paint."

A small smile tugs at the corners of his mouth. "Oh yeah? Why's that?"

"Well, you're pretty cute, for one thing." I hop off the stool and come around the counter. "Which makes it fun to watch you do anything." He grins at the compliment, though I know he wasn't fishing for one. "And it's always enjoyable to watch someone work who's good at what they're doing and clearly enjoys it." I step in front of him and take his paint cup and brush out of his hands, setting them carefully off to the side where we won't accidentally kick them or step on them. Running my hands up his torso to make sure the paint streaks are dry, I wrap my arms behind his neck. "Promise me you'll paint something else before you leave."

His hands bracket my hips, slipping under my sweater, cool against my bare skin. He dips his head and kisses me. “I will. I’ll paint something just for you.”

Pulling back, I shake my head. “No. Paint it for you.”

He gives me a long, solemn look, then nods once. “Okay. I’ll paint something for me. But I’ll show it to you. And if you still want to display it in your dad’s office, you can.”

“Perfect.” I kiss him again, then step away, walking slowly along the windows to admire his work. “All done?”

“Yup. I just need to clean everything up and put the paints away and we can go.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Ty

Olivia seems more pensive tonight. Not sad, exactly. Her smile's as quick as ever when we're talking, but she's thinking about a lot of things.

"Everything alright?" I ask as we walk to her car hand in hand. My truck's still at The Filling Station, but I can get it in the morning.

She gives me a smile and nods. "Yup. I finished what I wanted to get done tonight, so that was good."

"Okay, just checking. You seem quiet tonight."

She shrugs. "I guess I just don't have much to say right now. Is there something you want to talk about?"

I wait until we're both in the car to answer. "I'd love to talk about our plans for the evening. We've already had dinner, so we don't need to worry about that. Should we go straight to your bedroom?"

Her eyes roam my face, and she reaches up to run her thumb on my cheek, squinting at me. "I think you might need a shower first."

"Even better. You can help wash me and make sure I get all the paint off."

She laughs. “It’ll be a tight squeeze, but I’ll make the sacrifice for you. And I’ll make sure to inspect every inch of you afterward just to be sure you’re nice and clean.”

I lean onto the center console, dropping my hand on her thigh as she drives the few blocks to her apartment. “Will you be inspecting me with your tongue?”

She hums, flashing me a grin. “I’m sure that can be arranged.”

My blood rushes south at the thought of her mouth all over me, and I shift in my seat to make room for my hardening dick. Her smile turns knowing when I tug on my jeans to try to get more comfortable.

“Don’t worry,” she says. “We’ll be home soon, and we can get you out of those dirty clothes.”

Once she parks, we both hustle out of the car and up the stairs, but she holds up her hand when we get inside. “Hold on, hold on.”

I let out a growl deep in my throat, my patience worn as thin as the sheer fabric of the lacy panties she favors. And I need to see what color she has on today or I might combust from sexual frustration.

“Whoa there, tiger. I just want to hang up my coat, and I don’t want you to rip my clothes off. Number one, I intend to undress you tonight, and number two, I like these clothes, and I don’t want you to pop the seams like you did last night.”

I let out a rueful chuckle. “I really am sorry about that. I can pay to have them fixed if you need to send them to a tailor. Or replace them if that’s not an option.”

She waves away my apology and hangs up her coat, nodding for me to do the same. “It’s fine. I can salvage them. But mending things isn’t my favorite activity, so I’d appreciate not adding to the pile.” She steps under my arm as I hang up my coat, slipping between me and the coat rack and running her cold fingers up under my shirt. “It was pretty fun seeing you come a little unhinged that way, though. So even if I don’t

want to make a regular practice of you damaging my clothes, I have no regrets.”

Lifting my arms and bending at the waist so she can shuck my shirt off, I chuckle. “Good,” I answer once my head and arms are free again. “Me either.”

She grabs me by the waistband and tows me through the living room and to the bathroom next to her bedroom. It’s small, with a pedestal sink and an over-the-toilet cabinet for storage. But it has a full tub and shower combo. It might be a tight squeeze, but we’ll fit. The lack of space just gives us more of an excuse to rub up against each other. Not that we really need one.

With a yank, she pops the button free and unzips me slowly, her fingers brushing my cock as she drags the zipper down. She reaches inside my open fly, dragging her fingernails over my cotton-covered shaft and making me hiss. “Jesus, Liv.”

Her smile is all vixen as she releases me briefly to stick her hand inside my underwear and stroke me skin on skin.

My eyes practically roll back in my head at the sweet relief of her touch, my knees buckling enough that I grab the edge of the sink to hold me steady.

She lets out a low, sexy chuckle. “Pants off.”

“I thought you were going to undress me,” I grumble as I shove my pants down my thighs and step out of them.

“It’s easier for you to do that part. Especially in here. And it lets me turn on the shower so it can warm up.” The hiss of the water hitting the bathtub fills the room, and I toss my jeans and underwear in the hall, pulling the door closed to trap the steam and get us warmer.

“You turn,” I murmur, reaching for her.

She holds up a finger and wags it back and forth in time with her, “Ah ah ah. Remember? I’m doing it tonight.”

Stepping back, I cross my arms and lean against the door, content to watch the show. She holds my eyes as she slowly drags her deep turquoise sweater up and over her head, her hair bouncing around her shoulders when it pulls free. Her bra today has pink satin cups edged in black lace, a dainty bow at the center. My fingers itch to touch her, but I restrain myself.

Next she undoes her dark brown pants, pushing them off her hips and letting them drop in a pool at her feet. She steps out of them, turning to give me her back as she bends to pick them up, presenting me with her gorgeous ass cheeks bisected by the matching pink satin and black lace thong.

“Jesus,” I repeat, dropping my arms and reaching for my cock. If I can’t touch her, I can at least touch myself while I watch her.

Her smile is sultry when she sees what I’m doing. After folding the pants and depositing them on top of the sweater on one of the shelves over the toilet, she reaches behind her and unhooks her bra, holding the cups in place as she pulls her arms out of the straps before finally letting it fall away. She places her bra on her pile of clothes, then slides her hands down her body before hooking her thumbs in the waistband of her panties and slowly, slowly dragging them down her legs.

“You’re killing me here, Liv,” I mutter, pushing away from the door when she crooks her finger at me.

“You seem to be holding up okay.” She pulls the shower curtain open enough to slip inside, holding out a hand for me. I take her hand and follow her in. Her hair immediately gets wet, as my presence in here forces her completely under the spray.

Laughing, she wipes the water out of her eyes, smearing her makeup in the process. “Maybe I miscalculated how much room there really was in the shower.”

I raise my hand to wipe some of the mascara off her cheek, laughing along with her. “I don’t mind being crowded against you.”

“Good.” She steps closer to me, letting the water hit her back more than her head, twines her arms around my neck, and kisses me. “I’m going to wash my makeup off, though. Then we can trade places and I’ll wash you, okay?”

“I can wash myself, though. I don’t mind.”

She grins. “I know. But where’s the fun in that?”

She nudges me to the side so she can reach her face wash. Once she’s scrubbed off her makeup and rinsed her face, she tips her head back under the water, wetting her hair fully and slicking it back. She looks like some kind of mythical water fairy, wet and glowing in the light filtered through the sea green shower curtain. She smiles at me. “Your turn.”

Holding onto each other, we shimmy around so I’m under the spray, giggling the whole time. Then she reaches for her body wash, the scent of toasted coconut and vanilla filling the air. “Turn around,” she orders softly. And even though some part of me wants to resist, I do as she asks, presenting her with my back.

Her slim hands, slick with soap, smooth over my shoulders, rubbing circles on my back, nudging my arms up so she can even wash my armpits.

It’s strangely intimate and almost difficult to take. No one’s washed me in as long as I can remember. Not since I was old enough to do it myself. Not like this, anyway.

Yes, I’ve taken showers with girlfriends before. But usually they wanted me to be the one doing the washing. And when they’d return the favor, they’d make a few cursory swipes at my torso, but it was just an excuse to soap up my dick and jack me in the shower as foreplay, getting me nice and clean before they’d blow me.

Olivia takes her time, making sure I’m actually clean, and not just my dick and balls. After she’s done with my back, ass, and the backs of my legs, she has me turn to face her, her attention totally focused on washing my chest and arms. She finds streaks of paint on my hands and forearms and massages

the soap into each one until it fades and disappears down the drain.

Kneeling, she bypasses my dick—which is standing at full attention—in favor of my legs. Every time she gets to the tops of my thighs, I tense, holding my breath, hoping she'll finally touch my aching cock.

But she doesn't.

It's not until she looks up at me, a wicked grin curling her lips, that I know she knows what she's doing to me.

Finally—*finally*—she slides her hand up my inner thigh, cupping my balls in her soapy palm, making sure to wash them thoroughly. Using both hands, she washes the tops of my thighs, my lower torso, and my dick, stroking me with the soap, my dick right next to her face.

Inches away from her lips.

Torture. Pure torture. But the best kind.

Her hand still encircling my dick, she rises to her feet, backing me farther under the spray. "Gotta get you rinsed off now," she says, releasing my dick and running her hands over my body again.

I'm not sure if she's done or not, but I am. Cradling her face in my hands, I bend my head and kiss her, needing more than the tease of her hands on me not doing what I want them to. "I'm clean," I growl against her mouth.

Her lips curve up in a smile beneath mine, ruining the kiss.

I give her smile one more quick peck, then reach behind me to turn off the water. Olivia's already reaching for a towel, stepping out and wrapping it around herself before handing one to me, then grabbing another to blot her hair.

I dry myself off quickly, reaching for her as I step out. "Don't think I'm letting you get away that easily." She lets out a surprised yelp when I grab her towel and give it a sharp yank, pulling it off her.

“I’m still wet!” she protests.

“Not as wet as you’re going to be.” Backing her against the door, I lick stray droplets of water off her neck, enjoying the way she shivers at the sensation. I grab her leg and hitch it over my hip, opening her for me to explore. “You had your fun,” I say into her skin. “Now it’s my turn.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Olivia

I slump against the door under the onslaught of Ty's attention, the towel I used on my hair dropping from my fingers. He's nearly overwhelming. His mouth and hands seem like they're everywhere. Like he has more than the normal human amount of those things, because he's never still. Kissing, nipping, licking anywhere he can reach. Gripping, caressing, rubbing, one hand between my spread thighs, the other on my back, my ass, the back of my leg, holding me open for him. He fucks me with first one finger, then two, grinding his palm against my clit, and thank god I'm backed against the door, because otherwise I wouldn't be able to stay upright.

With his fingers still inside me, he straightens, giving me a lingering kiss and then resting his forehead against mine, his other hand planted on the door like he needs support too. Given his heavy breathing, he probably does.

"We need to get to your bed," he pants. "And a condom. Now."

I squirm against him, grinding on his hand. "I can't go anywhere when you're doing that to me."

With a wicked grin, he slowly withdraws his fingers, bringing them to his mouth and sucking them off in the most filthy, lascivious fashion. I can't hold back my gasp at the look

on his face as he cleans my juices off his fingers with his tongue. “Jesus,” I whisper, echoing his favorite expression of wonder.

Wrapping his arm around my back, he pulls me away from the door, reaching for the knob with his other hand. I want nothing more than to twine myself around him and climb him like a tree, but I think that would just slow us down at this point.

And while I slowed us down very deliberately earlier, wanting to draw this out and extend the moment for as long as possible, we’ve both reached the end of our patience.

Instead, I grab his hand and lead the way to the bedroom, pulling out a condom before climbing onto the bed. He follows me, ignoring the condom for now and crawling over me, his fingers finding their way inside me again as he kisses me, stretching himself out half on top of me, one of his legs between mine, using it to leverage his hand better.

“I want to watch you come,” he breathes when he breaks away from our kiss. “Do you think you can come on my fingers?” He gives a hard push with his leg, curling his fingers and hitting my G-spot at the same time, making me gasp. “Yeah.” His smile is almost smug. “I think you can. You’re getting close, aren’t you?”

