



Miracle
on
Mistletoe
Lane

SNOWFLAKE CREEK



OLIVIA
NOBLE

New York Times
Bestselling Author

MIRACLE ON MISTLETOE
LANE



Olivia Noble

Snowflake Creek Series

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CHAPTER 1



GABBY

Lying on my back with the hospital gown covering me from the waist down, I wiggle my bare feet in the cold metal stirrups uncomfortably. I can't help feeling anxiety and dread rising in my stomach. I hear footsteps outside, and I flinch when the doctor enters the room. He is elderly and bearded, holding a large syringe.

I sit up suddenly as a rush of fear prickles my skin.

"Are you sure that's the right specimen?" I ask nervously, clamping my knees together. "Because I saw this documentary where some doctors insert the wrong things..."

The doctor laughs as he moves closer with the syringe, showing me the letters on the side. *BENNY*. My boyfriend's name. "I'm sure it's the correct specimen," the doctor says. "But are you sure? This is what you want?"

"Well... yes," I respond, a bit startled by the question. "We've been trying for two years, and nothing ever happens. I found out that I'm not ovulating properly, and I have hardly any eggs left. This could be my last chance."

"But are you sure about Benny?" the doctor asks as he waves the syringe cryptically.

I pause, frowning. "I'm not quite sure if it's appropriate for you to question my decisions. I came here with Benny, and I want to start a family with Benny. End of story."

"So where is he?" the doctor asks.

“Busy with work,” I answer. “But he’ll be here soon. We can get started.”

“Alright, Gabrielle,” the doctor says as he taps the syringe and moves to stand near my feet. “If you’re really sure, then let’s do this.”

I wince, staring at the slender instrument in his hand. “At least it’s not a turkey baster. I imagined it would look like a turkey baster, for some reason.”

The doctor chuckles again. “No, dear. Turkey basters are for turkeys.”

“Good point,” I say anxiously, lying back on the bed again.

“You’ll have to relax,” he tells me.

I begrudgingly let my knees fall apart to offer him access. Smashing my eyes closed tightly, I screw up my face in preparation for the pain—expecting that it will be like a pap smear, but worse. But there is no pain.

Squinting one eye open, I look at the doctor with surprise. “Is it done?”

“Yes,” he responds, moving over to a large machine. “Easy as pumpkin pie. With a little swirl of whipped cream and nutmeg on top.”

Just like my mother always makes, I think to myself wistfully, as the memories come rushing back. I want to finally have some good news to give her when I go home this Thanksgiving. And a reason to eat as much turkey and pumpkin pie as humanly possible.

A cold plop of jelly on my stomach makes me jump. I am surprised when the doctor runs an ultrasound wand across my abdomen.

“Congratulations, the procedure was successful,” the doctor says, as he stares at the machine.

“What?” I ask with surprise. “Doesn’t it take a while to find out?”

“Actually, with new advances in technology, I can tell you everything immediately,” the doctor says. “Would you like to know if it’s a boy or a girl?”

“That’s impossible,” I tell him. “There’s no way you would ___”

“Oh—something’s wrong,” the doctor says suddenly, stroking his heavy white beard. “This isn’t right.”

“What do you see?” I ask with fear. “Is everything okay? Is the baby okay?”

“It’s not a boy or a girl,” the doctor says. “It’s not even a baby.”

“What is it?” I ask with horror, imagining the worst. The first thing that comes to mind is a tumor. Fibroids? Maybe the c-word. Are my insides just so messed up that I will never be able to conceive?

“It’s a turkey,” the doctor explains, turning the machine toward me. “You’re somehow carrying a turkey instead of a human. I guess I should have used the turkey baster after all.”

I look at the screen and see the weird bird inside my stomach, growing rapidly until it becomes larger and larger. I look down to see my stomach expanding like a balloon, almost like someone hit fast forward on my pregnancy, and I see the bird’s head struggling to break free under my skin. Like I’m possessed by a little demon or alien trying to explode out of me.

A bloodcurdling scream is ripped from my lungs. “*NO!*”

Sitting up in bed with a start, I find myself panting and covered in a cold sweat from the creepy nightmare. I take several deep breaths to calm down. I reach up to brush strands of wet hair off my forehead, where they are clinging to my face unattractively.

Benny walks out of our large his-and-hers closet, fastening a tie around his neck as he looks over at me. “Bad dream again? What was it this time?”

“A turkey,” I say, with a slow exhale, trying to conceal my horror.

He chuckles at me. “Those hormones are really doing a number on you, huh?”

“Yeah,” I say tiredly. Then it registers in my brain that he is fully dressed. “Where are you going? It’s Sunday—I thought we could have breakfast.”

“They called a special meeting for the partners at the firm,” he explains to me as he finishes pulling on his blazer.

“Meeting about what?” I ask, slightly disappointed that I’ve failed to make partner yet again this year, even after working myself to the bone.

“Nothing important. Don’t you worry your little head about it,” he says, coming over to ruffle my hair like I’m twelve.

I hate it when he does that. “Benny,” I say softly. “We haven’t spent any real time together when we weren’t sleeping in... months. We haven’t even shared a meal together all week. Maybe two weeks. Maybe more—I can’t even remember.”

“I think these hormones are also making you really needy, right, hun?” Benny asks. He reaches up to smooth a hand over his hair, which is graying handsomely at the temples. He is the epitome of a suave, sophisticated, Manhattan lawyer, sharply dressed and clean cut, smelling of expensive cologne. He exudes power. Since meeting him, my career has taken off with all the connections and opportunities he’s offered me. We’re both earning tons of money. Stupid money. More than I have any idea what to do with.

But sometimes, I would almost prefer if he were a poor lumberjack, like my father was in Minnesota. If it only meant that we could spend a few more minutes together. Sitting down for brunch or dinner a few times a week, talking and laughing together about anything and nothing at all. I miss that feeling of family.

“Sorry, hun. I gotta run,” Benny says, as his phone buzzes incessantly. “Catch you later?”

“Sure,” I say glumly, lying back down and pulling the blanket over myself.

“Hey,” he says suddenly, as an afterthought. “Do you want some help with your injection? I know you hate giving it to yourself.”

“Yes,” I say weakly, dreading the task. “But why are we even doing this? If we have a baby, you’ll barely even see him or her at this rate. You’re always out.”

“Things are going to slow down soon, Gabby,” he promises me. He comes over to the bed and squeezes my shoulder. “Here, let me get the needle for you.” He moves to the night table to collect the medication.

CHAPTER 2



Sighing, I slide the blankets off myself and reach down to lift my satin nightgown up over my butt, exposing the area where I prefer to take the shot. Benny prepares the needle and uses an alcohol wipe to clean my skin, before gently stabbing me in the fatty part of my hip and letting the contents seep into my body. Super romantic. Isn't this what every little girl dreams of, when she imagines someday getting pregnant and starting a family?

Hardly any human touch. Hardly any companionship. Just a little metal stick. Just working long hours, and getting synthetic hormones injected regularly instead of normal bodily fluids. Tons of doctor's visits, to the point of having insane nightmares. More time spent with an ultrasound wand inside my lady parts than an actual man.

Lovely.

"Don't worry," Benny says gently, with a fond slap on my ass—which I'm sure is intended more to help distribute the hormones around under my skin than to actually show me any sort of desire or affection. "We'll get our family started soon, Gabby. Your egg retrieval is only in a few days. And then we can finally plan that big gorgeous wedding you've always dreamed of. Invite your mom, and sisters, and friends in Minnesota."

"That would be nice," I tell him quietly.

"You'll see," he promises me. "Everything you dream of is right around the corner. Almost within reach. So close I can

almost smell it.”

“Okay, okay,” I tell him with a tired smile. “Stop with the pep talk, and go to work, Benny.”

He kisses my cheek and leaves.

After a few minutes, my phone buzzes, and I grumble and sit up in bed. It’s a text from my best friend. It’s a picture of an omelet in his frying pan.

COLE

I was cooking up some eggs for breakfast, and thought of you. Since you’re cooking up some extra eggs in your ovaries...

Cole then sends a bunch of egg emojis and frying pan emojis.

I can’t help but giggle. I respond with a chicken emoji.

GABBY

That better not be my favorite spinach and feta omelet you’re making when I’m halfway across the country! You jerk. I’m jealous.

COLE

I’ll save some for you.

GABBY

I won’t be home for weeks, you goofball.

I LIE HERE FOR A MOMENT, smiling happily in remembrance of our youth, and better times. What I wouldn’t give to be there now, wearing pajamas in the kitchen and laughing with Cole as we prepared breakfast together for our families. My younger sisters, always causing trouble. Trees covered with snow visible outside the windows. It would be a lot less lonely. A lot prettier than all this concrete.

Swinging my legs off the side of the bed, I move to the window and open my curtains with a flourish. “Hello, Manhattan!” I say to the neighboring skyscrapers. Unsurprisingly, they do not respond. I idly rub my sore butt where the needle jabbed me.

My phone buzzes again, and I look down to read it:

COLE

Be honest. Are you dreaming of my Thanksgiving turkey?

The question causes me to scrunch up my nose. How does he know me so well?

GABBY

More like dreaming about creepy doctors with turkey basters

COLE

Ew! What the heck, Gabs?

GABBY

Ugh. I’ll tell you later. It’s just this whole IVF process, it’s driving me crazy.

He takes a second to respond.

COLE

You’ll get through it, Gabs. You’re the strongest person I know. Can’t wait to meet this Ben dude you keep telling me about. I will make sure it’s a killer feast, and we’ll show him a real Snowflake Creek Thanksgiving.

Cole always puts a smile on my face. I miss home.

I’m also pretty sure that Benny is going to propose at Thanksgiving dinner with my family. He’s always told me that he didn’t think marriage was necessary unless a baby was on

the way, and I guess I understand that point of view. Although it has been a bit heartbreaking to see all the negative pregnancy tests, month after month, and to get my hopes up each time, and know that my body just wasn't working.

This one issue has been the only thing standing in the way of my happiness. But in a few days, my eggs will be ready and modern medicine will help us along. Thank goodness for that. I have always wanted to be a mother so badly. I have always wanted to be a wife.

I've often felt like I'm so far behind on my goals and life plan that these things will never happen. The diminished ovarian reserve definitely didn't help.

But that's just the card that I've been dealt, and I'm trying to deal with it as well as I can. I am sure that everything's going to work out for the best, in the end.

When my phone rings, I look down at it, and I am confused to see no messages. Then I realize that it's not my phone.

Looking behind myself to the night table, I see two items.

Oh, Benny forgot his glasses.

He needs them to read over documents, so I'm sure he'll be back for them shortly. Along with his cell phone. He must have forgotten them when rushing to give me the injection.

Feeling bad, I move over to the night table, where his phone is being spammed with messages. A quick glance at the notifications causes my blood to run cold.

ALYSSA

Hey babe, where are you? I've been waiting for an hour...

CHAPTER 3



I can't even believe what I'm reading as the messages keep popping up.

ALYSSA

Did you tell her about us yet? I need to know what's going on.

ALYSSA

Look, I've been thinking about it, and I think I want to keep it. Don't be angry. Please text me back. I'm waiting for you at the hotel.

Hotel? Keep it?

My hands begin shaking slightly. I reach for the glasses case, and open it up, staring down in amazement. There's a familiar, slender white rectangular object there. A pregnancy test. With a positive line. Clear as day. The positive line that I always failed to see. Tears immediately spring to my eyes when I see the stupid little mark that I could never achieve. It's not even a faint hint of a line. It's just a harsh, plain, visible, well-defined positive pink mark.

What the fuck...

I feel my throat becoming very constricted, and it's suddenly hard to breathe. My heart is breaking as I stare down at the little object through fuzzy vision, and the world begins to spin around me. I feel like I am wobbling on my feet, and so dizzy that I may not be able to stay upright.

Meanwhile, Benny's phone continues to receive messages from Alyssa. I can't even bear to look at them anymore. I just can't take my eyes off that horrible pink line on the foreign pregnancy test. That's in my home, in my hand. But does not belong to me.

When the door to my bedroom opens, Benny rushes in with a panic.

"Hey Gabby, I'm so sorry, I must have forgot—fuck."

I turn to look at him, with tears in my eyes and shock on my face.

"I am so sorry," he says, at once, moving toward me cautiously. "I meant to tell you about..."

"Get away from me!" I scream, throwing the glasses case and pregnancy test across the room. "After spending tens of thousands! After giving me the fucking injection this morning!"

"It was an accident, Gabrielle. A one-time only thing—we were working late one night, and it just happened..."

"No," I tell him slowly. "It does *not* just happen."

"Well, with some women it does just happen easily!" he shouts at me.

And there it is. The cruel words that cut me right to the bone. The horrible sentence that I think I can never come back from. Right where I'm weakest, he just stabbed me in the heart.