My hands claw at the blanket, scrabbling for purchase as he works my body. I don’t even need to answer. He can tell.

Dipping his head, he sucks a nipple into his mouth, worrying it gently with his teeth and tongue. I arch into it, my whole body undulating, striving for enough stimulation to propel me toward my orgasm.

He keeps going, working me, switching to the other nipple, changing from finger fucking with the help of his leg to rubbing my clit with his fingers. Quick, light circles, and oh, god. “Don’t stop,” I whisper when he starts to adjust.

“I won’t. Not until you tell me to.” If anything, he seems to pick up speed. My hips lift, my whole body going tight, the

pleasure building, building, and then it explodes outward in a wave of tension and release.

He slows, bringing me through the orgasm and down the other side, keeping it going until I try to scoot away, closing my legs and reaching for his wrist. “Stop. Enough,” I pant.

With a sexy grin on his face, he leans over and kisses me again.

This is one of my favorite parts—after my orgasm, he always kisses me, caresses me, holds me until I’m ready for more. There’s no rush, no sense of disgruntlement that he can’t just slap on a condom and go.

I don’t want to wait long this time, though. I want to feel him inside me. Rolling him onto his back, I reach for the condom and rip it open. He plucks it from the package and covers himself, looking up at me and giving himself a few strokes.

Sitting up, he kisses me, maneuvering us so I’m on my back again, his legs nudging mine apart to make room for him. He rubs himself up and down my slit with a soft groan of pleasure. “God, Liv. You always feel so good.” Then he lines himself up and sinks inside.

I wrap my legs around his hips, lifting my chin to kiss him as he braces himself over me on his forearms. “This is my favorite part,” he says between kisses. “When I first slide inside you.” He pulls back and drives forward again. “Well,” he hedges. “One of them.” He gives me a cheeky grin that makes me laugh, but laughter falls away as he reaches down, gripping my ass and tilting my hips up so he hits me in just the right spot.

“Oh, god,” I moan, my eyes closing so I can focus on the delicious sensation of him making love to me.

Thinking in those terms is dangerous, I know that, but I don’t care. That’s what this is. I can’t lie to myself and call it anything else, even if I know better than to give those feelings voice.

It's too soon, even if we have known each other basically our whole lives. We haven't really gotten to know each other as adults before now.

And he's leaving.

Regardless of anything else, our paths are going in different directions. And I know from painful experience that love isn't enough to overcome divergent life plans.

Opening my eyes, I focus on Ty's face—the way those dark brows come together when he focuses, and right now he's focusing on me. Us.

He dips his head, kissing me, and I relish the contact, using it to anchor me more firmly in the present rather than spinning out with future projections and sad memories pulling me in opposing directions.

The kiss doesn't last long, though. He's moving away, sitting back on his knees and folding my legs back, which feels—*unf*—amazing. Resting his hand on my belly, he slides it down until his thumb reaches my clit, rubbing in slow circles as he moves inside me.

“Oh fuck,” I mutter, my arousal ratcheting up several notches.

He gives me a smug grin, his thumb moving faster. “You gonna come for me again?”

I groan, moving against him, needing more, and he gives it to me. “Maybe,” I gasp.

“Yeah, Liv. I just wanna make you feel good.”

“You are. Fuck, yes. Don't stop.”

That's all the encouragement he needs. Between his thumb working my clit and whatever he's doing with his hips that keeps him hitting my G-spot, another orgasm is barreling down on me like a freight train.

When it hits, its intensity shocks me, curling me up as pleasure explodes out of me. Ty doesn't stop, though he does

take his thumb off my clit, holding onto my legs and riding me through my orgasm and into his own, his dick pulsing inside me.

“Oh my god,” I mutter when he collapses next to me.

“Mmhmm,” is all he says, dragging my body closer to his and kissing my shoulder.

We lay there, sweaty and sated, neither of us willing to move, no other words needed. Eventually, Ty gets up to deal with the condom and wash up. I find my way under the blankets, still unwilling to get out of bed.

He returns to my room with a soft chuckle, climbing back in with me and getting under the covers, gathering me against him, my back to his front. “I’ve been looking forward to this all day.”

I let out a contented hum. “Me too.”

“Thank you for bringing me dinner.”

Spinning around, I give him a kiss, caressing the scruff on his face. “My pleasure.” The look he gives me is so full of affection that I’m almost tempted to say something else. Something to reflect my growing feelings for him.

But no. That’s not smart.

Instead, I kiss him again and snuggle into his arms, content to let this be exactly what it is. And nothing more.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Ty

“Do you have anything going on this weekend?”

Olivia looks up from the dishes she’s putting away. We finally managed to pull ourselves out of her bed when my stomach started growling again. We found a snack, and now she’s cleaning up, dressed in her favorite silky pjs and half robe. I have to say, they’re some of my favorites too.

She got me a pair of achingly soft blue plaid lounge pants after the third time I stayed the night, saying that I might as well be comfortable while I’m here, and I’m wearing those now.

When she gave them to me, casually, like it’s no big deal, it stopped me in my tracks for a second, the contrast between my feelings about her buying me clothes versus how I felt when Anna bought me clothes so sharp it could cut off a limb. These lounge pants make me feel cared for, like my comfort matters. With Anna, her clothing purchases for me always came with a sort of underhanded criticism.

“Um,” her face scrunches up adorably as she thinks of the answer to my question. “Hanging with you?” She shrugs and gives me a grin before putting the bowl in her hand in the cabinet. “What did you have in mind?”

“I like that I’ve made it onto your schedule already. We’re all taking Sophie sledding on Saturday afternoon. Do you want to join us?”

Her surprise is evident on her face, but she covers it by putting away a few more dishes as she answers. “Who’s we?”

“My siblings plus Shane, of course.” I pull my brows together. “I thought I mentioned that we were planning something special for her. Didn’t I?”

“You did. But it was an excuse for my mom at the Christmas party last weekend. I didn’t know anything more about it.”

“Oh, right. Sorry.” I waggle my eyebrows suggestively. “I guess I’ve been distracted while I’m with you.”

She laughs. “Sure. I’d love to come along, as long as you think no one else will mind.”

“Why would they? You’ve been to most of our family events growing up anyway. I’m not sure why this would be different.”

Her mouth opens, but then she closes it and shrugs again. “I guess that’s a good point.”

“Awesome. Just make sure to wear your snow pants. We’re planning all the snow activities—sledding, snowball fights, making snow angels. Whatever Sophie wants to do.”

She grins. “Of course. I’m sure she’ll have a blast.”

* * *

I can’t help grinning at Olivia in her snow gear. Some part of me hoped she’d show up looking like an abominable snowman, but no. Not Olivia. Even in a parka and snow pants, she looks fashionable and put together, her white coat hugging her curves and her lavender snow pants warm, but not ridiculously oversized like Sarah’s.

“That’s not even fair,” mutters my sister Nora next to me, watching Olivia make her way to where we’re standing at the base of the sledding hill. “How does she look good even in snow pants? Did she sell her soul to the devil for that level of fashion sense?”

I can’t help chuckling and pulling my youngest sister into a headlock. Sarah won’t let me anymore, so I’ve gotta get it in where I can. And with Nora eighteen and in college now, my remaining opportunities to pick on my younger siblings like this are extremely limited.

“Hey!” she screeches, pummeling my thighs, though it’s muffled greatly by her thick winter gloves and my snow pants. Then she goes limp, and I’m smart enough not to buy that, but then I feel my jacket lift up in the back. I let her go immediately and try to hop away, but she’s got ahold of me and manages to untuck my thermal shirt and stuff a handful of snow up my back.

“Dammit, Nora!” I shout, reaching behind me and trying to get all the snow out of my shirt.

Sarah’s cackling, standing next to Nora, who’s fixing her hat, a victorious grin on her face. “Aww,” Sarah says, “did you get some snow on your back, Ty? Is it cold?”

I give her a glare, but that just makes both my sisters laugh more, then give each other a high five and turn away, back to where Shane and Sophie stand with Dylan, who’s also laughing at my expense.

“Don’t even think about it,” he calls when he catches me looking at him. “You’ll get worse than a handful of snow up your back if you do that to me.”

Olivia’s laughter reaches me, and I turn to find her standing behind me, her arms crossed. “Not as easy to pick on everyone anymore, is it?” she asks, one dark eyebrow arched.

“It’s not fair,” I faux-protest. “I’m the oldest. I’m supposed to be able to pick on them.”

“Aww.” She pokes out her lower lip in mock sympathy. “Poor Ty. Everyone’s too big to get picked on anymore. Even his youngest sister.” Leaning in close, she lowers her voice to a stage whisper. “I know Sophie will technically be your sister-in-law, but I wouldn’t recommend doing that to her. Shane’ll probably beat you up.”

Chuckling, I wrap an arm around her and pull her close, dropping a kiss on her smiling lips. “You’re probably right. And I wouldn’t do that to her anyway. She does like horsing around, though.”

Sophie and I have fun together when she’s over. I take breaks from work and play board games with her, we go out and have snowball fights, and she likes it when I pick her up and toss her in a snowbank, giggling and squealing the whole time.

With my arm around Olivia, we join the others. “Alright, sledding first?” I ask.

“Yes! Yes!” Sophie answers, jumping up and down, reaching up to adjust her hood when it falls over her eyes. “Let’s go!”

Turning, she charges up the hill, leaving the rest of us to follow and carry the sleds. We start on the small hill, waiting behind other little kids sledding with their parents or on their own, their parents waiting at the bottom. Shane sits in one of the sleds and keeps himself anchored while Sophie clambers in front of him.

I step forward and give them a shove when he lifts his hands and they don’t move. Their laughter carries up the hill to us as they careen down the sledding path, coming to a stop when their momentum runs out on the flat ground at the bottom.

“Again! Again!” Sophie shouts loud enough for us to hear.

“You guys go ahead,” Sarah says, gesturing our youngest siblings forward. “I’m going to wait for them to get back up here.”

We all take turns going down the hill, moving up to the bigger hill at Sophie's insistence after a few times down the smaller one. She takes turns riding with each of us, her excitement and happiness contagious.

One of my favorite moments is when she insists on sledding down with Olivia. Olivia looks at me, surprise on her face. Obviously she didn't expect to be included in that way, having gone down multiple times by herself. She's having fun, joking around with everyone and enjoying herself, but since she's not actually a family member—though, honestly, she might as well be—she won't be one of Sophie's in-laws.

“Come on!” Sophie insists, grabbing Olivia's hand and tugging her and her sled to the starting point. “Hold the sled while I get in.”

Throwing an amused look in my direction, Olivia does as Sophie asks, bending to hold the sled, then climbing in behind her. I step forward to send them down, grinning as their shouts and squeals get carried back by the wind.

At the bottom, instead of coming to a gentle stop, they veer to the side into the powder. The edge of the sled catches, and they come to a sudden stop that catapults them both into the snow.

Holding my breath, I take an involuntary step forward to make sure they're okay, and Shane steps up right next to me.

Olivia flounders a bit before rising to her feet like an ungainly newborn fawn, then bends to help Sophie up, both of them laughing.

Shane's grinning as he watches them. “Things are going well for you two, I take it.”

I hum noncommittally, because things simply are what they are between us. They're good, yes, but we both know there's an end date approaching soon, though my lungs try to freeze up at the thought of leaving.

I don't want to go.

The thought hits me like a ton of bricks.

I don't want to go back to Vancouver if it means no longer getting to do things like this with Olivia.

Chuckling, Shane punches me lightly on the shoulder. "Deny it all you want, dude. I have eyes, though. I thought we talked about this. You're allowed to enjoy yourself." He waits for me to look at him. "You're allowed to have a relationship that makes you happy."

With that, he moves to Sarah's side and gives her a kiss, as though proving his own point. Shaking my head, I refocus on Olivia's progress with Sophie to the top of the hill, dragging the sled behind them by its attached rope.

I'd planned on returning to Vancouver after New Year's, but there's no specific reason I need to. My stuff's in storage already, and I'm perfectly capable of continuing that arrangement. Staying longer would allow me to save even more, since I'm not paying rent right now. Maybe I could buy something.

Maybe you could buy something with Olivia ... whispers an insane voice in the back of my mind.

I have to stifle a snort at my own train of thought. We're nowhere near that being on the table.

But would she want me to stay for longer too?

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Olivia

Watching Ty play with Sophie is adorable.

We've finished sledding and have progressed to a snowball fight, and it's basically everyone taking turns helping Sophie face off against Ty. Right now, Sarah's supposed to be helping her, but she's too busy laughing hysterically as Sophie chases Ty around with handfuls of snow barely formed into any kind of ball that she chucks at him. Anytime she gets him, he gives her a dramatic death scene.

He makes more fully formed snowballs, but only tosses them at her softly from close range, aiming for her torso or legs to make sure he doesn't accidentally hit her in the face. The kid's already missing two teeth, after all. She doesn't need her brother-in-law/uncle-to-be knocking out any more. He has to get within a couple feet of her to hit her since he's throwing so softly, so she always gets him too, which has him clutching wherever he's been hit and dramatically falling down in the snow.

"Sarah!" Sophie shouts. "You're supposed to be helping!"

Sarah gestures in my direction. "Get Olivia to help!"

"Livia! Get Ty! Distract him with kisses like Sarah does to Shane sometimes! Then I can bury him with the snow." Her

eyes sparkle under the faux fur lining of her pink hood, her cheeks and the tip of her nose pink with the cold and exertion. We've been out for hours already, but this kid shows no signs of wearing out.

"Ew!" Nora makes a face at Sophie's plan, and Ty laughs, his eyes sparkling with mischief as I step closer to the fray.

He's half crouching, ready to take off in any direction, smiling and breathing hard. "You think you can catch me?" he asks, his voice almost dangerous sounding, filled with more meaning.

"Pretty sure I've done it already," I murmur.

Sarah makes a T with her hands. "Alright. Enough of that kind of talk. There are impressionable ears here."

Sophie glances between us and Sarah, clearly confused about what's got Sarah in a twist. Ty just grins even wider.

I fake left, but he's not fooled, standing still and waiting for me to make a real move.

"Get him, 'Livia!" Sophie shouts.

I charge, laughing and expecting to have to chase him, but he only backs up a couple of steps before reversing course and coming straight at me.

Surprised, I whoop and take off running in the other direction.

"Hey!" shouts Sophie. "You're supposed to get him, not him get you!"

Everyone's laughing, and Ty catches me, wrapping his arms around me from behind and pulling me down to the snow, turning so I land half on him. I let out an undignified squawk, squirming around to face him.

He's lying on his back, cheeks red, scruffy today, looking fit and delicious. "You gonna kiss me? I need to be distracted so Sophie can bury me."

A glance over my shoulder reveals Sophie already at his feet, frantically shoveling snow over them with her hands.

“Good job, Livia!” she crows. “Keep doing whatever you’re doing!”

Laughing, I return my attention to Ty. “You’re a good uncle-slash-big-brother-in-law.” I screw up my face as I consider what I just said, because really, only Shane will be his brother-in-law. But since she’s Shane’s ward and will be Sarah’s kind of stepdaughter ... “What does she consider you to her?”

He shrugs, his smile undimmed. “Family.”

I guess that’s as good of an answer as any. Their situation is unusual, with him occupying a little bit of both uncle and big brother type roles in her life. But family seems to sum it up nicely.

Leaning down, I kiss him. Not because Sophie ordered me to or because he actually needs to be distracted for her to bury him in snow—since he obviously planned to let her do it all along—but because after seeing this caring side of him, how can I not?

* * *

A few hours later, Ty and I are back at my place after having dinner at his parents’ house with everyone. Mara said I could stay there if I wanted, but I declined since all my things are at home.

We stuck around until Sarah and Shane took Sophie home for her bedtime, everyone pleasantly tired and happy from a long afternoon playing in the snow, followed by stew, rolls, and Christmas cookies.

I’m wrapped in my soft Christmas pjs and fleece robe while Ty takes a shower, neither of us having fully warmed up after so long in the snow. Or at least I hadn’t, and when I said I

wanted a shower, Ty said he'd take one too. Separately this time, because while showering together is fun, someone always ends up a little cold when they're not under the spray, and I wanted a shower to warm up more than anything.

I put the kettle on for tea, then pull out my laptop to check my email while I wait.

My breath hitches when I see the name and subject line sitting at the top of my inbox. Clicking on the email, I read it quickly, then again more slowly to make sure I'm not mistaking anything, laughing with tears in my eyes as I read it one more time.

"Everything okay?" Ty asks, coming out of the bathroom wrapped in a towel, looking delicious with his dark hair slicked back, a stray droplet of water carving a path down his chest.

"More than okay. One of the resumes I sent out has turned into an interview request. They've given me a choice of dates and times. I just need to pick one and respond."

A wide grin spreads across his face. "That's awesome, Liv!" He crosses the living room in a few long strides, bending to kiss me hard. "We'll have to celebrate." Sitting next to me, he leans in to look at my screen. "What's the job? And where?"

Laughing, I shake my head. "It's at a gallery in Denver. And celebrating might be premature. I haven't gotten the job yet."

He shrugs. "So? We can celebrate any good thing, no matter how small. An interview is only the first step. If you don't get this one, there'll be more. You'll land your dream job yet, just you wait and see."

"Okay, okay." I pull back and wave my hands. "Let me pick a date and respond. The water should be ready for tea in a sec."

He lets out a low chuckle. "I'll go turn off the kettle. I'm not planning to celebrate with tea." When I look up at him, the

sexy glint in his eye lets me know exactly how he plans to celebrate. With an anticipatory shiver, I hit reply, type out a quick email letting them know my choice of date and time, add it to my calendar, and close my laptop.

Ty reaches for me, pulls me to my feet, then cups my face and kisses me deeply before leading me to the bedroom.

* * *

Ty collapses onto his back next to me, breathing hard. Rolling over, I throw my arm across his torso, enjoying the way he lays his hand over my arm, an acknowledgment that he likes it there too.

“I’m going to miss this when you leave.” I say it quietly, the words out as soon as the thought enters my head. Maybe I shouldn’t say things like that. Both the reality of missing him and that he’ll be leaving in ... well, I’m not sure exactly when he plans to go. Soon, at any rate. Christmas is only a few days away now. I think he said something about waiting until early January, but that gives us—what? Two weeks at the most?

That’s not long at all.

He turns his head, his face solemn as he looks at me. “Me too,” he says eventually. Patting my arm, he knifes up, climbing out of bed in a way that feels like deliberate distance even though he’s just dealing with the condom. Of course he’s dealing with the condom. I can’t imagine having a sticky condom full of jizz on your dick for longer than necessary is all that enjoyable. Plus, we usually cuddle more after he disposes of it, so doing that means better cuddling sooner.

He’s quiet when he comes back, though, standing at the foot of my bed and studying me for a second, his hands on his hips. When I move the blankets back and pat the spot next to me, he climbs in, pulling the blankets over him and spooning behind me.

Something about the moment leaves me full of questions, but whatever his reaction means—if anything—I chalk it up to tiredness when he kisses my shoulder and sighs contentedly.

“Do you know what you’re doing for Christmas?” he asks after a moment.

“Not much. I’ll probably go see my mom and dad in the morning, have a sedate gift exchange with some coffee and cinnamon rolls, then come back home for the rest of the day.” I roll over so I can face him, and he kisses me on the lips. That, more than anything, feels reassuring. “You’ll be busy with your family, I’m sure. I can use the time to prepare for my interview. It’s next Monday.”

His eyes widen. “That’s soon.”

“Yeah, I know.”

He kisses me again, rolling onto his back and taking me with him, one arm around me and the other behind his head. “You could come over to my parents’ for Christmas dinner, if you want.” He dips his chin to look at me. “If you’d rather spend all day doing interview prep, I understand. But if you want a break and something more fun and festive, you’d be welcome.”

I open my mouth, a little hesitant to agree. But also not wanting to say no. The way he invited me makes it unclear if he actually wants me to come, though.

He looks down, his fingers trailing up and down my back. “I’d love it if you came,” he says just above a whisper, his eyes coming back to mine. “I can’t imagine not spending at least part of Christmas Day with you after all this.”

Smiling, I nod. “Okay. I’ll come.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Ty

Christmas morning starts off pleasantly lazy, with just my parents, Dylan, Nora, and me at the house. We don't sleep in too late because Sarah will be coming over with Shane and Sophie, plus Shane's other siblings, plus Brad's boyfriend for breakfast and presents in a little while. It'll be our first Christmas with them as official additions to the family. Sure, the wedding isn't until June, but that's more a formality at this point. Shane and Sophie are family now, and no one's more adamant about that than my parents. And since they're family, that means their other siblings are, too.

When I wander out in my red flannel lounge pants and thermal T-shirt for coffee, Dylan and Nora are already in the kitchen, and Mom has a casserole dish of baked French toast ready to go in the oven when the others arrive.

"Oh, good. You're up," Mom says when she sees me. "Olivia's coming over, right?"

"Yes, Mom," I tell her for the fifteenth time. "She'll be over this afternoon and will stay for Christmas dinner. Merry Christmas to you too." I can't wait to see Olivia's reaction to the Secret Sundae Society certificate I made for her. We didn't discuss exchanging gifts, but I've been working on it for a

couple weeks now, and today seems like the perfect time to give it to her. I don't care if she doesn't have anything for me.

Mom gives me a playful swat, and I kiss her on the cheek. "I just want all my babies under one roof," she says. "Is that really so much to ask?"

"Since when did Olivia become one of your babies?" I ask, grinning.

Another swat with the kitchen towel in her hand. "Since Sarah started bringing her home multiple times a week when they were in grade school. And now that you and she—" She cuts herself off with an audible click of her teeth.

"Now that Olivia and I are ..." I sip my coffee, waiting for her to finish, but Mom just shakes her head.

"Come on, Ty. You can't possibly be that dense," Nora chimes in from her spot at the table. "She's already planning for you and Olivia to get married and have babies. Olivia will officially be part of the family that way, and now that she's gotten the grandma itch from Sophie being around, she can pester you *and* Sarah to give her more grandbabies. She's got it all planned out."

Mom glares at Nora. "You hush."

Hiding her grin behind her mug, Nora does as ordered and sips her hot chocolate.

"Don't be getting ahead of yourself, Mom," I tell her in a quiet voice. "I still live in Vancouver. And Olivia lives here."

"You've been working remotely for most of this month, though. You could make it work if you wanted to. You could stay here most of the time and go back to Vancouver periodically when they absolutely need you in the office. Or something. They're obviously willing to accommodate you. You could ask."

"Mom," I warn. "Stay out of it. What happens with Olivia and me is between the two of us. I understand why your story is appealing to you, but I'm not sure it's reasonable."

Though I have to admit that I find it rather appealing too. My job probably would let me do something like that—alternate weeks between here and there or maybe half the month. Some kind of split. It'd kinda suck, since it's almost a five-hour drive, but I'd be willing to do it.

The real question is whether Olivia would want that.

Since the night after Sophie's special snow fun day, she's been making more and more comments about me leaving. It's possible that's some way to insulate herself against future sadness, but it's also possible she doesn't want this to last any longer than early January like we'd originally said.

The kicker of it is, I've gotten really attached to her in the last few weeks. The life Mom's dreamt up for us is not too different from the one I'd thought of, with the slight change of me going with Olivia when she gets a job she wants somewhere else.

Depending on how far away she ends up, I'd have to find a new job there. My agency might be accommodating, but considering her interview is for a museum in Denver, I'm not sure they'd want to deal with me being in a completely different state thousands of miles away as a long-term situation.