"Look, she doesn't mean anything to me," Benny is saying as he tries to move closer. "It was just the heat of the moment. This whole process has been really hard on me, too! All the pressure you put on me to perform when you're ovulating. You know it has been a long time since sex was stress-free and enjoyable, without a schedule. I think the fact that it was spontaneous and passionate and just for enjoyment, not for a singular purpose..."

"Are you blaming me for this?" I ask him in a horrified whisper.

“No, not at all. I just want you to know it wasn’t planned. It was just an accident. I didn’t mean for this to happen, Gabby! I’m still committed to our future, to our plans. It was so easy, because she’s only twenty-three...”

“Get out,” I tell him quietly. “Get out! *Get out!*”

“This is my apartment,” he says with confusion.

“*GET OUT!*” I scream at him again, throwing his phone against the wall. He listens immediately this time, and I sink to my knees beside the bed, sobbing. I clutch the bedpost for support.

It’s hard to have a dream destroyed so easily. All my hopes smashed in one morning. I still can’t believe he gave me the fucking injection, when he knew that he had already gotten another woman pregnant.

I feel like I’m going to be sick. But not morning sickness, because I’m not the lucky, easily pregnant twenty-three year old. When I was that age, I was still busting my ass in law school, trying to make something of myself.

Now here I am. Is this the something I wanted to be?

It takes me a few moments to gather my composure, but once I do, I realize that it *is* his apartment. *I* have to get out. Out of this so-called home, out of this city, out of this life. I’m supposed to be at work tomorrow, bright and early Monday morning—but there’s no way in hell I can go back to that place now. Alyssa is his secretary.

I stumble toward my closet, nearly falling over, but managing to grab onto furniture for support to keep myself upright. I reach for my suitcase, and begin throwing everything I can into it. Just anything, and everything. I need to get out.

But where will I go?

There’s only one place in the world I want to be right now, where I know I’ll always be welcomed with open arms. Cole. My mother. Hot cocoa, hugs, and kind faces. I don’t know how I’ll ever tell anyone about this—I am so ashamed. I just

wish I could be in the arms of someone who loves me right now, instead of this cold and ruthless, unforgiving city.

I need to go home to Snowflake Creek.

CHAPTER 4



COLE

*I*t's 5 AM and my alarm is incessantly blaring a high-pitched tone only inches away from my head. At first, I'm dazed and a bit confused at what's going on and why this god awful noise is piercing my ears.

Slowly, my senses start to come back to me. Swiping my arms around in the dark, trying to find my phone in an attempt to silence the noise erupting from it, I accidentally knock it onto the floor... Great. Now it's even further away from my comfortable pillow and *STILL* blaring!

Mustering up all the strength I can find at this early time of day I swing out of bed to retrieve my phone to finally silence this alarm that I can't quite still recall why is going off. But somehow my phone has hidden itself in between my bed and nightstand, requiring me to get on all fours to reach it.

It's almost as if my phone is playing games with me, making it as difficult as possible to make it stop yelling at me to wake up. Finally grasping it I turn it over so I can see the screen:

Pick up Gabby from airport.

Crap! How could I forget that I had promised to pick her up?

I must have had one too many drinks last night at the company party. That's not really like me. I must have been dreading meeting Gabby's new boyfriend or fiancé or

whatever he is, and trying to make myself temporarily forget that she will never be mine.

After all these years of wishing things had been different between us, I have come to finally accept that I've lost my chance. I had a million opportunities to try to make us something more when we were younger, but I let foolish things stand in my way.

My father's advice. The closeness of our families.

My own insecurities. I was always too scared to let my heart get broken and afraid to lose a childhood friend that I've cherished so deeply.

Wanting to support her dreams, and help her get through law school. Help her chase her goals of becoming a super successful lawyer in New York City. I knew that today would be hard, seeing her with another man for the first time, and I knew I'd have to smile and act happy for her—and I am happy for her.

There's just always that little twinge of pain underneath it all.

That little voice inside my head that has told me for years: *Hey, you idiot. Gabby's your soulmate. She's the one. She's the love of your life. Do something about it!*

But it's too late now. I let her get away.

I guess that accepting that knowledge required a few more drinks than I would usually indulge in. To be honest, I don't even remember what time I got in or even how I ended up back here. Ugh, my head is starting to pound from a combination of the alcohol and entirely too good of an alarm noise to wake me up from that deep liquor induced sleep.

Looking down at the time, it's now 5:07 am. I have 23 minutes to get showered, dressed properly to impress, and on the road so I'm not leaving her to wait once she lands. But then she'll be with him. Ben. What's Ben short for, anyway? Probably Ebenezer Scrooge. That's fitting, since he's stealing the joy out of my Christmas holidays, and probably my life. Maybe just five more minutes of rest...

Shit. I wake up with a start after dozing off, and see that it's 5:21 AM already. I'm not any closer to getting out the front door. Finally launching myself up, I make my way to the bathroom and turn on the water to let it warm up, while I shave lightning fast.

While I lather up my face and body, I go over the quickest route I could take to shave off time from my commute to the airport. Minneapolis is a few hours away from Snowflake Creek. Only half paying attention to the razor in my hand, my thoughts are flooded with how much I've missed Gabby these past few years. A knot forms in my stomach, of longing. It's been hard getting through the days without seeing her smile.

As fond memories drift in and out of my head, I hear a buzz coming from my phone. Quickly, I glance down to see what notification has popped up. Is she landing ahead of schedule? Or is the flight delayed due to the snow? Opening the message, my heart sinks deep into my gut.

“Good morning, sleepy lump of Cole. Just wanted to let you know that I don't need a ride from the airport anymore, so you don't have to rush around like a maniac! And cut yourself shaving! I'm going to delay my flight by a few days—my sister says she can pick me up then.”

Hmm, that seems unlike Gabby. She never cancels plans on me last minute, and I'm always the one who picks her up from the airport whenever she comes home to visit. It's our little tradition. Also, I don't think either of her sisters are even in Minnesota right now. Did she lie to me?

Is something wrong?

Ouch! Somehow, I seemed to have forgotten that I have a sharp blade in my hand, caressing my face, and nicked myself. I frown as I study the little trickle of blood sliding down my chin. How does she know me so well? Even after all these years, it's like she still knows me better than I know myself.

Alright, alright. Let's shake this off, and make some use of being awake so early in the morning! There's all this adrenaline flowing through my body from the rush to get ready and on the road. I might as well change into sweats and head downstairs to my home gym, to distract my brain from going into overdrive trying to sort out what could be wrong with Gabby.

Something just seems off.

Is it this Benadryl guy? Is he giving my Gabby stress? He better not fucking harm a hair on my girl's head, or he'll have to answer to me.

Despite everything, I was really looking forward to seeing Gabby. I *need* to see her, and it's confusing that she would ditch our plans last minute. I guess I should be grateful that I don't have to spend half the day driving, but I can't help worrying about her. Lifting heavy things is the best way to distract my mind from running through all the possible scenarios. Plus I really could use the extra cardio to work off all that liquor I drank last night. Time to sweat.

CHAPTER 5



GABBY

Sitting in my car at a gas station along the interstate, with all of my earthly belongings crammed into the trunk and backseat, I polish off a hamburger. I feel a bit bad about lying to Cole. I just didn't know how to tell him how badly I failed. I didn't know how to tell anyone back home, really. So, I just checked into a hotel for a few days, and mentally prepared myself for the long drive-of-shame back home to Minnesota.

My mother was so proud of my career, and everything I fought to accomplish. It was the career she would have loved to pursue, if she had been given more opportunities in life. She lived vicariously through my success. How do I tell her that I turned my back on a job where I was making nearly \$300K per year, and just disappeared on my employers? With no notice, no plan.

I just left, with all my possessions still in my office, and simply couldn't go back.

Because of a guy.

She'll surely scream at me in Spanish for at least three hours. Twice a day. For somewhere between three weeks and three years. And I wouldn't understand half of it, but she wouldn't be wrong.

I've still been reeling from getting my entire life upended. I have felt lost, and crazy, and uncertain of what to do. I wanted to talk to someone so badly, but I wasn't sure who would understand. Even my siblings would surely just offer

me tons of positivity, and reiterate their longstanding offers to donate their eggs to me.

Which is very kind, supportive, and saintlike of them—Ginny and Gilly, my sweet younger sisters mean so much to me. I would be happy to have a child containing their DNA. It's close enough, right? I know we would all do anything for each other. Donate kidneys, lungs, bone marrow, or a shoulder to cry on. But still, in this moment, I don't think they would really understand. I think they would pity me.

Awww, poor Gabby, everyone will say. That's the last thing I need right now. I will literally scream if anyone says that. Which is why I haven't been talking to anyone very much.

I wanted to leave immediately after “the event” but I decided that I wasn't going to waste what could be some of the final few remaining eggs that belong to my body. Not when I already did the injections to stimulate the follicles.

I wasn't going to let him take *everything* from me.

I decided to freeze them. Unfertilized.

We just extracted a few of the last, lonely little eggs—but I feel better that they are safe.

Just in case I ever want to try again. Who knows? Maybe I'll finally find a decent guy who loves me, at some point, many years in the future. Maybe I'll be forty-five, or sixty, or eighty. Surrogacy is a thing. Hopefully, I'm ready to do this while my uterus still works—or at least while my little sisters are still young enough to volunteer. Hopefully, before I'm so old and weak that I can't even hold the baby. Before my bones become brittle and turn to dust.

I begin eating a second hamburger.

My body was a bit worn out and I suffered from some terrible cramps after the mini surgery to remove the eggs, but otherwise everything was rather pleasant and easy. No creepy doctors, and no more creepy nightmares.

I guess my nightmares were really just warning me about Benny after all. It wasn't the doctors or the procedures that

really frightened me. It was the jerk who nearly became the father of my children.

My whole body shudders.

I know what I'm grateful for, this Thanksgiving. That I found out who Ben really was before I did something so permanent with him. And of course, I'm grateful that technology allows us modern ladies to freeze our eggs, and take as long as we want to find a good man.

Because from my experience of dating in New York City... it could take *a while*. Like a very, very, very long while.

When my phone rings, I am startled to see that Cole is calling me. My stomach twists. He never calls. He must have been able to sense that I was lying.

Here is a good man, actually. The best man I know.

Unfortunately, he just happens to be way out of my league—the son of the richest man in Snowflake Creek, while I was the daughter of their maid. And more importantly, he was just not that interested in me. Not in *that* way. Which grieved me for many years, as I secretly pined for him as a teenage girl—but I'm an adult now, and extremely thankful for our solid, dependable friendship.

“Hey,” I say softly, answering the phone.

“Gabrielle Mendoza, what the heck is going on with you?” Cole demands. “Where are you? What's happening? Are you safe? Are you coming home for Thanksgiving?”

CHAPTER 6



*I*t's really good to hear his voice. It warms my frozen heart up a few degrees.

"I'm okay," I tell him. "Things have just been... really hectic around here."

"But you're coming home, right?" he asks.

"Yes. But I'm not sure if I'll make it there in time for turkey day. But I'll definitely be there for Christmas."

"Come on, you said that last year!" he sighs deeply. "And the year before. Three years in a row without my best girl is absolutely unacceptable. I need my Gabby fix for the holidays, or I won't be able to survive the rest of the year."

I smile sadly to myself. "I'll try my best, Col-ar Bear."

He seems to pause at the old childhood nickname. There's a heavy silence on the line, before he speaks again. "What's going on, Gabs?"

I sigh deeply, feeling the tears prick the back of my eyes again. I try to hold it together. "It's just... I'll tell you later."

"Did the IVF work?" he asks. "Are you expecting a tiny little Gabbster?"

A single tear falls. Just one, that's okay. I wipe it away and try to breathe slowly. "No, Cole. I didn't get any embryos implanted. Actually—I didn't get any embryos made at all."

"Why is that?" he asks.

I contemplate how much information I want to give him. I need to be careful, because I don't want to kick him into crazy, overprotective, killer mode. Since we were kids, if anyone in school tried to mess with me, even in the slightest, Cole would fiercely defend me with his fists and words, and pulverize bullies in a protective rage.

While I always greatly appreciated having him in my corner—I had to learn to conceal some things to protect Cole from himself. So that he didn't get suspended, expelled, or arrested. If he knew what Benny did to me? Who knows what he would do to him...

"Stop hiding things from me, Gabs," he says with annoyance.

"Okay," I whisper, trying to think of how to say this diplomatically. "I just decided that Benny wasn't an appropriate partner, and I didn't want him to be the one to fertilize my eggs. But I had them extracted, and they are frozen."

Cole exhales loudly, in a sigh that seems like a gush of relief. "Are you feeling okay after the procedure?"

"Yes, a little sore, but it wasn't too bad," I respond.

"And what about that Ebenezer guy? Did he hurt you? What did he do? Talk to me."

The name draws a genuine smile from my lips. "Ben isn't short for Ebenezer, silly. What made you think that was his name?"