My skills are marketable, though, and I'm not too worried about me being able to find something else in a city like Denver. Plus, I can always freelance in the interim while I look for something.

We could figure it out. I'm willing to figure it out.

But I think I need to wait until after the interview before determining if Olivia is too.

* * *

Christmas morning is more fun when there's a little kid who still believes in Santa involved. And it's extra adorable—and

sometimes hilarious—that she believes Sarah is a real elf who lives in Arcadian Falls on a special mission from Santa, an on-the-spot lie to give Sophie a reason why Sarah, who was dressed as an elf the first time they met, lived next door.

According to Shane, Sarah sort of elbowed her way into their lives, but he says it with such affection that it's obvious he doesn't really mind.

And Sarah does have a tendency to bulldoze her way through things when she wants to. It's entertaining that that's how their love story started. I didn't realize all of that last year when I was home for Christmas. I was too wrapped up in my own relationship issues to pay much attention to Sarah's. All I knew was that she was hurt and sad, and the guy who hurt her crashed our Christmas dinner. I'd done my best to distract her by being my charming self—which means picking on her like only her big brother can do—to no avail.

Yes, I know she gets annoyed with me picking on her. But I figured annoyed was better than sad.

Instead, she was just annoyed *and* sad. And then this asshole showed up ...

I was ready to throw down.

Fortunately, someone else had metaphorically beaten me to it and performed a recto-cranial reversal. He fixed whatever bullshit he'd tried to pull, and now they're together, happy, and engaged.

And now he's trying to fix *my* love life.

I'm less convinced about how I feel about that, though I suppose I could do worse than him as a source of advice.

"Did I hear that you invited Olivia for dinner?" he asks as we sit on the couch, *The Grinch* on the TV and Sophie playing with her new toys on the floor with Brad and his boyfriend.

"Yup."

His lips quirk in a smile as he looks at me out of the corner of his eyes. "That's really all you're going to say?"

Chuckling, I shake my head. “What do you want me to say?” I bat my eyelashes at him. “Should I giggle and gossip with you about it?”

He rolls his eyes and scoffs. “No. But I thought you might be a little more invested.”

“Who says I’m not?”

That has him giving me an appraising look and sipping his drink. “I stand corrected.” He’s silent for a moment. Then, “When are you planning on heading back to Vancouver?”

I shrug.

That seems to be all the answer he needs. “I see. Does she know you’re planning on sticking around yet?”

Another shrug.

“I’ll take that as a no.” This guy. What the fuck? “You should talk to her. Trust me, cutting off your nose to spite your face is even less fun than it sounds.”

I turn to ask him what exactly he means by that, but Sophie calls his name, and the opportunity is lost.

“Olivia’s on her way,” Sarah announces from the kitchen, and I pull out my phone to check if she texted me.

My brow furrows when I see she hasn’t. Why did Sarah get the notification that she’s almost here instead of me? I mean, I know they’ve been friends for ages, but considering the ... level of friendship we’ve reached, don’t I deserve a text too?

I’m stewing on that until she arrives. And her arrival doesn’t really make anything better.

She’s engulfed by everyone else as soon as she’s inside, Sarah and Mom fussing over her and Sophie hopping up to give her a hug. I feel like I have to wait in line to greet my own girlfriend.

Although ... she’s not technically my girlfriend, is she?

Not yet, anyway.

Between my own thoughts and Shane's prodding, I think we need to have that conversation sooner rather than later. Because I don't like this. At all.

Eventually, everyone clears out, leaving me to greet Olivia at last. She gives me a tired smile. "Hey. Merry Christmas."

I examine her face, my brows pulling together in concern. "Merry Christmas. Are you okay?"

"Fine," she says on a sigh. "I spent the morning with my parents, so ..." She flips her hand to indicate I should fill in the blanks.

Knowing that her parents are trying at the best of times, I fold her into a hug. Her fingers clutch the fabric of my thermal Henley, and she clings to me, burying her face in my chest, and I'm glad I can give her comfort. Getting to hug her like this gives me comfort too, and the fact that she's out of sorts from dealing with her parents makes me feel better about her leaving me out of the texting loop. A little bit.

But before I can ask anything about that, Sarah swoops in as soon as we step apart, hooking her arm through Olivia's and sticking her tongue out at me. "She's here for me, not you," she says, towing Olivia away.

"I wouldn't be so sure about that," Shane comments from his spot on the couch, prompting Sarah to stick her tongue out at him too.

"Don't take his side. You're supposed to be on my side," she hisses.

He holds up his hands in surrender. "I'm not on anyone's side. I'm on the side of truth and righteousness."

That makes Olivia laugh, and she gives me an apologetic look as she gets towed into the kitchen where she'll either be grilled about our relationship status, put to work helping finish Christmas dinner, or both.

Dylan emerges from his room and looks around, clocking Dad in his chair, snoozing, Shane on the couch, and me still standing and glowering at the kitchen. “What’d I miss?”

“Your sister and your brother fighting over Olivia,” Shane says.

Dylan snorts, glancing between Shane and me. “And you don’t have a problem with your fiancée fighting over a woman?”

Shane grins.

“Gross!” Dylan shouts, and Sophie raises her head, engaged now.

“What’s gross?” she asks.

“Nothing,” we all say in unison, including Brad from his spot on the floor, and she looks between us.

“Dylan misinterpreted something I said,” Shane supplies. “It’s very boring grown-up stuff, I promise.”

Sophie narrows her eyes like she doesn’t believe him, but Mom saves the day, calling from the kitchen, “Sophie! The pie crust trimmings are ready for you to dust with cinnamon and sugar.” And Sophie vanishes like Santa going back up the chimney.

Once she’s gone, Shane shakes his head at Dylan. “No, I don’t have a problem with Sarah fighting for her best friend. And Ty’s just jealous because he wants Olivia to focus on him. It’s part of the deal with new relationships—you want all of the other person’s attention for yourself. He’ll eventually realize it’s okay for her to spend time with Sarah and that doesn’t mean she cares for him any less.”

The tone of voice he uses for this speech reminds me that Shane’s a teacher, and he sounds like he’s giving a group of high school boys relationship advice.

Unfortunately, he’s not wrong, so even though I’m irritated by both the tone and content, I can’t actually be mad at him. So I grunt, which makes him laugh.

“Have a seat, Ty. She’ll extricate herself from your sister eventually. And if she doesn’t, I’ll get Sophie to help us out, okay?”

I grunt again, but do as he says. “Thanks, Shane,” I mutter, and he chuckles.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Olivia

The kitchen bustles with activity and warmth. Sarah plonks me at the table with Mallory, Shane’s other sister, and sticks a plate of cookies in front of me.

“Oh, I don’t—” I start to protest, but she silences me with a look, then returns to helping her mom get dinner ready.

Their exchanges are a mixture of requests and orders, both of them working in a choreography honed over years.

It gives me a pang in my heart, because I’ve never had that type of relationship with my mother, and I never will. Yes, I’m always welcome here, but it’s not the same, and we all know it.

I pick up a cookie—a peanut butter blossom, which Sarah knows is my favorite—and take a delicate bite while I watch Nora help Sophie sprinkle what can only be a cinnamon and sugar mixture over twists of pie dough.

Between Ty’s hug and the energy here, it’s the balm that only Sarah could know I need. Just sitting in the midst of the bustle and warmth with love flowing out of every action helps me feel calmer and more centered. More able to be a part of the rest of the day.

By the time I finish my cookie, I'm feeling loads better. Brushing off my hands, I stand. "Is there anything here I can do to help?"

Mara gives me an appraising look, then hands me a stack of plates. "Sophie put the placemats out earlier, but you can set out the plates if you don't mind."

"No problem." I take the Christmas dishes she's had for as long as I can remember—white with a red rim and a Christmas tree motif around the edges—and head out to the big dining room table that's already been set up and had the extra leaves put in, Mallory trailing after me.

"I'll help, if you don't mind," she offers with a smile.

When I emerge, Ty comes to my side almost immediately. I give him a smile—a better one than I managed when I first arrived—and set the stack of plates down on the table. Without a word, he helps Mallory and me set one on each placemat.

Once we're done, he pulls me close, settling his hands on my waist. "Are you okay?"

"Better now. Sorry. It was a draining morning. I just needed a minute."

"And a cookie!" yells Sarah from the kitchen.

I laugh. "And a cookie."

"Do you want to talk about it?"

I shake my head. "Not really. I'm just glad I'm here."

His smile matches mine. "Me too." He steps back, tangling his fingers with mine. "Come with me. I have something for you."

Warmth kindles in my chest, despite the fact that I don't have anything for him. "Really? You weren't supposed to get me anything. I didn't get you anything."

His grin turns mischievous. "I didn't expect anything. It's nothing big. But ..." He shakes his head. "Just come on."

He leads me to his room, and I can't help getting more and more curious with each step. With a house full of people, there's no way he's giving me something sexy. And he's already kissed me in front of everyone, so it can't be an excuse to do that ... though I suppose he could want a make out session, which we wouldn't do in front of his entire family. I wouldn't, anyway.

When we get to his room, he pushes the door almost closed, leaving it open just a crack. Then he picks up a Christmas-themed box with a bow on one corner from his desk, the kind you use to wrap a sweater or something.

Did Ty get me clothes? That seems out of character for him. But he said it's nothing big ...

Curious, I lift the lid, finding a sheet of thick cardstock inside, covering my hand with my mouth and laughing out loud when I read what it says.

Emblazoned on fine, high-quality paper in gold letters, it reads, *Secret Sundaes Society*, in a fancy script. Beneath that it declares me the High Priestess of the Secret Sundaes Society.

When I raise my eyes to his, he's grinning like a little kid who's entirely too pleased with himself. "Do you like it?" he asks.

Laughing, I shake my head and set it back on his desk, then wrap my arms around him. "I love it. Thank you. I'll frame it and hang it in a place of honor."

His hands rub up and down my sides, and he gives me a kiss. "Good. You can tell your interviewers about it too. Be sure it's hanging in the background for your video call."

"Oh for sure," I agree with a laugh.

Someone calls our names from the living room, and we break apart to rejoin the family. Being here with Ty—not just as Sarah's friend—adds a different dimension to my experience with the Daniels family. And for one afternoon, I give in to the fantasy that, like Shane and Sophie, I can officially be folded in.

I know it's not real. I know Ty and I are only together for this one shining season. But for just a few hours, I don't want to think about that.

I want to pretend that this can last forever.

* * *

Ty and I spend even more time together following Christmas, which only lends itself to the continuation of the fantasy I indulged in on Christmas Day. My dad's office is closed, so Ty's been staying with me. He spends part of each day working on some of his freelance projects, but he doesn't have to start any new work for his regular job until after the new year. While he does his work, I prep for my interview.

But with that only a couple days away, I'm getting more and more antsy wondering what Ty's thinking and planning. Every time I've asked when he's planning on going back to Vancouver, he gives some kind of nonspecific, wishy-washy answer, and it's driving me crazy.

I need to know so I can plan accordingly.

Honestly, the stress of not knowing our exact end date is worse than knowing there is one.

When we started this, I thought knowing we could only last this handful of weeks was a nice warning going in. I could keep my heart out of it, enjoy myself, and know when and how it ends.

What relationship can give you such guarantees?

Usually, you're in a stew of wondering and hoping and fearing the outcomes. There are no questions about the outcomes here, though.

But it's not playing out how I'd hoped.

I haven't entirely been able to keep my heart out of it, for one thing. I already cared about Ty going in. Sure, we haven't

gotten along very well historically, and I enjoyed having him at a distance previously, but I didn't want bad things to happen to him. He's my best friend's older brother. I care about her whole family in much the same way I care about my own.

I've loved Ty—platonically—basically my entire life.

But that's made keeping my heart out of the equation harder than I expected. I thought it would be easy, since Ty liked picking on me, to avoid getting too attached. But now he's not picking on me—or if he does, it's sexy teasing that ends with both of us naked—and he's been kind and caring and generous.

He's everything I've spent years hoping to find.

But I know it has to end.

I'm basically just a rebound for him. He's still recovering from his last breakup. Yeah, this is fun, but his lack of definitive statements about his future plans is anything but reassuring.

And I have an interview for a job that could take me far away from Arcadian Falls. If that happens, I won't even see him during his occasional visits home, because what are the odds our visits will line up?

I guess if we decided to make an effort to do that, it could happen. But that seems ... strange. Awkward. Unlikely.

Highly unlikely.

And the longer I think about this, the longer I spend thinking about it, to the point that I can barely focus on preparing for my interview.

It's simply not a sustainable situation.

When Ty sets aside his laptop, leaning back and stretching, I swallow down the sick feeling at what I'm about to do.

Poised, calm, I drag one of the dining table chairs to the edge of the living room, sit down, and clear my throat. "Have you thought any more about when you'll be going back to

Vancouver?” I ask the question baldly. More directly than I have so far. I’ve been hinting at it for days and getting nowhere. It’s time to face the problem head on.

Lowering his arms, he blinks at me, then scratches the back of his neck. “Not specifically. I’m not in a rush.”

That’s not helpful at all. I need a date. Not more waffling.

“But you *are* going back to Vancouver, right?”

He lets out a wary chuckle. “I mean, eventually I’ll have to, yeah. What’s this about?”

Closing my eyes, I draw in a deep breath. “Look, this—you and me—has been great. Really great. But I think it’s run its course. Don’t you?” Opening my eyes, taking in his stricken look, I force myself to plow forward. “We said at the beginning that we’d just enjoy what we have while it lasts. And while I have very much enjoyed it, I don’t think it can last any longer. You have a whole life in a different city, and I’m pursuing other goals in other places. We both know that long-distance relationships are nearly impossible to maintain, and even those only work as some kind of short-term solution until a long-term solution can be implemented. I have my interview the day after tomorrow.” I swallow hard again. “So I think we should call it.”

He blinks at me a few times, a frown growing on his face. “Did I do something wrong?”

I shake my head. “No. Nothing. You’ve been wonderful, in fact. So wonderful.” The last part comes out on a whisper, and I clear my throat, forcing my voice to be firm. “This is for the best, though. Don’t you think?”

Slowly, he shakes his head. “I can’t say that I do, actually.” He stands, gathering his things. “But if this is what you want ...” His throat works as he swallows, standing for a moment to look at me. “I never want to stand in the way of your dream,” he says quietly. “This has been ...” He looks around, searching for the right words. “Great,” he says at last. “This has been great. You’ve been great. I’ve had more fun than I expected to

being in Arcadian Falls for so long. I'd planned on being bored for weeks on end, and you've made my time here anything but boring, so thank you for that."

He moves through my apartment, gathering all the little things he's left here over the last few days, clearing his toiletries out of the bathroom, picking up clothes from my bedroom, and stuffing everything in the backpack he brought with him.

I stand in the entryway as he puts on his boots and coat, my arms wrapped protectively around myself. Once he's ready to go, he closes the distance between us, his hands rubbing my upper arms. Bending, he places a gentle kiss on my lips—so soft and sweet it almost breaks my heart.

And without another word, he's gone.

CHAPTER THIRTY

Ty

I leave Olivia's apartment in a daze, still trying to piece together what just happened. I replay everything again and again, looking for where things went wrong. What I'd done to make her decide this is it.

I guess she was ready to be done?

Or decided having me around was too distracting?

She could've just asked for me to stay at my parents' for a few days until after the interview if she needed some time to herself to prep. I thought she liked having me over. She said as much last week. I figured she'd tell me if she needed more alone time.

Well, I guess she just did.

My problem is assuming that she'd only need to be alone for a specific amount of time and that I'd be welcome back afterward.

My mistake, I guess.

The other thing that catches me by surprise is how much this hurts. Far more than my breakup with Anna, which seems really messed up, even to me.

Maybe because some part of me always knew that Anna and I couldn't work in the long run. And really, the only reason we worked for as long as we did is because I ignored all the things that were wrong between us for years, burying myself in my work and doing what she wanted me to do when she wanted me to do it, because it was easier than fighting or breaking up and all the disentangling that entailed.

Until I couldn't do that anymore, and here I am.

Or maybe it hurts more because I broke up with Anna, but Olivia broke up with me.

I don't get it, though. Things were good with Olivia. We were happy. Or I thought we were. I was, anyway. She seemed to be.

I know we said whatever was between us was a fun fling that would end when I left. But I haven't left yet. And I hadn't planned to for a while longer, either. I wanted to wait until after her interview, see what happened, and then we could decide—together—what to do with our relationship.

Breaking up was always on the table, I suppose. But I thought it would only be one option, with the other being me offering to work things out with my job so I could spend part of my time in Arcadian Falls if she's staying here, or offering to move with her if she gets the job. Offering to move with her *when* she gets another job, whether it's this one, or some other one months from now.

And given those other options, I really didn't think breaking up would be the one chosen.

It takes a little while of sitting alone in my old room at my parents' for the pain to fully bloom, like the delayed reaction from when you know you've overdone it on your new workout plan, but you don't feel the pain until later. It blossoms outward from my chest, rendering me helpless in the face of it.

My parents leave me alone for the most part, clearly figuring out something happened when I stumbled in the night Olivia broke up with me.

I'm not sure if they're the ones who sent Shane in, or if he decided on his own to bother me, but after two days, he knocks on my door and comes in uninvited.

"Dude." He stands in front of the door, arms crossed, surveying me in my pathetic state. "Dude." The second one is given with more sympathy, and he shakes his head.

"What do you want, Shane?" I ask from my place on my bed. I don't move. Why bother? It's not like anything I do makes a difference anyway.

His eyebrows kick upward. "Everyone's starting to get worried about you. You've become like Sasquatch—sightings are rare and mostly discounted as made up." He pauses as though he's waiting for me to say something. When I don't, he asks, "What happened?"

I shrug. "Apparently she had a firmer deadline in mind for the end of our relationship than I did."

He steps away from the door, finally pushing it closed, and settles in my desk chair as though this is going to be a long, drawn-out discussion. Goody.

"Wasn't that the plan all along?"

I lift my head to glare at him. "What happened to the guy who was trying to convince me I was half in love with her a week ago? Who was encouraging me to enjoy myself and telling me I had permission to have a happy relationship? Where's he?"

"He's still here. You are in love with her. If you weren't, I don't think you'd be in this state."

Letting my head fall back on my pillow, I grunt.

"What are you going to do?" he asks softly.

I lift a hand and let it fall back to the bed. "My plan was to wallow for another day or two, then head back to Vancouver and get on with my life. But if you're coming in to check on me, I should probably cut my wallowing time short and get on with it." I contemplate sitting up, but can't quite make myself.

Not yet. I need a minute to come to grips with the end of the wallowing stage.

“Really?” He sounds surprised.

Taking a deep breath, I push myself up to sitting and face my soon-to-be brother-in-law. I always wondered what it would be like to have a brother close to my age. Dylan’s too much younger than me to have been a playmate. Sarah and I played together, but even she’s enough younger than me that it’s not the same. Not what I wanted.

Is this what it would be like? Shane and I are the same age. Went to school together. We weren’t close in high school, but we were friendly. I remember that he was a good guy. He’s good for Sarah.

“Is there something else I should do instead? She made her position clear. She ended things. There doesn’t seem much room for interpretation in that.”

He frowns, pressing his lips together, then finally shaking his head. “No, I suppose you’re right. It just ...” He shakes his head again.

“I know, man,” I agree softly. “Trust me. I know.”

* * *

As I’m loading up my car, I wonder about Olivia’s interview. It was yesterday. Did it go well? Did they offer her the job? Are they interviewing other candidates and she’ll hear back some other time?

The questions eat at me, and I want so badly to text her and find out the answers, but I don’t.

I don’t ask Sarah, either. I could. She’d probably tell me. She seems as upset by this turn of events as I am.

Okay, maybe not quite as upset as me, but she’s obviously unhappy about it.

“You don’t have to leave yet,” she tells me, standing outside in a sweater, her arms crossed against the cold. “Tomorrow is New Year’s Eve. Stay through then at least.”

Closing the trunk, I shake my head. “Sorry, Sarah. I can’t. I need to get back to real life.”

She steps in close to me and wraps her arms around my middle, the way she always used to hug me when we were kids. With a soft chuckle I hug her back.

“Where will you stay?” she asks, the question muffled by the way her face presses into my chest.

“My friend Joel said I could crash with him until I find a place, but I found a vacation rental that I decided to get instead. I have it for a month. That should give me time to find a more permanent place to live, and even though it’s more expensive than normal rent, it won’t strain my relationship with my friend, which seems like a plus to me.” I pat her back. “Don’t worry about me, Sarah. I’ll be fine.” When she pulls away, I add, “And I’ll be able to be polite and friendly at your wedding in June too.”

She lets out a teary laugh. “Well, thanks. That’s good to know. But that’s not what I’m worried about.”

“Aww. You’re worried about lil ol’ me?” I place my hand on my chest.

Shaking her head, she punches me lightly in the arm. “Of course I am. You’re my big brother. I care what happens to you.”

I punch her shoulder in return. “Thanks, Sarah. I’ll be fine, though. It’s cold out here, and you don’t have a coat on. Let’s go inside so I can say goodbye to everyone.”

She looks like she might protest, but nods and turns toward the door. When I got here almost a month ago, I thought I’d be thrilled to get away by this time.

Now, leaving is the last thing I want to do. And the only way to move forward.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Olivia

My interview went great, at least on my end. I hope I didn't broadcast my desperation too much, but they seemed impressed with my progress on my master's degree—and said that was a big factor in considering me as a candidate so yay me for deciding to take that leap—as well as the small artwork displays I put together at my dad's office.

Obviously my work at my internship had a much bigger impact, but they said that creating the gallery wall at Dad's office “shows initiative” and that I'm “hungry for the work.”

It's a newer gallery, and they're wanting fresh eyes and talent to mix with the seasoned professionals who're spearheading the project, taking on junior curators and mentoring them—while paying them—with the eventual goal of passing the torch.

Honestly, it's a dream opportunity.

Given the cost of living, the pay isn't as much as I could hope, but if this is what it takes to land my dream job, I'll find a roommate and live on Top Ramen for a while. Maybe I can do what Ty suggested and take on interior design clients as a side gig.

Not clients like my mom.

But surely not everyone who can afford an interior designer is as much of a nightmare as she is.

At this point, though, I'm still waiting to hear if I got the job. It's all pie-in-the-sky dreaming that might not matter in the end.

But Ty was also right that getting the interview is a huge confidence boost. Even if they don't end up hiring me, I'm obviously on the right track. I just need to keep working, and eventually I'll get there.

Thinking of Ty brings a pang in my chest, as always, and I have to pause in my data entry to take a few deep breaths and regain control of myself. My dad's patients don't need to see me crying at my desk—over a guy, no less. And if Dad found out, I'd never hear the end of it.

Yet another reason why getting a different job would be so nice—I wouldn't have to have my dad as my boss.

I've been doubting my decision to break up with Ty ever since I made it. And seeing the Secret Sundae Society certificate only makes it worse. I hung it up on Christmas Day, but I finally took it off the wall last night, because the reminder of how much fun we had is just too painful. Though now, the empty spot where it used to hang is as much of a reminder as the certificate itself.

Should I have ended things the way I did? So definitively? Couldn't I have waited until he was ready to leave? Then we could've ... what? Left things ambiguous and open-ended?

No. That would be worse. Far worse.

This sucks, but at least I know what's happening.

* * *

Except the pain from Ty leaving doesn't get better.

I've had painful breakups before, but other than when Derek and I split up at the end of college, which knocked me so far off course, I'm still recovering, I've gotten over the others fairly quickly.

Sure, a few have left a lingering feeling of sadness, but it never dominated my day.

Ty's absence feels like something vital is missing.