"Because it's a classic name for a douchebag," Cole responds. "I had a feeling something was wrong. Are you safe? I'll hop on a plane and come over there right now if—"

"I'm safe, Cole. I promise. I'm in my car right now, just going for a bit of a drive to clear my head. I've already moved out of the apartment, so I won't be seeing him again. Ever. This is nice actually. I haven't driven in a while, you know, living in the city."

"I'm glad you got out. It's his loss, Gabs." He takes a deep breath, and I wonder what he is thinking. "Is there anything I

can do to help?”

“You always help me,” I tell him honestly. “Just by being you.”

He pauses again. “Well, when you get home, let’s get drunk and have some sushi. And soft fresh cheeses. And everything we couldn’t have done if you were pregnant.”

“It’s a deal,” I respond. And just like that, I’m feeling a bit better. A tiny bit.

CHAPTER 7



This long, twenty-one hour drive is starting to be relaxing and healing.

Considering everything that has happened, I think I'm handling it quite well. Maybe. Well, better since the call with Cole. And since I stopped at a motel for a little nap.

Before that, I was a bit of a mess. The radio kept playing love songs that made me feel a variety of emotions, from sobbing uncontrollably, to getting angry at the lies told to me by popular music, and smashing my dashboard to change the station, to just getting sick to my stomach and needing to pull over to seethe in fury.

I stop a few times to get gas, and I also got ice cream, donuts, and French fries, which I piled into my passenger seat and used to stuff into my face as I drove and listened to more love songs. Both sad and happy.

But now I'm a bit more calm.

Cole has always given me such a sense of strength like that. Growing up with him at Mistletoe Manor, I must have secretly crushed on him for decades, hiding behind the guise of friendship.

My mother always warned me not to get my hopes up. She drilled into my head that the Whittaker family was ridiculously wealthy, and Cole's father was an illustrious movie producer... while we had nothing. We were just the help. I was just the Spanish housekeeper's daughter. And the daughter of a lumberjack.

Maybe that's why I was so driven to go to law school and try to improve my station in life. Not just for myself, but for my mother to think more of me. Maybe I was even hopeful that Cole would see me as something more, someday.

But despite all the differences in our backgrounds, and my awareness of how I was supposed to feel "less than"—all of that melted away when he smiled at me.

When we met each other out by the pond, covered in dirt and catching frogs together and giggling as we placed them in his older brother's bed.

We spent hours studying together in the library, speaking on every subject until we knew the insides of each other's minds better than we knew our own.

Growing together through every pain and struggle.

Like when Cole lost his mother. A dark cloud that settled over the Whittaker family, and Blaze stopped making movies. The old mansion had always needed a lot of work and upkeep with constant repairs and renovations, but Blaze just stopped caring.

He stopped caring about himself, his career, or his sons, and fell into a deep depression. We were young then, and didn't quite know how to handle it. It took Cole and I many years and many creative efforts of trying to help him get past his grief and feel better.

We created the idea for the beautiful Mistletoe Mausoleum, nestled in the Snowflake Creek cemetery. A peaceful place that we could go to sit and remember Cole's mother.

Cole took over the upkeep of Mistletoe Manor, but decided that it was filled with too many memories for it to be a healthy place for his father to live anymore. He decided to rent it out, as a historic local hotel for visitors to the area.

He helped his dad move to a more peaceful location, away from the townsfolk, at a quiet, rustic cabin in the woods, where Blaze slowly began to regain his health.

But all those years spent caring for his father took a toll on Cole, who had never been able to grieve on his own. He decided to join the marines for a few years, and was doing tours overseas while I was in law school.

However, we always kept in touch.

When Cole came back from fighting in combat, he was different. Distant. It seemed like what he had experienced really affected him, and he occasionally would talk to me about it. He tried to take over more responsibilities in his father's company, but he had a hard time dealing with people sometimes.

He just seemed like he had some healing of his own that he needed to do, and as much as I tried, there was some part of him that was shut down, and there was nothing I could do to help.

I know that he dated some women, but he never really seemed to have any serious relationships. I could never really understand why. Maybe I can try to talk to him some more, and see how he's doing when I get home. It has been a few years that I've been super focused on my career, and my (now destroyed) relationship, and haven't had a chance to visit.

I feel a bit foolish, and wish I had prioritized coming home more often. I never really thought that he needed me. *I need my Gabby fix, or I won't be able to survive the rest of the year*, is what I think he said earlier. It made me feel so good, like I was important and essential to someone.

My heart swells. Maybe I've been a shitty friend these past few years, and a shitty daughter and sister. I've been so selfish and focused on building a life that all crumbled to dust in a matter of minutes—and made me realize that my career didn't really matter to me that much at all.

I am looking forward to being around the people who really care again.

I just hope they will forgive me for the neglect.

I hope there's still time to do better.

Check out the rest of this new release for November 2022:

Miracle on Mistletoe Lane

CHAPTER 8



Getting closer to Snowflake Creek, the old familiar roads are starting to make my heart swell with nostalgia.

Each stretch of highway seemed to bring back old memories. Driving through downtown Chicago reminded me of when Cole and I would beg our parents to let us go there to see our favorite musicians perform. All the places we got to experience together for the first time, with his big brothers or my younger sisters. All the parties and events that seemed like the most exciting times ever—the pinnacle of existence to a teenager.

Driving past Minneapolis also brought back memories. More recent ones—flying home for weddings and funerals. Getting to see my mother and sisters for a brief day or two, only every couple years. And Cole, dressed up in a fine suit.

As I make the turn to drive onto Main Street, I feel emotion overwhelm me. The town is already lit up like it came directly from the pages of a storybook, on this cold November evening. A shiver of *déjà vu* shakes me, as a million memories hit me all at once. All the beautiful feelings I've ever felt here come rushing back, shaking me to the core. I didn't know that Christmas lights could be so powerful.

I have to pull over and stop driving for a moment, as tears fill my eyes. I guess I didn't know just how much this place meant to me. How much I missed the people, and the love I experienced here.

A few light snowflakes flutter from the sky, dancing over the gorgeous, festive decorations. It seems almost silly and ridiculous, that a place could have such an impact on me. But it has been so many hours on the road, and I'm absolutely exhausted. Maybe the emotional and life-changing events of the past few days are just getting to me.

It was hard to lose my job, my boyfriend, and my whole future so quickly. I thought I was going to be coming home for Thanksgiving to celebrate some great success... I thought I could be proud of myself, and hold my head up high. I thought I'd be carrying a child. I thought that my real life was finally about to begin, after being in limbo for so long, waiting and waiting for the next chapter of my story.

But now it has all crumbled.

The future feels rocky and uncertain, and I can't see a way ahead.

Even though I'm here, in a place where everyone knows me—I'm not quite sure where to go. I haven't told my mother about what happened, and I'm not sure I want to, just yet. I'm not ready to hear her screaming at me. Maybe I can just delay it by a day or so. I could always go and stay with Cole?

No. I wipe the sleeve of my shirt across my eyes. I'm a crying mess, and I don't want him to see me like this. Maybe I should just take a few minutes to gather my composure, and crash at the hotel in town, at least for the night.

Nodding to myself, I head back onto the road, driving down Main Street toward the hotel. But then I see someone I know. At a place I know and love. I slam on the brakes a little too hard, sliding slightly on the slick, icy roads. But I wiggle the steering wheel perfectly to make my tires catch grip again, because my reflexes haven't forgotten how to handle this weather, even though it's been a while.

An older, silvery-blond woman in an apron is dusting snow off the signs in front of her store, and she looks over at me with surprise as my car skids to a stop close to the curb.

"Gabby?" she calls out in surprise.

“Skye!” I say with a gasp, as I park the car and turn it off, and get out to greet her with a hug. She is a close friend of my mom’s, and helping her at this little bakery was my first real job.

“Well, what the heck are you doing in these parts?” she asks, with her hands on her hips. “I thought you abandoned us for the big apple, and got yourself a bigshot boyfriend.”

My face falls, and I am aware that my misery and tiredness must show in the giant bags under my eyes. I feel like I’ve aged forty years in the last week.

“Oh, heavens, look at you,” Skye whispers, taking off one of her gloves so that she can place a warm hand on my cheek. “You look like hell, Gabs.”

“I know,” I tell her glumly.

“Come inside,” she says gently. “I’ll make your favorite pumpkin spiced latte, and we can chat and catch up.”

“Can I have one of your famous salted caramel apple ciders instead?” I ask hopefully. “New York has ruined pumpkin spice for me, with their weak and flavorless beverages.”

“Absolutely, my dear. And if I’m not mistaken, you look like you could use a shot of tequila in the cider,” Skye suggests with a wink.

“That would be perfect,” I tell her seriously. “And if you don’t mind—can I bake some cupcakes while you make the cider? I haven’t had the time to bake anything in years—and to be honest, I think it would be relaxing. I miss your kitchen.”

“You don’t ever have to ask me permission to bake cupcakes, young lady. If you want to break into my store in the middle of the night and bake cupcakes, be my guest. Your cupcakes are just divine—even better than my daughter’s and she studied as a pastry chef in France. Why you didn’t go to culinary school, I will never know.”

“Because it would have disappointed my mother,” I whisper, as tears fill my eyes again. “But I guess I did that anyway.”

Skye puts an arm around me and guides me toward her shop. “Listen, we’re going to have a little midnight bakery chat, like we always used to. I love Blanca, but I don’t always agree with the amount of pressure she’s put on you girls. So if you want to spill your guts, anything you say is safe with me.”

“Thank you Skye,” I say softly, as I walk into the shop with her. The moment the familiar aroma of freshly baked pastries floods into my nostrils, like a ghost of happier times, the tears start flowing out of my eyes again. But these are happy tears. It feels like sanctuary.

Surrounded by warmth, the cozy glow of the town, and the quiet peacefulness of the bakery, I feel like I’m finally in a safe space.

CHAPTER 9



“*H*e did *WHAT?*” Skye shrieks.

“Yeah,” I respond as I vigorously mix a chaotic bundle of ingredients together in a mixing bowl. I’m sure it was a dreadful attempt at remembering my signature old cupcake recipe. It will probably taste awful. But at least keeping my hands and mind busy like this eases the pain.

I beat the shit out of the batter with my whisk until I feel like I’m going to break the bowl. “She wasn’t even a paralegal. She was just a secretary. And he said that it was stress-free with her, *spontaneous and passionate*. Less pressure. Because she can just get pregnant easily, accidentally, poof! Like magic.”

“I am so sorry, darling. My husband did the same thing,” Skye says softly. “But it was after Stella and Sam were born, and then he left me to raise them alone. At least you can count your blessings that it was a few days before you fertilized those eggs.”

“Three days!” I tell her angrily as I violently throw the little polka-dotted paper cupcake cups into the pan. “He even gave me the bloody hormone injection *a few minutes* before I found out. Like everything was normal!”

“Sounds like that Ben dude was a piece of work,” Skye says with a shudder. “I’m so glad you got out.”

I am grateful for the ability to talk to Skye, who was almost like a second mother to me, growing up. Unlike most of Snowflake Creek, where everyone has had perfect lives

with hardly any divorce or hardship, it was not the case for her family. “I guess Stella wasn’t so lucky either,” I say as I calm down enough to pour the batter into the cupcake cups.

Skye’s daughter is around my age, and attended school at the same time I did. We were always good friends as children, and part of many of the same clubs and sports. I remember being very upset on her behalf when her lifelong boyfriend, Jack abandoned her shortly before she found out she was pregnant with her daughter, Luna.

“The Valentine women have never been lucky in love,” Skye says sadly. “But I think that luck may be changing. Perhaps...”

“How so?” I ask her, curiously. “And where is Stella, by the way? Is she around?”

“She’s actually in Hawaii,” Skye muses thoughtfully, as if this information surprises her. “With Jack.”

“Jack came home?” I ask, startled.

“Yes. After everything that happened, they reconciled, and they are expecting another child soon,” Skye informs me.

I nearly drop the spatula I have been using to scoop the batter into the cups. “I didn’t expect that to happen,” I say softly, pausing. “Oh, she must have been so happy! And angry. And happy.”

“Yes,” Skye says, with an emotional laugh. She wipes a tear away. “It has been a crazy few years. I have so much to tell you. Now plop that in the oven, my dear, before you destroy this kitchen with your furious mixing and whisking. Come sit and enjoy your cider.”

I sigh as I place the pan of cupcakes into the preheated oven and close it gently. Then I head over to sit at the countertop. The cider she has prepared is gorgeous golden brown, with a thick layer of freshly whipped cream and drizzled homemade caramel sauce. Fresh apple slices garnish the sides of the glass, along with a stick of cinnamon.

“God, this looks like heaven,” I say before putting it to my lips. I take a long, deep drink and let the soothing powers of

the cider wash over me. Including the touch of tequila she added. “But it tastes even better than heaven.”