I figured that would pass after a couple of days, but it's been over a week now, and if anything, it's worse.

A knock on my door makes me jump, my heart racing with unfounded hope. The last person to knock on my door was Ty. And some part of me keeps hoping he'll show up and tell me he can't live without me or something equally ridiculous.

That only happens in movies, though. And my life is anything but a movie.

Besides, he left town last week. He's probably out with his friends or looking for an apartment. There's no way he's here ... right?

Which is confirmed when I open the door to find Sarah on the other side. A profound sense of disappointment washes through me, and it must show on my face, because she gives me a wry smile. "Thrilled to see me, I take it."

"I'm always happy to see you," I counter, pushing the door wide and inviting her in. It's rainy tonight, but that cold, miserable rain where it's just above freezing, turning the snow into a slushy mess that'll be a sheet of ice by morning.

It goes nicely with my mood. Messy, sloppy, and terrible.

"That'd be more convincing if your face hadn't fallen at the sight of me."

I let out a rueful laugh. "I'm sorry. It's not you."

The look she gives me as she closes the door is so full of sympathy that tears prick behind my eyes. "I know," she says softly, removing her coat and shoes. "It's Ty."

There's no point in lying. Pressing my lips together to keep my broken voice from coming out, I nod wordlessly.

I'm still nodding when her arms wrap around me, pulling me in for the hug I've been needing for ages, but because it's her brother, I've denied myself the comfort of my best friend since he left.

She rubs my back, making soothing noises as I cry into her shoulder. When I calm a little, she leads me to the table, goes into the kitchen, fills the kettle, and puts it on the stove. Rummaging around, she finds the tea she knows I like best when I'm sad and gets out two mugs, dropping a tea bag in each one.

Joining me at the table while we wait for the water to boil, she pats my hand. "Why didn't you call me? I would've come over and done this days ago."

I shrug. "I thought it might be weird for you."

"Not any weirder than the two of you getting together in the first place." She squints as she looks me over. "But what's all this about? I thought you said it wasn't that serious. And didn't you end things with him? Like you planned? I thought this was what you wanted. But you've been avoiding me and barely responding to my texts. I knew something was wrong, but I have to admit, this isn't what I expected."

I cover my face with my hands. "It wasn't supposed to be serious," I wail. Dropping my hands to the table, I look her in the eyes. "That's why I had to end it. I was already developing feelings for him, and the longer I spent with him, the deeper they grew, and knowing it was going to end was too painful. The anticipation of future pain seemed worse than the pain itself."

"Seemed?"

Miserable, I nod. "Yeah. Seemed. I don't think I was right, though. And all I can think is that I screwed everything up for nothing. The gallery in Denver went with someone else."

“Oh, Sarah.” Her face morphs into a picture of distressed sympathy. She reaches for my hand, giving it a squeeze and standing because the kettle’s low whistle is starting. A minute later, she comes back to the table and sets my mug in front of me before resuming her seat with her own. “I feel like this calls for more than just tea.”

Letting out a low chuckle, I shake my head. “Tea’s fine. And you.” I muster up a grateful smile. Even though I couldn’t bring myself to reach out to her, I’m glad she’s here. She listens to me spill my guts about how much I miss Ty. How upset I am about not getting the job, even as I’m determined to keep applying and finish my master’s. How Ty encouraged me, telling me I was on the right path, to not give up this time.

At one point, our tea gone, a package of cookies demolished between us and the crumbs all over the table, Sarah looks at me, confusion on her face. “I don’t get it. If things with Ty were so great, and he wasn’t on his way out the door, why break up with him at all? You both seemed really happy together. Why not figure out a way to make it work?”

“How?” I ask. “Derek and I were together for almost two years. We lived together for a year. We were deeply in love. And he didn’t think we could make it work out. Why would a guy I’ve been seeing for less than a month?”

Understanding dawns on her face. “This is about Derek?”

“No, no, no. You aren’t understanding. This is about—”

She cuts me off, shaking her head. “No. This is one hundred percent about Derek. That guy fucked you over, and you’re still letting that wound control your life. He’s the reason you came running home with your tail between your legs—”

“Hey!” I protest, but she ignores me.

“He’s the reason you’ve gotten so picky with men, breaking up with guys for the most minor of perceived flaws, and now he’s ruining the best relationship you’ve had maybe ever because he was too chickenshit to ask you to come with

him?” She clamps her lips together, a sure sign that she wants to say more, but is holding back.

“What? After all that, you’re not going to finish?”

She sighs, shaking her head and fiddling with her empty mug. “I just don’t want to hurt your feelings. I know you have a story in your head of what happened between you and Derek, but I think he didn’t really love you as much as you loved him. I think he was looking for an out, and graduating and moving was the most convenient one. I think he’d been wanting to break up for a while and just didn’t have the balls to do it without some excuse.”

My mouth drops open, a protest ready to burst forth, but my memories of those last few months we were together flash through my mind, recontextualizing themselves in light of Sarah’s observations. The way he stopped initiating sex as often. The way he’d claim to be too busy to come to any of my events. The way we stopped having date nights like we used to. He had excuses for all of it—applications, workload, study groups, papers, projects, you name it. But he was withdrawing.

“Oh my god,” I breathe.

She reaches for my hand again. “I’m sorry, Liv. I know he broke your heart. I just hate to see that heartbreak continuing to ruin your life years later.”

Blinking away tears, I focus on my best friend. “Thank you. You’re right. About all of it.”

She studies me for a moment. “What are you going to do?”

Sucking in a breath, I shake my head. “Stop basing my relationship decisions on what happened with Derek, for one thing. I think it’s finally time for me to move on.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Ty

Sighing, I answer my phone as I close my laptop. “Hi, Anna. What can I do for you?” I’m still working remotely most of the time, using the excuse that I need a flexible daytime schedule to look for an apartment. The problem is, I’m not really looking. I’m just spending my days in the lounge pants Olivia bought me while I wallow in my patheticness. Though I have gotten some paints and canvases, and I take brief breaks from wallowing to paint and do paid work.

Mostly it’s the wallowing, though.

Anna’s been calling and texting since I got back in town. I don’t know how she found out I was back, but clearly one of our mutual friends realized and shared the news. I’ve mostly ignored her because I have no energy to deal with anyone I don’t have to, but she’s become increasingly insistent. And for some reason, blocking her feels mean. Which is silly. I should just block her. But I feel like I should at least talk to her one last time first. Maybe she just needs a bit more closure.

Considering I feel like calling Olivia about fifty times a day—I haven’t, but I still *want* to—I feel a bit more sympathy for Anna than I might otherwise.

“Tyson,” she says in the voice she thinks of as her sexy baby voice. I never found it particularly sexy, though I never

told her that. I didn't want to hurt her feelings. "When are we going to go out for dinner?"

I can't help my laugh of disbelief. "Um, why would we do that?"

She makes a sound of frustration, then all pretense at cajoling sexy baby voice is dropped, thank god. "Look, I know you're back in town. I'm just wondering how long it's going to take you to come to your senses and move back home."

Words fail me for a moment. "Never?"

"Be serious!" she demands.

"I am serious. I was serious when we broke up. I literally moved all my things out and took my name off the lease. I'm not sure what part of that wasn't clear."

She's silent for a moment. "I thought you were just doing that to show how upset you were."

"I honestly wasn't upset at the time. I was just done. I'm sorry, Anna, but you have to realize that our relationship wasn't really going anywhere. You didn't actually care about me."

"Yes I did!" she protests. "I still do!"

I open my mouth to contradict her, but really there's no point. If she can't realize that she cares more about having somebody—anybody, really—around so she's not alone, me stating that fact isn't going to sway her. Especially not now when she's clearly emotional.

"I'm sorry, Anna. But we're not getting back together."

"There's someone else, isn't there?" she accuses.

There is. But that's over too. Either way, it doesn't make a difference with Anna and me.

"Goodbye. I hope you find the life you're looking for." Before she can respond, I end the call, feeling relieved. Then I open her contact information and block her. Whether she's ready to let me go or not, I need to not be badgered by her.

My thumb hovers over Olivia's contact information. Maybe I should block her too. Or delete her.

But that feels too permanent. Some part of me keeps hoping she'll change her mind.

Before I have to make a decision, my phone rings again, only this time it's my sister Sarah calling.

"You have to come back," she says without preamble as soon as I answer.

"What?"

"What do you mean, what? I'm speaking plain English here. You. Have. To. Come. Back. Here."

"Why?" I guess that's a better question.

She lets out a frustrated sigh. "I know you're not doing any better than Olivia. I saw you before you left. Worse, I *smelled* you. Why do you think I made Shane go in and talk to you?"

So it was *Sarah* who sent him in. I guess that makes sense. "Because you didn't want to talk to me about my relationship with your best friend?"

"Well, okay, that too," she concedes. "But the bigger reason is because he's used to smelling stinky boys. He's a high school PE teacher and a football coach. He deals with stinky dudes every day as a job. If anyone could handle your unwashed stank, it's him. I'd have smoked you out with Febreze and Lysol spray and forced you into the shower before talking to you, and I figured that would make you less likely to open up."

"And instead you're calling and bossing me around because you think that'll have a better outcome?"

She growls. "Yes. Exactly. You're still moping, right?" She takes my silence as an affirmative. "Are you showering regularly at least?"

"Yes," I grumble. Mostly because I couldn't stand my own stink anymore, but I'm not about to tell her that.

“Good. That’s some improvement at least. But the thing is, Olivia’s as upset as you are. I just don’t think she believes she deserves to make it right between you. I know it’s shitty, because she’s the one who broke up with you, but if you want her, you’re going to have to go after her.”

“Sarah,” I sigh. “She made it clear that our relationship had run its course. We agreed that it wasn’t anything that would last beyond New Year’s at the latest.” Even if I’d hoped maybe it could, she wasn’t out of line for ending it when she did.

“Right, I know, but you want more than that, right?” Again, I say nothing, and she takes that as a yes. “Right. Exactly. The thing is, she does too. She was just too scared to think you’d want more with her.” She makes another frustrated sound. “I can’t tell you everything without betraying her trust, and even though you’re my brother, she’s my best friend, and I can’t do that to her. Just know that she’s used to getting fucked over by people she cares about, so her breaking up with you early was her trying to protect herself. She cares about you, though. She was disappointed when I showed up unannounced the other day. She was hoping I was you. And I know that if you told her you wanted her, that you wanted to find a way to be together, she’d be receptive. She just doesn’t expect anyone to want to put in that kind of effort for her.”

She pauses, her tone softening. “But if you do ...” She clears her throat. “If you do, it might take her a little while to believe it’s for real, but I think it’ll be worth it. For both of you.”

After we hang up, I stare at the wall for several minutes, reviewing everything Sarah said.

Could it be that easy?

I think about how I felt about Anna assuming we’d get back together—namely, irritated and frustrated. Olivia might feel the same way about me showing up again. That thought makes me sick to my stomach, and is the main reason I haven’t reached out to her again.

She broke up with me. She doesn't want to hear from me, right?

Except ...

According to Sarah, maybe she does.

She was disappointed when I showed up unannounced the other day. She was hoping I was you.

That's what Sarah said. Which means maybe Olivia *would* want to hear from me.

I could take the easy way out. I could call. Or text ...

Picking up my phone, I open my text messages, intending to do just that. But something stops me.

If she really doesn't believe that she deserves effort, giving her that kind of low-effort attempt won't convince her. If I want her to believe that I *am* willing to put in the effort, I need to show her.

Now.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

Olivia

I'm going over the syllabus for one of my classes that starts next week when once again there's an unexpected knock at my door.

Checking my phone, I see no texts from Sarah warning me of her impending arrival. But given that she showed up unannounced a few days ago, it seems likely she's doing it again. If this is going to be her new MO, we might have to have a conversation about that. I know last time was because I'd gone MIA, but I'm not avoiding her now. We've been texting the last couple of days, and we have plans to get dinner this weekend.