“I’d like to see New York do that,” Skye says smugly.

“Heal everything that’s wrong with me in one sip? That’s only possible in this bakery,” I say solemnly. Then a large yawn escapes my lips. “Maybe I should go to the hotel and get some rest after this, I’ve been driving forever.”

“You could stay in Stella’s room,” Skye suggests. “I’m sure she wouldn’t mind. It’s an empty house, and I would enjoy the company. Heck, you can stay as long as you want, as long as you make more of those cupcakes.”

“As long as you don’t tell my mother I’m home,” I say cautiously. “I would love to stay. I just need to build up my courage.”

“What about Cole?” Skye asks.

“Not him either. Not while I look like death like this.”

“He’s been really excited for you to come home,” Skye tells me as she sips her own spiked cider.

“How do you know that?” I ask with surprise.

“He stops by the bakery sometimes, to buy treats to cheer up his father,” she explains softly.

“Lemon meringue pie,” I say suddenly, as it comes back to me.

“Oh, you remember,” Skye says as she gazes off at the shelves of her bakery. “Yes, I bake it especially for him, every Thursday. But speaking of Cole—do you know that poor boy is basically in love with you?”

“What? No,” I tell her, with a dismissive wave of my hand.

“Why not?” she asks. “You two were always joined at the hip. Why did nothing ever happen between you?”

“I just... I don’t know,” I say quietly. “He was always so perfect and wonderful. The popular boy, the sporty boy, the rich boy. I was just me. I didn’t think I stood a chance. My mother always warned me not to try.”

Skye sighs deeply. “Blanca always had some silly ideas, and I wish she didn’t drill them into your head. She means well, but... why shouldn’t you try? To be with someone who clearly cares for you so much.”

“Because it rips your whole heart out if something goes wrong,” I tell her in a whisper. “Like it did to Stell. At least I’ve only been seeing Benny for a few years. It hurts so bad because it’s fresh. But he wasn’t a lifelong friend. He wasn’t... my soulmate. If I tried to be with Cole and I lost him, well... I think I would just die.”

“I understand, my dear,” Skye says, patting my hand. “But what is life, without risk? You know, I actually went to school with Cole’s father? Similar thing, I guess. Blaze and I were friends, but he was wealthy and popular, and I didn’t think I had a snowball’s chance in hell. He could have any girl he wanted, so why would he want me? So, I never tried. I just settled for *easy* instead of fighting for *wonderful* and I think I’ll always regret it. I’ll always wonder how my life could have been different.”

“That’s really sad,” I tell Skye softly. “Maybe it’s not too late—he’s single and sad, and you know how to bake his favorite pie.”

“It’s too late for me, my dear. I’m an old hag, totally decrepit.”

I snort out my cider. “What the heck are you talking about, Skye? You’re gorgeous. You’re like... a mega-MILF. I hope I look even a quarter as good as you do, at your age. Heck, I already look older than you right now.”

“Tonight, you do look a bit like a skeleton, Gabby,” she says with a lifted eyebrow. “I may have seen people getting several rounds of chemotherapy who look more alive than you do. But that’s okay, once you get a good night’s sleep, and some more medicinal cider, I’ll fix you right up.”

“Baking cupcakes does feel very therapeutic,” I admit, glancing at the oven. “I can’t wait to decorate them.”

Skye smiles. “You always were the best at that. Look, I appreciate your help, but you’re a bit overqualified to work here anymore. I can’t afford to pay you half a million dollars per year, or whatever insane salary you were making in the city.”

“I was headed in that direction,” I tell her softly.

“Damn, girl,” she says with a low whistle. Then she frowns. “But what does any of that money matter, if you’re miserable and look like a skeleton?” Skye asks.

“It’s worthless,” I respond hoarsely, staring down at my cider.

“Happiness isn’t directly related to your earnings. I got a ton of cash from Sam’s life insurance, years ago—but do you think I could enjoy a cent of it? I would have given all of it, and more, to know that my baby boy was okay.” She wipes her sleeve across her eyes. “There’s always a heavy price to pay, it seems. You get a ton of money, but it costs a piece of your soul.”

“My soul could really use some rehab right about now,” I tell her.

“Well, then you’ve come to the right place,” she tells me. “If you really don’t want anyone to know you’re home, you’d better move your car around to the back before someone recognizes it. Gossip still spreads like wildfire in this town.”

“I will. Thanks for letting me stay here,” I tell her with a nod.

“Thanks for making your special cupcakes,” she says with a grin. “I’ve missed you, darling. Just don’t take too long to see your mother, or Cole—everyone else misses you, too.”

CHAPTER 10



Over the next few days, I spend most of my time baking in the kitchen to help Skye prepare holiday themed treats for sale. I find the cooking to be hypnotically relaxing just as I always did when I was younger. Once I start, I can't seem to stop. And it feels really therapeutic and refreshing.

Skye even said that I'm beginning to regain some color in my cheeks, and look less like a skeleton. I'm also feeling less like a skeleton. Maybe I was worn down from the side effects of the IVF drugs and the surgery, although it was minor.

I am in the middle of carefully decorating Thanksgiving-themed cupcakes with little pilgrim's hats on them, when my phone rings. I glance at my smartwatch and see that it is my mother, and sigh and wipe my hands off on my apron before taking the phone out of my pocket to answer.

"Hola Mama," I say as cheerfully as I can muster.

"Hey mija, how's it going?" she asks. "Just wondering if everything is good with you and Benny, and if you two are still coming home for the holidays? How's work been lately? Your sisters keep asking about you, and—"

"Sorry, Mama, I'm really busy," I say, which is kind of a lie, but also not entirely a lie. "Work is really hectic, but I'll try my best to come home soon, okay? I'll see you in a few days."

"Alright, mija. *Hasta luego*. Take care of yourself..."

"Adios, Mama," I say, hanging up and then sighing deeply. I still can't bear to tell her everything. I move to the sink to

wash my hands, then dry them carefully and return to decorating my cupcakes.

I don't know what it is about this simple task that helps the pain. It just gives me something to focus on temporarily, completely. Something fun, idyllic, innocent and sweet. When I was younger, working at this bakery, I used to imagine someday having kids to do these silly designs with. A cute little turkey pumpkin, with candy-corn feathers and little googly eyes.

But here I am, over double the age I was back then, and not much has changed. Maybe I've disappointed myself far more than I did to my mother. Besides, she has two other wonderful daughters who aren't total screw ups, like me.

The phone calls from my mother and texts from Cole have been increasing lately, getting worried and asking me when I'll be coming home, and if I'm going to make it to Thanksgiving dinner. I've deflected and delayed as much as possible with both of them, but I know that I can't put it off much longer.

I'll have to go see them soon.

I am pulling a fresh batch of cupcakes out of the oven when I hear the bell to the store ring. It's been ringing all day, but this time, I hear a masculine voice that causes all the hairs on my arms to stand up straight.

"Hey, Miss Skye. Got any of that lemon meringue for me?"

My stomach does flip flops. I stand absolutely deathly still where I am, hidden away behind a wall in the kitchen. I nearly drop the cupcake tray, but I move to carefully put it down, with shaking hands. I try to breathe very quietly and shallow.

"Right over here, Cole!" Skye says. "My, my, you are looking fine today, young man. Those arms of yours are looking *very* buff. Have you been working out?"

"Actually, yes. I have been lifting a lot of weights lately, as stress relief. Thank you for noticing, Miss Skye."

Hey! Is she flirting with him? He sounds like he is blushing. I roll my eyes a little in annoyance. I guarantee,

she's doing it just to annoy me because she knows I'm listening. Classic Skye.

“What’s stressing you out, Cole?” the older woman asks him gently.

“Ah, you know. The usual. I’ve been staying at the old Mistletoe Manor and doing more renovations to keep it from falling apart. Then there’s work, my frustrating father, my annoying brothers, and... wait. Wait a second.” He pauses and his voice changes. “Who made this cupcake?”

I inhale slowly.

My heart starts beating a little faster.

“Which cupcake?” Skye asks innocently. “Oh, that’s just a normal cupcake, Cole.”

“This?” he asks, and I can almost imagine him holding it up and shaking it. “With this tiny perfectly painted pumpkin? This is not a normal cupcake! This is exactly like Gabby used to make. I would know her handiwork anywhere.”

“And who do you think taught her to make cupcakes like that?” Skye asks.

“So, she hasn’t been here?” Cole asks sternly. “You haven’t seen her?”

“Of course, not. I am sure she will visit you as soon as she gets to town.”

“I hope so,” Cole says, but he doesn’t seem convinced. “Maybe I’ll pick up some of her favorite desserts while I’m here, so that I have something to offer her when she visits. What do you suggest?”

“Anything,” Skye says with a laugh. “That girl eats like a vacuum cleaner.”

I make a face at this description, but Cole chuckles in response. “This is true. I do miss watching her eat, she’s so fricking adorable.”

Oh my gosh. My stomach flip flops some more and all my insides ache with missing him so badly. It’s tortuous knowing

that he's only a few feet away. I just want to run around this wall, and tackle him with a giant bear hug.

“Especially if it's a hamburger,” Cole adds. “She almost shoves her whole face into the burger, and somehow gets the ketchup all over her cheeks. I have no idea how. But it's so darn cute.”

Skye laughs loudly at this. “I don't think you have to get her anything, Cole. Just seeing you will be enough to brighten her day.”

“Nah, I doubt that. I'm going to prepare some sushi rice, and get some kanikama—I don't know why, but she loves that imitation crab meat more than real crab. I promised her sushi when she comes home.”

“That's really kind of you,” Skye says softly.

“Is there anything else you think I should get?” he asks. “I don't know, Miss Skye. Is there anything you suggest I could do... to cheer her up? She seems kind of weird lately. Kind of down.”

I close my eyes in amazement. What an absolute sweetheart.

Then I feel my nose tickling with the beginnings of a sneeze. I pinch it with my thumb and forefinger to try to prevent a loud explosion of air from my nose that would surely alert him to my presence.

I barely manage to fight the sneeze off, long enough for Skye to sell him the lemon meringue pie and get rid of him. She immediately marches back into the kitchen, and glares at me.

“Listen girl—that man is head over heels in love with you. If you don't go after him, right now, then I will.”

“Yeah?” I say weakly.

“He's also crazy good-looking. He definitely takes after his father. Holy shit, he is handsome, and gets better looking every year. Hot damn. If I were a little bit younger, I would have

stolen him away while you were hiding in the kitchen like a scared little mouse.”

“I’ll make a deal with you,” I tell her. “I’ll gather up my courage and go to Cole’s house right now, if you take your lemon meringue pie to Blaze Whittaker yourself one of these days, and go have a chat with him. Because the way I see it, you’re pretty scared too.”

“Okay,” Skye says, holding out her palm. “You got a deal. Let’s shake on it.”

I grasp her hand and shake it firmly.

“But ‘one of these days’ could mean literally any one of these days, so that could mean in ten or twenty or thirty years. You need to be more specific with your phrasing,” she says with a wink.

“Skye,” I say with a groan.

“Come on, Gabby—go get ready. You’ve got cupcake batter on your face,” she says, reaching for a towel and helping me to wipe it off.

And that simple gesture is so caring that it makes me feel strong and loved and capable of doing this.

CHAPTER 11



When I get in my car, I head directly toward Cole's old family mansion. I'm still not ready to face my mother, but I can't really go another day—or another hour without seeing my best friend. Not just because he's planning to make my favorite sushi. I text him on the way over:

Hey, I'm finally here in town. Is it okay if I come over?

He responds instantly. *Hell, yes! I've been waiting basically forever.*

The response causes a lump to form in my throat as I pull into his driveway, and look up at the stately home. I get out of the car and walk slowly, anxiously toward the front door.

As I move my hand to ring the bell, the door swings open and Cole steps out without hesitation, wrapping his arms around me tightly, and holding me close before I can even say hello.

At first, I'm tense and surprised, but I slowly relax into his embrace. I let him hold me for almost a full minute, wordlessly, passionately.

And a whole lifetime of emotions come flooding back to me. I feel perfectly at home, and perfectly like where I should be. Tears touch my eyes. I never want him to stop holding me. Ever.

How do I tell him that?

After being in such a cold and lifeless relationship with Benny, where it felt like we were professional work partners

more than lovers, it almost feels strange to be really touched. Really held. Really loved.

It washes over me like a healing wave of magic, and it feels like a present for every holiday wrapped up all in one. Thanksgiving, Christmas, New Years, and Valentine's Day—all the ones we missed and all the ones that are yet to come. This is all I really need to be happy.

He holds me in a way that feels like a promise, that he's never going to leave my side. I guess... he never really has. I'm the one who left. First for school. Then he left for tours overseas.

I wish life hadn't pulled us in separate directions like that. But now, standing here, wrapped up in his arms, it feels like not even a day has passed since he last touched me. Yet it also somehow... feels so different.

It feels greater than it ever did before. More intense, more desperate.

"Hi Gabby," he says gently, and I realize then that we haven't spoken a word to each other in all this time. We've just been standing here and hugging for—I have no idea how long.

His body just feels so perfect against mine. So different than it did when we were children. So hard, and strong, and finely muscled. Skye wasn't joking. He's buffed up quite a lot.

God. He was always the cutest boy in town (in my totally unbiased opinion) but now he's an utterly irresistible, steaming hunk of pure man flesh. What am I supposed to do with all of that?

"Hi," I whisper softly in response, against his shirt.

"You drove here," he says with surprise, when he looks up to see my car. "With all your belongings?"

"Yes," I respond. "Sorry I lied about the airport stuff. I just—was going through some stuff."

"It's okay. This is good," he says with a nod, reaching for my hand and giving it a squeeze. "Then you're staying."

My heart leaps into my throat. I don't really know what he's saying. I know what I want him to be saying, but there's no way he's saying what I think he's saying. That would be... insane. Totally out of left field. "Yes," I find myself responding. "I'm staying."

He wraps his hands around my waist, and pulls me close, fiercely—and for a moment, I think he's going to kiss me. I hold my breath, praying that he's going to kiss me.

But he abruptly catches himself, and pulls away, clearing his throat. "I'm going to grab your things, then I'm going to make you some sushi," he says as he nods briskly and heads toward my car to bring my belongings inside.

I watch him move purposefully, feeling stunned by the passionate way he touched me, and drinking in the beautiful sight of the man I've loved for so long.

What has changed between us? Something has changed, right? Am I just imagining it?

"Come inside," he says softly, as he carries my suitcases into the house. "There's no reason for you to ever leave."

I stare after him in wonder, startled by the conviction in his tone. Puzzled.

Then he turns back to look at me, as if to clarify: "I'm not letting you leave me, again. Just so you know. Even if it means I have to tie you up. So... just deal with it."

And somehow, I just melt for him. My insides melt into a puddle of happiness and longing, and it takes every ounce of my strength not to throw myself at him. My heart soars happily, feeling weirdly free at the idea of being trapped with him.

Why would I ever want to leave him again? I couldn't imagine beginning to try. This is where I belong. It's where I've always belonged.

CHAPTER 12



Laying in front of the fireplace with Cole, holding a glass of mulled wine, I feel happier than I have in years. Just so warm and cozy inside. And the sushi was perfection. Just the fact that he made it himself instead of buying it from a store or ordering in from a restaurant—the fact that he put that extra effort in to roll it with his own hands, and use ingredients he knew I would love... it has filled me up with so much emotion and gratitude. Just to be able to watch him move.

Standing there in the kitchen, with his strong arms rolling the tiny sushi mat. Hearing his voice, seeing his smile. It fills me up with joy and wonder. And amazement. There is so much carefulness, kindness, and quiet precision in everything he does. I could watch him do almost any task for hours.

Now, I fear I'm a bit drunk on emotion more than the wine, and extra sensitive to every little thing he says and does. Like I'm seeing him for the first time.

The way the firelight sparkles in his wintery blue eyes makes my tummy tingle with desire, and I can't help feeling like a teenage girl again. I wonder if this is what people feel like when they've just gotten out of prison, and haven't seen their loved ones in years. Just so filled up with pent up emotion and longing that they could burst.

I feel like every word could make me cry. Every touch, every taste of a meal prepared with love. I feel like I've been wandering alone out in the cold for years, starving and hopeless, and Cole is my water, my shelter, my sustenance, my salvation. My way back to humanity.

Okay. I might be slightly out of my mind. I recognize that. Having just gotten out of a horrible relationship, where I was mistreated and neglected, I'm probably extra vulnerable and should be careful to act with tact and not throw myself at the person who's been there for me my whole life. But it's extremely difficult when all I'm dying to do is touch him, and tear the clothes off his gorgeous body.

It's probably hormones. Yep. All those hormones I was injecting for so long—well they finally kicked in now. That's all this is. *Calm down, Gabby! Jeez Louise, it's just Cole. It's just sweet little Cole, who was shorter than you for around twelve years. But there's nothing small about him now...*

My eyes are roaming over his body hungrily, and I feel so embarrassed, and not like myself. I wish I could rip my eyes out of my head to make them stop betraying me. I try to look away, toward the window, where the snow has been falling steadily for several hours.

This is a weird amount of snow for late November.

When the news said to “expect snow” I guess I was still thinking like a New Yorker. I forgot all about what “snow” means in Minnesota. It looks like we are going to be stuck inside Cole's house for several days.

And that's perfectly fine with me. Too fine. I need to get it together, and calm my body down, before I jump his bones. For real.

“How many eggs did they extract?” Cole asks me, as we sit and talk about everything in our lives—and nothing at all. It turns out that we know each other so well, that we don't really need to say very much to understand each other.

“Eight,” I tell him softly. “They got eight eggs.”

“Is that a lot?” he asks.

“I don't know. Hopefully it's enough,” I respond. “Sometimes it doesn't work, you know...”

“I've been meaning to ask you,” he says softly. “If at some point in the future, you decide to use them... well, you have

any spare eggs left over from your super-ovulation, would you consider giving one to me?”

I look at him with puzzlement on my face. “Why do you want one of my eggs?” I ask.

“I don’t know,” he responds. “I’ve been thinking about it a lot, too. Maybe someday, I’ll wake up miserable and old and decide I want a baby, and I can’t think of anyone else I would want my kid to be like. I would want her to be just like you.”

I stare at him in surprise for a moment.

“Because you have good genes,” he says, with a grin and a nod as he takes a sip of his wine. “Not just because you look really good in those jeans.”

I bite my lip as I watch his eyes roam down over my hips and legs. Wait. He’s doing it too! I’m not alone in my insane sexual feelings. Right? Maybe? When I see where his gaze is lingering, heat spreads through my midsection. What the heck is happening? “Are you checking out my ass, Cole?” I ask him in amazement.

“Yes,” he responds softly, sipping his wine. “Does that surprise you?”

“Uh, yeah. I don’t think you ever looked at me like that before.”

“Gabby, are you mad. I looked at you like that every time you turned away for half a second, for over thirty fucking years.”

“Then why are you only saying it now?” I nearly shout at him.

“Because I nearly lost you!” he shouts back. “And it’s my own fucking fault for being so weak and pathetic and silent about it. I’m not going to be a pussy about this anymore. I will not hide how I feel and fuck up my life and lose you again! Because the whole world is just bleak and dead without you, Gabby. I felt like my father did when he lost my mom—but you’re still alive. You just weren’t mine, and you weren’t close. And nothing’s right about that. *Nothing’s right* without you. I just need you. In every way. Do you understand?”

And I can't even think anymore. I'm so overwhelmed with my own need. I can't speak, can't find the words to respond. I just launch myself at him, knocking over our wine glasses, kissing him and tearing off his clothes, letting buttons pop off and tumble everywhere.

"I love you," he whispers, between kisses. "Gabby, I—"

"Shut up and show me," I tell him huskily, as I tear his pants down and take his hot, throbbing cock into my hand. "Please. Show me."

And he does, wasting not a second longer in tearing off my clothes, and rolling me off him and pinning me to the floor. I feel the soft fuzzy carpet against my naked back as he climbs over me, positioning himself between my legs. I am wet and pulsing with need for him, and possibly more turned on than I have ever been in my life. I pull him closer and smash my lips against his, wrapping my legs around him.

He doesn't waste another moment in getting inside me as fast as possible, our bodies just scrambling madly, mindlessly to be connected together at last.

And once he is moving inside me, hard and warm and large, perfectly filling me up, I can only moan out his name and cling to him. "Cole," I murmur as he thrusts deeply into me, so deeply and perfectly that I feel like nothing in my life has ever compared to this. He is fucking me so deeply that it hits my very soul.

It's completely perfect. And I know he possesses me now—completely owns every inch of me, body and soul. Maybe he always has. "I love you too," I whisper tearfully, as pure blinding, excruciating bliss floods my body. "I love you more than anything else in the world."

CHAPTER 13



When I wake up, tangled up with another naked body beside me, it feels so wonderful that it takes me a few minutes to process where I am. I just don't really care—my skin and nerve endings are still buzzing and tingling blissfully from head to toe. I drift in and out of slumber, in a peaceful post-orgasmic stupor.

Then it hits me.

Cole.

My eyes shoot open with awareness as I look down and see the beautiful man wrapped up around me.

Oh, no. Oh, no. No. No. No. No. I slept with my best friend. What the hell did I just do?

“Cole,” I say softly, shaking his shoulder. Tears begin to slip out of my eyes. “Cole, I’m so sorry. I’m so, so, so sorry. I didn’t mean for this to happen. Please forgive me.”

He takes a minute to stir awake, groaning and stirring slightly, with his face on my chest, just above my naked breasts. When he opens his eyes and sees this, he smiles contently, and yawns.

“What am I forgiving you for, Gabs?”

“Jumping your bones. Like a cat in heat.”

He chuckles with amusement at this as he stretches his big arms out, and then wraps them around me even tighter.

“Apology not accepted. I quite liked it.”

“Cole...”

He begins to press kisses all over my chest, showering affection over my breasts and nipples. “In fact,” he says as he continues to kiss me, his hands roaming down over my stomach, stirring my body awake with arousal again, quite easily. “If there’s any free time on your schedule, I might like to do it again. And again and again...”

My lip quivers as I try to hang onto some morsel of sanity, but the truth is that almost the only thing in my mind is wanting more of him. “Cole,” I whisper. “I don’t want to cause any harm to you, or damage our friendship. You’re so important to me.”

“You’re the most important thing in my life,” he says as he continues to press kisses all over my body. Then he pauses. “Oh, Gabs—there is one thing I need to apologize for also.”

“What’s that?” I ask him softly.

“I didn’t even think about using a condom last night,” he admits. “I should have asked you—I just... I couldn’t think about anything but being inside you. I completely forgot that condoms are a thing that exist and I know that sounds awful, and it was really rude of me not to consider...”

“I can’t have children anyway, Cole,” I tell him as tears stream down my face. “That’s why I’m afraid of hurting you. We didn’t talk through this carefully before doing this, and I’m afraid that you don’t know what you’re signing up for. I’m going to disappoint you. I know you want to have kids, and I love you so much and want you to be happy. Maybe it’s better that you seek out a relationship with some young girl who’s capable of giving you everything you need.” I struggle to breathe, and fight back a sob.

“First of all, Gabrielle, I already called dibs on your frozen eggs. That being said, I am not opposed to using fresh eggs instead—”

“You don’t understand,” I tell him softly, as I run my fingers through his hair. “You don’t know how broken I am. There’s no guarantee I can even carry a baby to term. I’m an

overworked, exhausted, beatdown lawyer in her 30s, not a fertile, fun, easygoing secretary in her 20s.”

“Why are you telling me how old you are? I’m the same age as you. I know how old you are, you crazy girl. This isn’t a first date in a bar with some guy you met on an app. It’s me, Cole. Remember me? You don’t have to give me a disclaimer.”

“But I do, because I want you to understand now, and I don’t want to hurt you later! I don’t ever want to hurt you.”

“You’re not hurting me. You could never hurt me,” he says earnestly, placing gentle kisses on my lips. “I mean, I might have a few scratches on my back from your fingernails—but I kinda like those. Feel free to hurt me like that any day,” he says with a soft growl.

“I didn’t tell you everything,” I say to him softly. “Benny got so exhausted with IVF and trying and failing for years that he ended up cheating on me and knocking up our coworker—”

“What the fuck?” Cole asks angrily. “Listen, I’m nothing like that pathetic man. I refuse to accept any comparison to Ebenezer—”

“His name is Benedict,” I explain.

“Whatever Benedickless, Benedickface, Bag-of-dicks that asshole’s name is, I don’t give a fuck. Forget him, he’s not worth even remembering or mentioning. It’s about you and me now, and you’re everything to me, Gabby. I would never do that to you—you know that right?”

I nod. “But I just don’t want to put you through the pain and disappointment that a long-term relationship with me could hold. If it’s a deal-breaker, I understand. I just want you to know, right now, logically and scientifically speaking, that I may not ever be able to have a child for you. I can’t get pregnant naturally. I just can’t.”

He looks down at me with a wicked glint in his eye, grinning slightly. “Is that a challenge, Gabrielle Mendoza?”

I can’t help laughing softly at his reaction. “It’s not a test of your manhood, you goofball.”

“Why not? I think you’re making a big mistake by comparing me to that Benedickless dude. I think you just actually haven’t tried with a real man, who really loves you,” he says confidently.

I put a hand on his handsome face, enjoying his youthful optimism and innocence. “I appreciate how positive you are, but I’m the broken one, Cole. Benedict wasn’t dickless, because clearly he got the secretary pregnant quite easily.”