I still need a few days to recover before going out and being social. And since I have to go to work during the day, the evenings provide the only recovery opportunities.

Plus, it's cold and yucky outside, and with the excitement of the holiday festivities over, the town just seems kind of ... sad.

While it echoes my internal landscape, seeing it just makes me feel more depressed.

It's really impossible that it could be anyone other than Sarah at my door, though.

“Coming,” I call, setting aside my laptop and smiling through my exasperated sigh.

But when I open the door, it’s not Sarah on the other side at all.

His brows pulled down in a broody stare, Ty stands in the puddle of light spilling out from my open door. His lush lips part as his eyes roam over me, but no words come out.

I’m equally speechless.

“What are you doing here?” I finally manage to blurt out after a full minute of both of us staring at each other, my door hanging open.

I wrap my sweater around myself and step back. “Come in. But what are you doing here?”

He steps inside and closes the door. “Sarah told me I needed to come. That you were as miserable as I was.”

“She what?”

Flashing a grin, he plows ahead, reaching out a hand but letting it drop to his side before touching me. “I miss you, Olivia. I didn’t realize before that when you were asking me for my definitive leave date, that you were trying to figure out how much time we had left. The reason I kept giving vague answers was because I didn’t want to leave. I wanted to stay with you. Here. With your interview coming, I didn’t want to add pressure on you, so I kept the truth of my feelings to myself. But I want us to work. And if that means moving to Denver with you, then that’s what I’ll do.”

“I’m not going to Denver,” I blurt out, that being the only part of what he said that seems to make sense to me.

Wait. He’d move to Denver? For me?

“Oh,” he says, nonplussed. Then, more softly. “Oh. Olivia, I’m so sorry. I know you were so excited about the possibilities there.”

He reaches for me again, but just as he's about to drop his hand without touching me once more, I step into the gesture, wrapping my arms around his torso.

Sighing, he wraps both arms around me, holding me close and burying his face in my hair. "There'll be more opportunities," he whispers. "More interviews. Better jobs."

With a choked laugh, I wipe away a tear that's escaped down my cheek. "I don't know about *better*."

"I do," he says with such confidence I almost believe him. "If not better, at least as good." He pulls back enough to look me in the eyes. "And I want to be with you every step of the way, cheering you on. If you'll let me."

"Really?" I ask, still not quite believing that part of it. "But your job. Your apartment. Your whole life in Vancouver."

"I've been working remotely for over a month. I don't think my job cares much if I'm in the office as long as I'm getting my work done. *I'm* the one who prefers the office, just so I don't stare at the same four walls all the time. But I feel like that's a pretty easy problem to solve with a little creativity." He lowers his voice to a stage whisper. "And between you and me, we've got quite a bit of creativity. I think we can come up with a solution."

He tips my chin up and drops a kiss on my lips, sighing with relief when his lips make contact with mine, like holding me for this long and not kissing me is too much for him.

It feels good to be with him again, in his arms and kissing him. I just don't understand how. Or why.

"I've missed you so much, Olivia," he whispers. "I couldn't even bring myself to look for a permanent place to live. Say yes, and I'll move back to Arcadian Falls. I can stay with my parents again. You'll finish your master's and get a kickass job somewhere, and we'll go together. I've never been happier than I have these last few weeks with you. I don't want it to end because of some arbitrary deadline or the false belief that we don't deserve to be happy."

“I’ve missed you too.” I let the words spill out, having held them in for so long. Sarah’s the only one who has an inkling of how much I’ve missed him. “So much. I thought breaking up would save us both from more pain in the long run, but I don’t think that’s true. I’m sorry I ended things prematurely. I wish you would’ve told me you wanted more before then. And I’m sorry I didn’t give you as much time as you thought you had so you had the chance. I’m so, so sorry.” Tears are flowing freely by now, and I can’t stop them, even though I hate that I’m blubbering like this when I’m apparently getting everything I want.

He wipes my tears away with his thumbs, kissing me again. “No more apologies,” he whispers. “No more wasting time. I’m here. I’m in this. Are you?”

His eyes search mine as he waits for my answer, and I nod. “Yes. I’m in this. I want this. You. Us. If you’re willing to do it, then so am I.” I hold my breath for a moment, the words on the tip of my tongue, and I feel like I’m standing in the doorway of a plane, about to fling myself out and hope my parachute works.

But holding back hasn’t gotten me anything but heartache. So I fling myself into the air, trusting I’ll come down unscathed.

“I love you,” I tell him.

He kisses me deeply, his hand cupping my cheek. “I’m so happy to hear you say that. I love you too.”

Turning in his arms, I take him by the hand and lead him through my living room to my bedroom.

He sheds his coat and shoes as soon as we cross the threshold, his shirt coming off next, and I stop and stare for a moment, mesmerized by the fact that he’s here in my room once again.

I didn’t even dare hope this might happen when he returned this summer for the wedding. Or ever. I knew that ending things when and how I did meant he’d never speak to

me more than necessary for polite civility ever again. That we'd see each other at Sarah's wedding, and then maybe never once I find a job as a curator somewhere.

He gives me a lopsided smile, closing the distance between us and kissing me, his chilled fingers sliding under my shirt. "I've missed the feel of your skin," he whispers against my mouth.

And suddenly I have too many clothes on. I want to feel his skin against mine. Right. Now.

Backing up, I pull my top off. My pants come off next.

Ty gets a sexy glint in his eyes and undoes his jeans, shoving them down and kicking them off before climbing on my bed in his boxer briefs, reaching for me and pulling me to him. As he kisses me again, he reaches behind me and unhooks my bra, tossing it away as soon as I pull my arms free of the straps.

His hands roam my back, down to grip my ass, pulling me tight against him, his hard cock digging into my belly.

I reach between us, circling his cock with my fingers, and he groans into my mouth. God, I can't get enough of him and his sexy noises. I love that I'm able to do this to him.

I've been aware that Ty is handsome for years. But now ... I can't get enough of looking at him. Especially like this.

Pulling away from the kiss, I rest one hand on his heart as I dip my hand inside his underwear, palming his cock and stroking it slowly. His eyes widen when I grip him, then his lids grow heavy and his breathing ragged.

His hand slides inside my panties, his fingers finding my opening and sliding inside, and I gasp in pleasure.

"God, Liv," he breathes. "Lay back. I need to taste you."

After giving him one last stroke, I do as he says, arranging myself on the bed and sliding my panties down my hips.

He takes over, pulling them off all the way and tossing them over his shoulder. Then he's lowering himself to his belly, wrapping his arms around my thighs, and diving in, licking me slowly at first, then spreading me open with his fingers so he can focus on my clit.

"Oh my god. Oh fuck." I can't control the tide of curses flowing from my mouth. Having him here doing this to me after wishing and dreaming and missing him for what felt like ages—even though it was only about two weeks—is ramping me up faster than ever. Or maybe it's the knowledge that this is the real thing, something lasting, something we're both committed to making work.

Whatever it is, there's no slow ramp up, no gradual build. Instead, I feel like I'm teetering on the edge of ecstasy for far longer than normal, my hips moving. Then Ty slides two fingers inside me, and that's all it takes to send me flying.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Ty

Olivia cries out, a wordless shout of pleasure as she pulses against my tongue. I don't let up, keeping it going until she's pushing on my head, her feet working like she's trying to crawl away from me.

“Please, Ty. Stop. Come here. I need you.”

As though I could deny those words.

Standing, I get rid of my underwear as fast as I can and rummage for a condom in her bedside table, thankful to discover she hasn't gotten rid of them. Once it's in place, I climb on the bed, but she's sitting up, her hand on my shoulder guiding me to my back.

“Lie down,” she murmurs, her sex kitten smile in place.

Grinning, I do as she says, thrilled when she throws her leg over my hips, lifts my cock, and sinks down on it, her eyes half closing as she does so.

For my part, all my muscles pull tight with pleasure at the feel of her taking me inside her. Hot and wet and tight.

Heaven.

“Jesus,” I whisper, and she smiles down at me, moving slowly, swiveling her hips, lifting and grinding and dear god,

I'm not gonna last.

She's so sexy riding me, her face flushed with pleasure, her perfect tits bouncing with her movements. My hands rest on her hips, then move up to her rib cage as she leans over to kiss me, making love to me with her mouth as much as the rest of her body.

I rise up to meet each of her downstrokes, urging her to move faster with my hands, needing more. Some distant part of me wants this to last, but the part of me that's in charge is demanding more, harder, now.

She breaks the kiss, one hand going to the headboard for leverage so she can move faster, and I take the opportunity to curl up and suck one of her nipples into my mouth. She gasps, breaking her rhythm, and after giving its twin the same treatment, I release her breasts, urging her to move once more.

With both hands on the headboard, she moves faster. Holding her hips, I keep pace with her, my fingers twitching as my orgasm races closer.

My abs contract, and I curl up off the bed as she works me over, the tip of my dick tingling so intensely, I'm not sure if I'm going to die or orgasm first.

My orgasm hits like a freight train, and I clutch Olivia's hips, holding her in place so I can grind up into her, my dick pulsing as I empty myself inside her.

"Jesus," I breathe, as I finish and go limp on the bed.

She bends to kiss me one more time, and I hold the back of her head so she doesn't end the kiss too soon.

As far as I'm concerned, this is only the beginning. Of everything.

* * *

A little while later, we're curled up on the couch together, half-drunk mugs of tea sitting on the coffee table, and I'm lazily stroking the top of her bare arm. She put on a tank top with skinny straps and her favorite silky soft lounge pants when we got up, wrapping a sweater around her to stay warm. But the sweater's fallen off her shoulder, revealing the expanse of skin I'm caressing from there to just above her elbow.

She lets out a contented sigh. "I'm glad you're back," she whispers.

"Me too."

"I love you." She's still whispering.

I smile, a thrill going through me at the words and the answering feeling in me. "I love you too."

EPILOGUE

Ty

Olivia bursts into Beans, where I've set up shop to work for the day, one arm raised above her head, the other holding up the skirt of a pink, frilly dress. "I got it!" she shouts, making everyone in Beans turn to look at her.

A grin breaks across my face, and I stand, holding my arms out. "You got it?"

She nods, tears streaming down her face, her smile irrepressible. "I got the job in Portland!"

I start across the coffee shop at the same moment she takes off for me, and we meet in the middle where she launches herself into my arms. "I'm so proud of you," I tell her before fastening my mouth to hers.

She kisses me back, wrapping her arms around my neck.

When my hands slide down her back, they catch on pins, though fortunately the blunt side, not the sharp side, and I pull away, confused. "What are you wearing?"

Laughing, she looks down at herself and tugs at the top. "They called to offer me the job in the middle of our dress fitting." She holds her hand over her mouth, her cheeks growing pink. "I should get back so they can finish."

Hugging and kissing her again, I head for my table and pack up my things. Work can wait until later. “Let me walk you back. I’m sure everyone will understand.”

She laughs some more, her whole being radiating her happiness. My own grin is irrepressible as I throw my bag over my shoulder, tangle my fingers with hers, and head out the door.

Big changes are coming our way, but we couldn’t be happier. And with her job taking her to Portland, everything’s working out in the best way possible.

We’ll be together, pursuing our dreams and supporting each other.

I can’t think of a better way to go through life than that.

Want more of Ty and Olivia?

[Click here to get a free bonus scene!](#)

Dear Reader,

Thank you so much for reading Ty and Olivia's story! I had so much fun returning to Arcadian Falls, and I hope you did too. (And if this is your first visit, make sure to check out [A Very Grumpy Christmas!](#)) As always, please leave a review! Reviews help new readers decide to give books a chance.

I have a free bonus epilogue if you're not quite ready to let go of Ty and Olivia yet. [Grab your copy here.](#) It asks for your email address, but you'll only get emails from me if you click the box saying you want them (and if you already get my emails, you don't need to sign up again). Otherwise it's just for Bookfunnel to email you the download link.