“Nah, he’s definitely dickless, because no real man would treat you the way that he did. Listen, Gabbster. Look at me. Hey.” He gently grabs my chin and positions it so that our eyes are locked together our noses touching. “Forget about everyone else. It’s you and me now, okay?”

I nod slowly. “Are you sure?”

“Me and you,” he says softly, placing a deep, sincere kiss on my lips. “And we’re going to be different than anything you’ve ever experienced before. Wipe the slate clean and forget about your past. Because you’re not broken. You and I are actually meant to be, and actually perfect for each other—we just had to get our heads out of our asses. Is your head out of your ass, Gabby?” He reaches down to gently squeeze my butt cheek as he asks this.

“Yes,” I say with a giggle.

“Okay, good. Mine too,” he says, kissing my forehead. “So how about you calm down? And let’s just enjoy the snowstorm, because it’s been piling up out there all night, and we’re going to be stuck in for a little while. So let me make you some eggs for breakfast. All this talk of eggs is making me hungry.”

CHAPTER 14



This blizzard seems to be going on and on forever.

But it's actually quite wonderful. I've been thankful for the snowy cocoon that shut down Northern Minnesota and allowed us to spend more time wrapped up in our little love bubble.

I put on overalls and helped Cole with painting the house and other renovations. We dug up some of our silly old childhood games from the attic, like puzzles and board games. Operation and Connect Four. We looked through old albums of polaroids and prints from a time before digital photos. But mostly we've cuddled up for relaxing Netflix and chill. A lot of chilling, and not just because of the weather.

The blizzard has been the perfect excuse not to leave his side for as long as possible. A little secret, unexpected vacation that I feel like destiny planned just for us. We wanted to go ice skating, and to the Christmas market and festivals in Snowflake Creek, but the snowfall has been so intense that it shut everything down.

Thanksgiving came and went, and we weren't able to have dinner with the family, because the roads weren't clear and it wasn't safe for anyone to drive and get together. (But that was perfectly okay with me.) Flying was also very challenging due to the storms, and my younger sisters could not fly in. But we did little zoom calls and chatted with everyone, and planned to make up for it with extra special Christmas celebrations in a few weeks.

Cole is going to make his special turkey, and I'm going to bake some sweet and savory pies.

* * *

Waking up in the early morning beside Cole, everything is quiet. I'm still amazed by how lucky I feel to wake up beside him, and just see his handsome face on the pillow beside me. Just to feel his beautiful body snuggled up beside me—it's a dream come true in more ways than one. I kiss his nose before getting up to brush my teeth and start the day.

Humming to myself, I head downstairs to make him pancakes. He usually cooks for us, and I feel like contributing this morning. Even though we are running low on fresh ingredients, due to the storm, there are plenty of boxed goods in the pantry, and I can do wonders with a good pancake mix.

As I'm humming to myself and lightly mixing the batter, happily and deftly, in a way that doesn't turn the whisk into a potential murder weapon, Cole comes downstairs and puts his arms around me from behind, holding me close while I cook.

"You left me," he grumbles into my ear.

"I wanted to feed you," I explain as I pour the batter onto the pan.

"You could stay in bed and feed me in other ways," he says gruffly against my neck.

"Ow," I say suddenly, grasping my stomach. I nearly drop the bowl with the pancake mix as a sharp cramp attacks me.

"What's wrong?" he asks, taking the bowl away and wrapping his arms around me to help me stand, as I am somewhat doubled over. "Are you okay?"

"Ugh," I grunt, holding my abdomen. "Yeah—maybe just some leftover cramps from the surgery? But I feel like they should be gone by now."

“Were there any potential complications?” he asks. “Like infection? Should we be following up or watching for anything?”

“I will have to check,” I tell him softly. “I don’t know, I thought everything was—owww.”

“Should we go to the hospital?” he asks as he places a hand on my stomach.

“No,” I answer immediately. “I need to flip the pancakes.” Grabbing the spatula, I manage to flip the tiny golden disk before doubling over in another wave of pain.

“I don’t like this,” Cole says. “I’m going to warm up the car. You should get dressed. If you can’t get upstairs, let me help you sit down, and I’ll grab something warm for you to wear.”

“The roads are all blocked,” I tell him. “It’s probably more dangerous to drive out there and risk our lives on slippery roads with zero visibility, than anything that’s going on with me. Look, they did say my ovaries could be swollen and sore for weeks after the procedure. They said I was at risk for something called OHSS—ovarian hyperstimulation syndrome. It just requires regular checkups. Please don’t worry.”

To demonstrate how okay I am, I flip over the pancake, and even pour another one out with the batter. But the pain is increasing, and it’s causing my hands to shake with anxiety. I grip the edges of the kitchen countertop for support.

“Gabby,” Cole says with warning. “I don’t like this. We need to get you checked out.”

“I promise I’m fine,” I tell him, as I flip the second pancake. “Look, if anything, it’s your fault, because you’ve been banging the hell out of my ovaries all day and night. They’re not used to this kind of action,” I say shaking the spatula at him with mock annoyance.

But he cowers with worry. “I’m so sorry, Gabby. Oh, god—I should have been more gentle.”

“No, silly, it’s fine,” I tell him, as I remove the second pancake from the pan. “I’m perfectly fine. Look, I’m even

making pancakes, so I can't be in that much pain. Any other requests?"

He smiles, moving closer. "How about some more of those special cupcakes of yours? Since you were practicing at the bakery."

I pause. "How did you know it was me?"

"You think I don't know when my girl makes a festive cupcake? Please. Those little painted pumpkins had Gabby written all over them."

"I always did love working with fondant. It's a lot more soothing for the soul than defending criminals."

"Maybe we should start a restaurant," Cole suggests. "Here in town. We could make it a breakfast restaurant, if you would like. That would be fun. And you wouldn't have to go back to law."

"So, you're serious about me staying here, and us staying together then?" I ask him as I continue to cook.

"Yes, of course," he responds. "What kind of dumb question is that? Obviously, you're mine now. And part of you must have wanted that too, or you wouldn't have packed up your whole life and showed up on my doorstep. And then jumped my bones." He grins playfully at me as he takes a bite of pancake.

I can't help giggling at this. "Okay, wise guy. Maybe it was a subconscious thing."

"You subconsciously wanted to trip and accidentally fall on my dick," Cole says, nodding gravely. "These pancakes are really good, by the way. What did you add to them? We should definitely open a breakfast restaurant. Here, try a bite."

But when he shoves it in my face, a wave of nausea hits my stomach and I have to spin around and grasp the front of the kitchen sink to lean over and throw up.

"Whoa," he says, stroking my back. "Is that a symptom of the OHSS thing?"

“I think so,” I tell him weakly, turning on the water to wash up. “But I still don’t think it’s that bad. Just a bit of pain and nausea—that’s not too serious.”

“I think we should go to the hospital,” he insists.

“And tell them what? That I just took tons of hormones, had needles poked into my ovaries to extract eggs which made them sore and swollen, and then you fucked my brains out nonstop for weeks, so it’s probably related to one of those things or a combination of things?”

“It doesn’t hurt to be safe,” he argues.

“Give me two days,” I tell him. “If the cramps don’t go away by then, we’ll go to the hospital. And the roads should be safer by then.”

“Deal,” he says with worry.

CHAPTER 15



After two days of increasing pain and nausea, we finally decided to go to the hospital. The roads were not much clearer, and it was definitely a difficult drive. It was challenging to stay on the roads at all instead of accidentally driving into a ditch—but we were both getting really concerned.

Now sitting here in the hospital bed, awaiting the results of my bloodwork, I look at Cole sadly. “Sorry I’m such a mess.”

“You’re my beautiful mess,” he tells me tenderly, moving to my side, holding my hand and kissing my forehead.

The doctor returns then, clearing his throat. “Hello Miss Mendoza. So, you said you just had egg retrieval a few weeks ago?”

“That’s right,” I tell him.

“Were any embryos implanted?” he asks.

“No,” I respond softly. “Just froze the eggs.”

He nods. “Well, I would definitely say you have mild OHSS. But there’s something else we see occasionally, when the surgeon performing the procedure makes some mistakes. Well, not exactly mistakes, because it’s hard to see everything in the ultrasound, especially if the excess of hormones have stimulated a lot of egg production. They could miss a small oocyte or two if the follicle may be taking a bit longer to develop than the others.”

“Miss a small oocyte?” Cole asks in confusion.

“Some people see a large boost in fertility after the taking those hormones,” the doctor explains. “Your ovaries are still enlarged and tender, but they generally go back to normal once you get your period. If you’ve conceived, it should take about six weeks for the pain to subside. Which is the case here, so I will be giving you some painkillers.”

I gasp with realization at what he might be saying. “Conceived?”

“Yes. It seems like you’re pregnant, Miss Mendoza. Congratulations. We’ll definitely do some follow-up testing and ultrasounds to make sure that everything is okay, that your ovaries are healthy and that the pregnancy isn’t ectopic. From a quick look, it all seems good to me.”

Cole and I are both staring at the doctor dumbfounded, in utter shock.

“Yes, so, I’ll let you process that news,” the doctor says with a nod. “Take care, both of you.”

I’m speechless to the point of disbelieving this information. I almost feel the need to check for myself. Like, did he mix up my bloodwork with someone else’s?

Meanwhile, Cole is starting to grin at me. “See? I told you so.”

“Told me what?” I ask softly.

“You couldn’t get pregnant with him because your body knew he was bad news. Your lady parts rejected Ebenezer Scrooge.”

“I thought I was totally broken,” I whisper.

“You’re not broken, Gabby, Your body just refused to settle for anything less than having a baby with the one true love of your life.”

I can’t resist his charming, arrogant smile. “And who’s the one true love of my life?” I ask him softly.

“Oh, you’ll figure it out eventually,” he says with a wink. “Maybe you’re still too young, but once you get about halfway through your life, I think you’ll have a pretty good idea.”

“Then I can’t wait to see what happens next,” I tell him, holding my abdomen. I feel hopeful, but more shocked than anything.

“Gabs,” he asks, suddenly serious. “I hate to ask this question, and it may sound dumb because you just went through that procedure and everything—but is there any chance that it could be someone else...”

I shake my head vehemently. “No. I actually... haven’t had sex in months. Unless you count with plastic ultrasound wands. And the needle thing they used to extract the eggs. But Benny was too busy boinking his secretary. Even if we did go through with the IVF, I’m pretty sure he was just going to dump his stuff into a cup while watching porn.”

“Yuck,” Cole responds. “Well, that explains your problem right there. I don’t know if you fell asleep during sex ed classes, but traditionally, you need a penis to do this job.”

“Thank you for educating me, teacher,” I say, gesturing down at my stomach with both hands. “It was an excellent demonstration of how to achieve impregnation. I had no idea about what goes where.”

He grins. “You are very welcome, Gabby dearest. If you ever forget, I’m always up for reminding you with a refresher lesson. They say we learn best through repetition, right? I’ll use a hands-on, tactile approach.”

I can’t help smiling at his dumb jokes.

It does feel much more natural and easy with Cole, while it always felt like I was forcing it with Benny. Now it’s almost effortless.

Maybe this was the way it was supposed to be, all along.

“But let’s not get too excited,” I inform him suddenly. “It’s still really, super early, and anything can happen.”

He nods with understanding. “Only good things are going to happen from this point onward. I’ll do my best to take care of you. No caffeine, no wine. No more sushi.”

* * *

As we're driving back from the hospital, I find myself sitting again in total shock and staring forward at the snowy landscape before us. "This is crazy, Cole. How the hell did you do this to me in only two weeks? I've been trying for over two years."

"It's because we got that special babymaking chemistry, GabbyGirl. You're lucky I didn't do it to you twenty years ago, because I really wanted to," he says with a chuckle.

"Ew. We would have barely been in high school. That's gross!"

"It's definitely very gross, all the nasty, disgusting, dirty things I've wanted to do you for so long. There's a whole long list in my head, and we haven't even scratched the surface. I hope you're ready."

I can't help but giggle at this, and reach across the center console to hold his hand. "Cole. Is this really happening?"

"I think it is, Gabbster."

"You fixed me. Or maybe it was just this magical little town. Maybe it was the old mansion." I place my hand on my stomach. "We made a little miracle on Mistletoe Lane."

"Pfft. I think it was just my pure raw masculinity and virility," he says, flexing.

"Sure," I respond with a smirk, and roll of my eyes. "That's the most plausible scientific explanation."

"It was a miracle in my super potent, fertile balls. Like Santa's sack, bringing you and toys for all the kids—except my ballsack brings you joy, and kids who will eventually need toys."

This causes me to burst out laughing harder than I have in a long time, until tears stream down my face. "You idiot," I say with a laugh. Then I see a drugstore up ahead in the distance. "Hey! Can we stop and get a pregnancy test?" I ask.

“Why is that?” he asks with a smile. “We already know you’re pregnant.”

“I guess I just want to see it for myself. It’s hard to believe. All of this is so crazy. I never had a positive test result before,” I whisper, but I’m smiling from ear to ear.

“Then let’s pick up two of them,” Cole says as he heads to the drugstore. “I’ve never had a positive test either! I would like a souvenir of this moment.”

CHAPTER 16



A FEW WEEKS LATER

It's my first Christmas dinner together with Cole and my family. My mom is actually overjoyed, and so are my sisters. Even his family is happy about our coupling, and they all seem to wonder what took us so long. We can't help but wonder why we thought they would all be so against us.

I have all this good news that I've been dying to tell everyone—although I'm worried that it's still too early. But I'm over the moon with excitement, and bursting at the seams. I even invited Skye to dinner, to try and set her up with Cole's dad. A little bit of matchmaking never hurt anyone. And the two seem to be getting along.

The room is filled with pure joy and happiness until the doorbell rings, and I run to answer it. But I am horrified when I see Benny standing at the door.

"I'm so sorry, Gabby," he says, covered in snow and shivering.

"What are you doing here?" I gasp. "You'd better leave before Cole hurts you."

"I know you still love me," Benny says pathetically. "I just hope you can forgive me. Alyssa had a miscarriage."

"I'm sorry to hear that," I respond awkwardly. As much as they are kind of my enemies, who deeply hurt me, I wouldn't wish that on anyone. "I guess it's not so easy for women of any age, is it?"

“No,” he says softly. “I’m so sorry I said such cruel things.”

“I don’t care anymore. But you should probably be back in New York comforting the girl who just miscarried instead of coming here to bother me. Or do you enjoy leaving women at the most critical times when they are most vulnerable after you just fucked them over physically, emotionally, and psychologically? Is that when you get weak and selfish and start looking for an easier, less stressful situation?”

“Gabby, I’m a fucked up person and I did a fucked up thing to you. And to her. But I learned from my mistakes, and I’m here to make amends. Will you take me back?” he begs. “It’s Christmas Day for God’s sake! Show some mercy and forgiveness.”

I stare at him in puzzlement. “So you just think you can waltz back into my life, and expect that I haven’t moved on, and I’m just sitting around crying and waiting for you? It doesn’t work that way, Ebenezer.”

“What did you just call me?” he asks with confusion.

I reach down into my purse, and pull out a positive pregnancy test. “I’ve got one too. You can tell Alyssa that it gets a lot easier to have a healthy pregnancy once she gets the hell away from you.”

“Oh my god!” he says happily. “Really? You’re finally pregnant? I can’t believe it Gabby! I’m so happy for you.”

When he tries to hug me, I step away, feeling repulsed. “Wait—you think this is yours?” I ask with a laugh of disbelief.

He pauses then, stuttering and confused. “Well—yes, of course. It’s mine, right? From the IVF? My frozen sample?”

“I didn’t go through with the IVF! Why the hell would I fertilize my eggs with your shitty sperm, after what you did? This is real life, not some ridiculous telenovela or Jane The Virgin!”

“Then it must be from before? We did it naturally?” he asks with confusion.

“Benedict, are you delusional? You haven’t even touched me for months. You were busy with Alyssa, remember? You moved on, so I did too.”

“You... fucked someone else?” he says in horror.

I sigh deeply. “Yes. I’m with Cole, now. Having a family dinner. That you were not invited to, and so rudely barged in on. So, can you please leave?”

“You bitch!” he whispers angrily. “If your dusty old uterus got pregnant, it’s only because *I* paid for those IVF drugs. And you turn around and cheat on me? I always knew you that you were a lying whore!”

“Excuse me?” I say with shock, taking a step back.

“I gave you everything! I gave you a career, and a place to live. I helped you work your way up the ladder. I made you! I can destroy you too.”

I shiver, but not from the cold breeze swirling around us. “I never knew you were so nasty inside,” I whisper. “There is nothing you can do to hurt me anymore, Benedict. Please leave my home.”

When his hands reach out to grab me, I don’t even have time to process what is happening before Cole is grabbing his wrists and twisting the man to the floor. He pins them there until Benny is screaming as his bones snap.

“Cole!” I gasp out with concern, fearful that he’s going to go too far. “He’s a lawyer. He knows people who can sue.”

“There are security cameras all around this room that will show he tried to attack you. It’s self-defense,” Cole says, as he holds the man down. “Now I’m going to release you, Benedickless. Move carefully and slowly, and get off my property, or else I’m calling the cops.”

When Benny nods, Cole releases him.

But Benny is blue with anger, and once he rises to his feet, he lunges at me again. This time, Cole delivers a single, swift punch to the man’s face, that knocks him out instantly.

“Ouch,” Cole says, rubbing his fist. “His face was like a brick wall.”

I launch myself into Cole’s arms, wrapping my arms around him tightly. “Thank you,” I tell him softly. “My hero.”

He grins, wrapping his arms around me and holding me close. He kisses the top of my head.

“Little Benadryl is very lucky that you’re standing here, or I would keep punching and kicking the stuffing out of him,” Cole says with a chuckle. “Like our turkey dinner. Which, by the way, is getting cold. Should we call the cops? Or just toss him outside in the cold to rot?”

“Rot,” I answer softly. “I don’t want him in our home.”

When Cole tosses him out, I add, “Cops, too, maybe. Just to be safe.”

“As you wish, my love.”

CHAPTER 17



A MONTH

The weather has finally cleared up enough for us to go ice skating on a local pond, decorated with Christmas lights. It's a popular outdoor venue in Snowflake Creek, and one we loved to visit as children. But as we skate across the ice, holding hands and talking and laughing, a sharp pain in my belly makes me wince.

"Gabby?" Cole asks with concern, stopping skating to hold me upright. "The pain is back?"

"Fuck," I whisper. "Something's wrong. This feels really scary. Something's wrong."

"Alright," he says gently, taking my mittened hand. "We're going to go to the hospital and get it checked out, okay?"

"Okay," I say hoarsely, looking at him with worry. A few of the townspeople come over to help us get off the ice.

When I'm sitting in his car, leaning back against the headrest, I feel tears prick my eyes. "I should not have risked going skating. I've still been getting weird cramps now and then—maybe it was too much activity. I should have been more gentle. Why did I do this?"

"You didn't do anything wrong," he says, with a tight jaw. "You've been super gentle and careful. So have I, since we found out."

"Cole, I'm so sorry, I didn't want anything to happen. I just wanted it to be okay," I say as tears begin to pour down my cheeks. Feeling some odd wetness in my pants, I slide a hand

inside, and pull it out, and sure enough, there are a few drops of blood. “No,” I say sobbing. “No, no, no.”

“It’s okay,” Cole says, reaching over to squeeze my knee. “Don’t jump to any conclusions until we get checked out.”

The rest of the drive passes in a blur. By the time we’re at the hospital and in the ultrasound room with a technician checking me out, I’m already sobbing and hyperventilating madly. Cole is holding my hands and squeezing them and reassuring me to try to calm me down.

The technician clears his throat as he looks at the screen, and scratches his nose.

“What is it?” I gasp, crying out. “Please, please, just tell me. Tell me now. Is she alive? Is she alive?”

“I need to get the doctor,” the technician says cryptically, leaving the room.

“No!” I scream after him. “Tell me what’s going on.”

But no one will tell me. Cole sits on the bed beside me and cradles me against his chest. “Don’t worry, Gabs. It’s going to be okay. Don’t assume the worst. Please.”

“There’s blood, Cole. There’s blood.”

“I know, I know. But we read that it can be normal,” he reminds me, running his hands over my hair. “Whatever happens, I’m right here, okay?”

I nod, unable to speak.

When the technician returns with the doctor, I have managed to calm my breathing a little.

They speak to me, but I don’t really hear the words, as I just shut my eyes tightly and squeeze Cole’s hand.

The doctor adds more jelly and uses the ultrasound wand on my belly, and I am reminded of the dozens of weird nightmares I had while going through IVF.

Please, please let this just be another weird nightmare. Let them see a Snowman baby or something ridiculous. Then I'll just wake up, and everything will be okay.

“Okay. You were right,” the doctor tells the technician, nodding. “I can confirm that.”

“Confirm what?” Cole demands. “Please. We’re freaking out.”

“Well, it’s very unusual news,” the doctor says, “and it’s going to require some difficult decision making from both of you. We didn’t find just one heartbeat. There aren’t just two heartbeats. There are three, strong, healthy little heartbeats in there.”

“Oh my god,” I say, crying from relief, not totally registering what was said. I only really heard *healthy*. “But the bleeding and pain?”

“Totally normal,” the doctor responds. “Just three little ones, growing and getting comfy in there.”

Suddenly it clicks. Three?

Cole and I both stare at the doctor in stunned silence for a moment.

“Triplets?” I finally croak out. “For real? No, this is just a weird dream. I’m going to wake up at any moment now.” I pinch my arm expectantly.

Cole begins to chuckle.

“What’s so funny?” I ask him in annoyance. “They just said I have *three* humans inside me. Do you think that’s funny? Because *you* put them there.”

“You should know by now, not to challenge my abilities,” Cole responds.

I grumble to myself in annoyance. “Great, now he thinks he’s the manliest man ever to be a man, when it’s probably just because I was taking the fertility drugs shortly before this happened.”

“Yes, it’s likely that fertility drugs are the main cause of this,” the doctor agrees.

“Uh, I beg to differ. I think I had a little something to do with it,” Cole says smugly.

“Stop celebrating,” I tell him in a low whisper. “It’s risky and dangerous.”

“But they’re okay,” Cole responds. “He said they are healthy and strong, right?”

We turn to look at the doctor, and he nods. “But it will be a long and complicated road ahead, and a difficult delivery. So we will need to set up a meeting with a multiples specialist in Minneapolis—or maybe Chicago. We’ll find the people who best know how to advise you on this.”

“Three,” Cole says with wonder, looking at the ultrasound machine. “That’s a lot of babies. Maybe we should like... get married or something? Just in case one of the babies really disapproves of the fact that we aren’t married.”

“We already got married when we were five,” I tell Cole, reaching into my purse for an old photograph I found in the attic. “My younger sisters decided to dress us up and marry us, and my dolls attended, along with your hot wheels.”

“Oh, wow,” he says, staring at the picture with misty eyes. He wipes his sleeve over his eyes, trying to maintain his composure. “I forgot about this. Well, maybe after thirty years of marriage, it’s time to renew our vows? What do you say, Gabrielle Mendoza? Would you like to be my wife in an adult-sort-of-way and have a ton of babies with me?”

“I guess we might as well,” I tell him softly, taking his hand and placing it on my abdomen. “We already got started, so... let’s do it. Let’s get married and have a crap ton of babies, Cole Whittaker.”

He holds me close and kisses me soundly for a few moments, as we come down from the high of receiving such incredible news.

When we walk out of the ultrasound room in the hospital, we realize that a small crowd has gathered just outside.

Everyone is cheering and clapping for us. Nurses and doctors and patients alike.

Apparently, the ultrasound tech who first saw the triplets ran through the hospital loudly whispering to everyone, *IT'S TRIPLETS! IT'S TRIPLETS! COME QUICKLY, IT'S TRIPLETS!* And he summoned a large audience consisting of approximately *every single person* in the hospital to witness our tender, private moment. Now we are surrounded by smiling, joyful, excited faces congratulating us.

I'm sure that violates some kind of medical rule.

But it's Snowflake Creek, so what can you expect? Everyone is always all up in everyone else's business. But after living in New York, where people walk by human suffering daily and have trained themselves to be completely numb and not to notice, this is a welcome change. A sense of community. They are all so sweet and caring and well-intended that I wouldn't have it any other way.

It's good to be home.

EPILOGUE



“*P*ush!” the doctor says. “Push!”

I scream at the pain as the final baby’s head begins to pass through an area of my body that somehow expanded large enough to fit an entire human infant. I’m in the middle of doing it, and it still seems crazy to me. Three whole humans were inside me. *Three*. We initially blamed the fertility drugs, but my mother pointed out that my sisters are twins, and she knows of a cousin who also had triplets. So, it runs in our family. Who knew?

But it’s even crazier that I’m actually doing it *at all*. Naturally. And Cole is here by my side, holding my hand and wiping the sweat off my forehead.

There’s no one else I’d rather be beside. How on earth did I get so lucky?

“One more push!” the doctor encourages me as the other doctors surround us.

I scream with the effort and the blinding pain, gripping Cole’s hand so tightly that I fear I might crush it.

“I hate you for doing this to me,” I tell him between deep, gasping breaths, although it’s definitely not true.

He grins in response. “You’re the one who said you wanted a baby. You wanted a baby soooo bad. I just performed a little Christmas miracle. With my penis. Come on, it was way more fun than IVF.”