Though if you want to keep up to date with new releases, like teasers and excerpts of the next Arcadian Falls installment or updates on other books between now and then (which you totally do) definitely click the box. You won't be sorry.

If you want something to read before next Christmas, check out [Off Limits](#) or keep reading for an excerpt.

As always, thanks for reading!

Until next time ...

Jerica

I once again backed myself into a tight writing corner, but I managed to pull off writing this book in less than two months, which is really fast for me! And I couldn't have done it without the team of people who always have my back.

To Deb, who's been impatiently waiting for this story since she read *A Very Grumpy Christmas* last year and said, "Are you really going to make people wait a whole year?" But it's a Christmas series! Of course I am.

To Leslie who squeezed in the read between a very demanding schedule. You're the best! Muah!

To David, who's added me to his proofreading schedule with no fuss and makes me laugh with his editorial comments as well as being a stickler for commas and hyphens.

To my Book Junkies and Book Club members who've been so excited as release date has approached. I hope you love it.

To Grey's Promotions, who've done an amazing job with every release I've worked with them on. Thanks for squeezing me in for this one again. You're the best!

To all the bloggers, bookstagrammers, and reviewers who signed up for ARCs. Thanks so much for taking your time and energy to bring these characters to life for so many people.

And as always, a special thanks to you, dear reader. I hope you've enjoyed your detours to Arcadian Falls, and that this book gives you all the Christmas feels you desire.

Thank you!

Keep in touch!

Don't forget to claim your exclusive bonus scene:

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Here are the best places to keep up with me and what's new:

<http://www.bookbub.com/authors/jerica-macmillan>

<http://www.goodreads.com/jericamacmillan>

<http://www.facebook.com/jericamacmillan>

<http://www.amazon.com/author/jericamacmillan>

You're also invited to join my closed reader group on Facebook, [Jerica MacMillan's Book Junkies](#).

Or, if you want to speak to me directly, feel free to email me at contact@jericamacmillan.com.

Did you enjoy this story? Please leave a review at Amazon, Bookbub, or Goodreads!

Jerica MacMillan has been reading romance since she stumbled into the paperback section of the library as a middle schooler. And it's been an ongoing love affair ever since!

You can frequently find her sipping coffee out of snarky mugs while dreaming up stories and trying to bring them to life on the page. Join her Book Club at www.jericamacmillan.com/book-club and get a free book!

Arcadian Falls Christmas

A Very Grumpy Christmas

Merry Kissmas to Me

Marycliff Football

Off Limits

Trick Play

Unrivaled

The Love Playbook

Offsides

Personal Foul

Players of Marycliff University

Summer Fling

Close Quarters

Always You

Unsaid Things

Coping Skills

False Assumptions

A Very Marycliff Christmas

Cataclysm

Anything You Need

Shouldn't Want You

Everything I Want

Just For Now

Anyone But You

Songs and Sonatas Series

Double Exposition

Development

Recapitulation

Broken Chords

Counterpoint and Harmony

Overtones

Reverb

The Arrangement

Keep reading for a sneak peek of Off Limits

Chapter One

Ellie

My flip-flops slap my heels as I march down the sidewalk to my brother's house. I know he won't be thrilled to see me, but that's just too freakin' bad. It's late. I'm tired. The library just closed, and I have nowhere else to go.

The perfect end to the perfect evening.

Fortunately, he only lives about a half mile from campus, and even though walking alone at just after midnight on a weekend might be questionable from a safety perspective, wandering campus alone would definitely be worse. And while I could probably call my brother and have him come get me, that would give him the opportunity to argue with me about my choice of destination—namely, his house. Surprise is definitely the better tactic.

And let's not discuss why I've spent most of my Friday night—the Friday of the first week of school, no less—in the library. We'll ignore that right now. We'll also ignore the reality of Cal's reaction when I show up knocking on his door in the middle of the night. Not that I'm worried he's asleep already. He won't be. He and his roommate will probably be up playing video games. At least that's what I assume they do on the weekends, especially during the football season when there are rules about parties and alcohol consumption. And when recovering from the grueling start-of-season practice schedule. That's what he did in high school, anyway, and I haven't noticed any marked changes in his interests since then.

I managed to avoid him most of my freshman year—both at his insistence and for my own sense of self-preservation—and I'm as irritated as he will be that this is the inauspicious start of my sophomore year.

To distract myself from Cal's likely reaction at seeing me, I start making a list of phrases that never end well.

First up is the infamous, *How bad can it be?* Plus its cousin, *How hard can it be?* Everyone knows those lead nowhere good.

Next is, *Hold my beer*. Often uttered by drunken idiots immediately prior to undertaking something spectacularly idiotic.

And my newest entry to the list? *Let me know if you need the room*. I made the mistake of saying this to my roommate last week, and she's taking advantage of the offer already. Which is fine, or it would be, if she only needed it for a few hours like I thought. But the few hours I expected appear to be stretching into all night.

Technically, it's not supposed to be all night. It's just until she tells me it's safe to return. But after five hours, I still haven't gotten the all clear.

Autumn is ... lovely, but a little eccentric. And tonight she tells me she's doing some kind of ritual to manifest the right energy for the year. She mentioned it having to be tonight because of the moon phase and chakra alignment or something that I didn't quite follow. I think she might've also mentioned needing a guy? But I might've misunderstood that part. When she gets excited, she starts talking fast and doesn't quite realize that not everyone grew up meditating naked under the full moon and reading tarot cards.

I met Autumn during freshman orientation last year, and thought she was fun, but we really hit it off when she wandered past my room and caught me changing the weekly quote on the whiteboard on my door. I started fancy lettering in high school while doodling in the margins of my notes. I'd pick an important word and embellish it. Eventually I branched out into calligraphy and various other forms of hand lettering. Doing it on a white board isn't quite the same as on paper, but it was a fun way to make my room unique. She *loved* it, told me how she'd go out of her way to walk past my room just to see what new thing I'd put up but she hadn't realized it was me. And we've been friends ever since. Anyone who gushes over my art is good people in my book. She's open and bubbly and pulls me out of my shell in ways I didn't know I needed before meeting her. I've spent my entire life living in the shadow of my parents' expectations. Autumn

doesn't seem to have any such constraints, and part of me hopes that by living together, some of her adventurous spirit will rub off on me. But being forced to stand up for myself to my brother the first weekend of school isn't exactly what I had in mind ...

Turning into my brother's walkway, I sigh with relief that I'm finally here, pleased that the porch light is on and there's a light glowing through the closed curtains of the front window. It's a cute little red brick house with a tidy front yard. That must be Simon's doing, because I know Cal only does yard work when forced to. Or maybe Simon forces Cal to help. That thought makes me smile.

Two steps up and I'm in the sheltered alcove that houses their door. Steeling myself for Cal's irritation, I raise my hand and knock firmly on the oak door. The sound of footsteps on creaky floorboards precedes the door opening, and I'm face to face with a chest. A solid, heavily muscled, naked chest. Perfectly rounded pecs dusted with dark hair and tipped with flat, dusky nipples a few shades darker than his tan skin fill my vision. His flat belly flexes under my gaze, muscles standing out in sharp relief under the porch light, more hair surrounding his belly button and dipping below the waistband of the gray sweats hanging off his narrow hips.

Swallowing hard and licking my lips, I don't allow my gaze to dip farther south, knowing there'll be thick thighs below the soft fabric. This isn't my first encounter with Simon, and I *might* have Googled him to find pics of him in his football uniform after I first met him, but it is my first encounter with his naked chest. I thought he was mouthwatering fully clothed, but I was in no way prepared for *this*.

I force myself to drag my gaze to Simon's face. Not that it's any less droolworthy than his chest. Square jaw covered in thick scruff, high cheekbones, full lips just shy of being pouty, a straight nose, dark eyes, and thick, level brows. His hair's longer on top than the last time I saw it, but he has the sides trimmed close.

This guy. *Damn.*

The first time I met him, I immediately developed a crush, which I know would annoy Cal to no end. And while I love nothing more than to torture my brother—and let's face it, he started it when we were little kids by constantly bossing me around and picking on me—somehow visibly drooling over his friend seems a step too far. So I do my best to rein it in and be normal. Or at least as normal as possible. As I'm sure Cal would love to say, I'm anything but normal.

God, and the last time I saw him, I actually *hugged* him. Like a moron. I'd come over so Cal could drive us home for Christmas last year, and before I left, I hugged Simon goodbye. I don't even know why. It just seemed like the thing to do. I'd been hugging my friends goodbye all morning and the day before, and then I'd gotten to Cal's place and Simon was there and we were leaving him behind, so I hugged him. And then Cal berated me for it for the first thirty minutes of the drive to Oregon, and then off and on the rest of the break. In fact, he brought it up *again* before he headed back to Spokane when practices started up a few weeks ago. Heat flares in my cheeks at the memory.

Simon crosses his gigantic arms over his gorgeous chest I'm definitely not ogling—nope, because I'm looking at his face. It's not my fault my peripheral vision is in perfect working order. His biceps and shoulders bunch and flex with the movement, and I can't help it if my gaze dips to take it in. He's moving. My eyes are drawn to movement. And beauty. And ...

His brows draw together over chocolate brown eyes as he tips his head back to survey me. "Ellie? What are you doing here?"

"Oh, uh, well," I stammer like I'm a moron who's never been asked a question, never seen a hot guy, and never seen a hot guy without a shirt on. For the record, I've seen both those things before and managed not to stammer when asked a question.

Sighing, I rub my forehead, the closest thing I can come to slapping myself in the face and covering my face in mortification at the same time. “Sorry, Simon. I know Cal will be pissed I’m here, but my roommate’s—”

Simon steps back and gestures me in with a jerk of his head.

Tentatively, I step inside the door, standing in the long hallway that leads to the back of the house. Peering into the living room, I’m surprised when I don’t find Cal on the couch. “Where’s Cal?” I ask, turning to face Simon and pretend I’m not distracted by his bare chest.

Simon shrugs those massive shoulders. “Out. Have a seat.” And with that, he disappears down the hall.

I lean to the side as far as I can to peer after him without actually following him, because that would make me a creeper, and I’m not. But I *am* mystified, especially since he’s said maybe five words to me. What’s he doing?

With a shrug, I settle into a corner of the couch, because he said to have a seat, so I guess he’s okay with me hanging out, even if Cal’s not here.

He reappears a moment later, and much to my disappointment, has a gray Marycliff football T-shirt now covering that glorious chest.

The couch creaks as Simon settles his large frame as far away from me as possible. I dart glances at him out of the corner of my eye as he picks up the remote and presses play on the paused show.

“Oh!” I sit up a little straighter and tuck my feet under me as the first episode of *Cobra Kai* comes to life. “This is a great show. Are you just watching it for the first time?”

The look he throws my way seems tinged with amusement, even though his answer is characteristically brief and could be interpreted as annoyance. “Yes. Shh.”

I make a show of zipping my lips as I settle back into my seat. Maybe this night isn't shaping up so bad after all. Watching a great show with a hot guy at his house? Yes, please.

And for at least a little while, I'll pretend that he isn't my brother's friend and this isn't my brother's house and that Simon might actually talk to me and think me pretty and clever and funny. So basically, pretend that I actually have more than a snowflake's chance in hell of landing Simon.

I'm not stupid. I know he'd never go for me. He's a senior. He's a football player. He's my brother's best friend.

And I'm the annoying little sister.

I know how life works. But for a few minutes, I'm just going to let myself believe in possibilities.

That's what Autumn's whole point for tonight was, after all. Manifesting what you want for the semester. And what I want is to have some fun. And ideally I'd like that fun to be with someone who looks like Simon. So even if I'm not chanting naked in the moonlight, I soaked up some moonlight on the walk over here, which according to Autumn is important somehow, so I'll take that energy and direct it toward what I want.

Closing my eyes, I take a deep breath and put my desires out into the universe. Fun with a hot guy.

Sounds like a great plan to me.

[*Click here to keep reading*](#)