“I wanted *A* baby not three at once!” I scream at him. “I’m not a cat, or a hamster, or a rabbit, or a racoon! I just want to have a normal sized litter. And a normal human sized stomach. Cole, I look like a *WHALE!*”

He pats my gigantic stomach lovingly. “What can I say, Gabby—we just have such great chemistry that the universe decided we could handle three precious angels, instead of just one. Also, you’re doing a great job!”

“Push again!” the doctor says, and I do.

I scream my lungs out as I push past the pain.

Before long, the final baby is being given to me to hold against my chest, while Cole holds the first and second baby. I lay here wearily, holding my daughter. And staring at Cole and the other babies with tears in my eyes.

I only have a few seconds with her before the cord is clamped and cut, and they are all taken away to be cleaned up and for neonatal care. The triplets had to be born very prematurely, and they are so tiny. They will need to be warmed up and cared for in the NICU 24/7, for a while before we can bring them home.

It’s a mess. There’s blood and placenta everywhere and it was a medically challenging, complex delivery that involved multiple skilled people. We needed both internal and external holding to turn the babies into a safe position to be delivered. They insisted I get an epidural beforehand to manage the pain.

But I feel so exhilarated and alive.

And the tiny little body in my arms, and tiny little fingers and toes, just makes me want to cry and cry with happiness. I can’t even process that this really happened. I really did this, and the babies are here, and they are wonderful. All as healthy and strong as they could possibly be.

“Is it everything you ever wanted?” Cole asks me in a soft whisper, as he kisses the top of his daughter’s head.

“It’s more,” I tell him breathlessly. “Because I also have you.”

“You always had me,” he tells me with an earnest smile.
“And you always will, Gabs.”

And when the warm sincerity in his eyes washes over me with a flood of love, and strength... I absolutely believe him. We did it. We're finally here, at the finish line of this crazy journey. But I have a feeling that it's only the start of many more amazing journeys to come. I know that I can get through anything with Cole by my side.

I have never felt so unequivocally loved and safe... and complete.

Thank you for reading this book!

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Don't miss the story of Skye's son Sam, who disappeared to live in witness protection in Hawaii...

My Secret Valentine



Sam Valentine, Secret Agent

For as long as I can remember, I've put my life on the line to put away the bad guys. Drug cartels, mafia, foreign agents—things the government doesn't want me talking about, even in my head. But today, I plan on doing something really dangerous.

My mission is to give that girl these flowers.

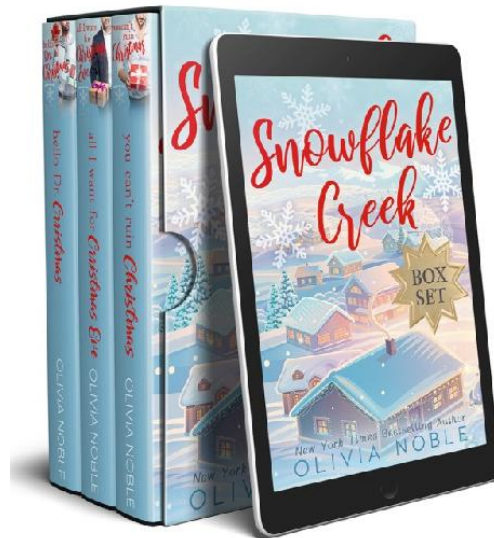
Target: I don't know her name.

Strategy: Ask her out on a date.

Objective: To win her heart at all costs.

[Check out Kai's story!](#)

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Stella found out she was pregnant on New Year's Day. But Jack was already gone. For years, Jack has been in Africa working for Doctors without Borders. Stella runs her little bake shop in Snowflake Creek with her daughter Luna— and Jack has no idea that she exists. When Eve discovers Luna's paternity, will she tell her brother?

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Read about Sam's sister, her secret baby, and her long lost love...

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Santa's Sleigh has crashed in Eve's backyard.

She saves Adam from the wreckage, and although he's injured, he's not too injured to make endless jokes about how they belong together.

Could Adam be Eve's Christmas present from Santa?

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Ballet dancer Clara suffers a terrible injury that ends her time dancing in The Nutcracker. All the doctors say she will never dance again, but there is one surgeon who might be able to help.

Klaus is a handsome widower from Sweden who performs complicated operations. But when sparks fly between him and Clara...

Can she help heal his broken heart?

See what happens to Clara in [*Hello Dr. Christmas*](#)

Now available: [Knocking up his Nanny](#)



The story of Ellie's sister, Juniper.

They call me Junebug and I'm the artist in the family. Which means I'm always dirt broke.

When my mom's hospital bills start piling up, I take every odd job I can find in Silver Mountain. Eventually that leads to a nanny position at the biggest mansion in town, belonging to a wealthy businessman. His kids are cute as stuffed animals.

Only one problem: their dad might be the hot mystery man I've been making out with in a hospital broom closet. Oops.

Mystery Man

Hiring June was a bad idea.

She's as sweet as apple pie, always smiling in her polka dots. She makes my heart warm, and makes my little demon children behave like perfect angels. I have never seen them smile so much.

I know I should be professional, but I can't keep my hands off her.

She has no idea that my secret plan is to make her more than just their nanny.

I want her to be their mother.

[Read June's Story](#)

Also available from Olivia Noble:

Snowed in with Grumpy.

A steamy, small-town, over-the-top, hilarious holiday romantic comedy...



They say he's so grumpy that he never speaks. He only growls.

I'm not intimidated. My boss sent me to deep backwoods Vermont to get Garland McGrumpypants—I mean McGuinty, to sell some of his lucrative landholdings on Silver Mountain. And I NEED this commission.

McGrumpy only likes kids, animals, and his giant axe... he definitely doesn't like me.

When our meeting goes horribly wrong, and an avalanche causes my car to be nearly crushed under a pile of snow... I'm rescued by the massive hermit himself.

No cell service, no road access, no escape. I am STUCK with Grumpy, and this Christmas couldn't get any worse!

Garland

Her name is Ava, and she's the unluckiest woman I've ever met. She spills every drink she touches all over herself, she trips over her shadow... and somehow, when she comes around, the whole mountain falls apart.

So why do I have a strange urge to protect her and take care of her?

Damn this crazy woman. She will be the death of me.

Check out Ava's story!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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PREVIEW

PLEASE ENJOY A PREVIEW OF

KNOCKING UP HIS NANNY

THE STORY OF JUNIPER SNOW

CHAPTER 1

JUNIPER

“Honey,” my mother says, once the nurse finally manages to get the needle into her arm. “Are you ever going to introduce me to a nice boy before I die?”

The question is not fair.

I watch as the tube connected to the needle fills with a yellow serum, slithering down into my mom’s veins. It’s liquid gold. It’s poison. It’s saving her life. It’s hurting her. It’s costing a fortune.

“I don’t know any nice boys,” I answer as I pull her knitting supplies out of her handbag. I hate these chemo treatments. I have so many mixed feelings. It might seem innocent enough, but it gives me a ton of anxiety. None of my sisters have driven our mother to these appointments and had to sit here for hours and watch.

“Oh, well, he doesn’t have to be *that* nice,” my mother corrects, trying to be understanding. “He can be a little naughty, I suppose. Just have some fun, dear. I want you to go out there and live your life, and I want to see you smile more.”

“I have lots of fun, Mumsy.” We all call her that—not just our family, but the entire town. She’s very old—old enough to be my grandmother. She couldn’t have kids of her own, so when she adopted all of us, she was already way past the natural age of any mother. Still, she’s always been so full of energy, love, and good advice—even the chemo hasn’t been able to keep her down. It wrecked her hair, but it couldn’t steal her smile.

Mumsy has been the surrogate grandmotherly figure for all of Silver Mountain. So, when she turns to all the other people in the room, they all pay attention. “My Junebug never has any fun,” she complains to the others receiving chemotherapy, as she resumes knitting a warm winter hat. “She’s basically a nun. Can you believe that I raised a nun?”

“Youth is wasted on the young,” says another old woman with a deep sigh.

“I am nothing like a nun,” I tell them all stubbornly. Although, my favorite movie of all time is *The Sound of Music*. And I may have considered becoming a nun once or twice after I got my heart broken really badly—and watched my sisters’ hearts get smashed into a million pieces. Sometimes, I wouldn’t mind retiring from the dating scene, hanging up my heels, and putting on a habit.

But I’m not a nun *YET*. There is still a tiny spark of hope left somewhere in this sad, dusty vagina.

“Junebug,” my mother asks, “When is the last time you went on a date?”

“Uh,” I say, trying to remember. “Recently?”

“How do you expect to meet a nice boy if you’re so shut down and closed off?” she asks.

“It took me years to build up the courage and talk to my wife,” says an old man in the room, holding up the hand with his wedding ring proudly. “Best thing I ever did. My only regret is taking too long—I wish I hadn’t wasted that time, and could have been enjoying life with her much sooner.”

“That’s a lovely story,” I tell him. “But these days, guys aren’t the same as when you were young. They aren’t serious—they just want to mess around and walk away. Everything is super casual.”

“That’s okay,” my mother says hopefully. “Maybe you can’t have serious without starting as casual, sometimes.”

I don’t know. Why bother starting anything if it never leads anywhere? This conversation is making me feel gloomy, and I am craving some Cheetos.

“Ah, Juniper,” says another old woman in disappointment. I know her from the daycare where I used to work. “I think I see the problem, young lady. Why are you wearing such a horrible potato-sack sweater? How do you expect to attract any man like that? Why, if my boobs weren’t sitting way down by my bellybutton, I would show off the girls!”

I look down in surprise. But I love this sweater. I knitted it myself.

Begrudgingly, I undo a few buttons and slide it off one shoulder. “Is that better, Mrs. Merriweather?”

“Yes, dear. Now you have to go out and have some fun for all of us!”

“Well, I actually *have* started dating someone,” I tell all the cancer patients. I feel horrible as soon as the words leave my mouth. I hate lying. I’m sure I’m going straight to hell. But how can I disappoint all of their poor, sweet faces, looking for some good news today?

I am sure that the best news they are all seeking is the R-word. *Remission*. But since I can’t give them that... the next best thing is another R-word. Romance? I bet they would love some Raunchy, R-rated Romance.

“Who is he, Juney?” my mother asks with excitement. “Why haven’t you told me about him?”

“Oh, it’s still very new,” I respond. “He is very handsome and seems wonderful, but I didn’t want to talk about it too soon and get my hopes up. Just in case it ends up falling apart.”

“Tell me all about him!” my mother says, her eyes lighting up. “Is he good enough for my little girl?”

“Oh, he’s the best,” I say, as I begin to share a vague and enchanting tale about some dashing mystery man that I’ve never met. I tell them all how he opened the car door on our date, and held my hand as we walked in the snow. All kinds of romantic things that probably don’t happen anymore—I doubt they want to hear the truth. That most ‘dates’ consist of Netflix and chill and never speaking again.

Mrs. Merriweather listens and nods. “Just don’t wear that sweater when you see him, and I’m sure everything will be just fine.”

I groan. After entertaining them all with my story, I excuse myself from the room to stretch my legs. My only comfort during these chemo sessions has been to find all the hospital vending machines and buy as much junk food as humanly

possible. I must say, the coffee vending machine isn't terrible either.

But very few things in this world comfort me like Cheetos.

After a quick stroll through the hospital halls, I am grateful to see that there is still one small bag of my favorite treat left in the vending machine. I reach into my ugly sweater to extract some money, and feed a crumpled bill to the machine. I am running low on cash—my mother doesn't know that I can barely afford the gas to get us to the hospital, which is two towns over. I'll have to ask my sisters for help later.

The machine eats my dollar, then I punch in the code for Cheetos. B3. It's like a Bingo number.

Maybe one of these days I should bring a set of Bingo cards to chemo to entertain the old people, instead of knitting or inventing stories about a thrilling love life that doesn't exist.

I stand here, waiting and waiting for my Cheetos to drop so I can collect them. But the metal coil around the junk food twists, and fails to push it out completely. It hangs there, halfway out—but no longer moving. And I don't think I have another dollar.

"No," I whisper in horror, placing both hands flat against the glass. "Please. Please, Cheetos, I need you—I beg you to come down out of there and into my stomach. We are fighting cancer and you're the only thing that cheers me up in this whole hospital. Please don't fail me, today."

I'm really bad at praying and begging, so I quickly turn to cursing and threatening.

"Damn you, Cheetos! I paid good money for you, and you're just *stuck* there, staring at me, taunting me." I press my finger against the glass, angrily. "You better behave yourself, or I'm going to come in there, and knock some sense into you. Don't think I won't. I'm not a nice little nun like they all say. I'm a hungry, angry—*hangry* woman—I will eat you alive!"

Beginning to beat my fists on the machine, trying to dislodge the junk food, I want to scream in frustration as I kick

the machine and curse at it. I let out all my anger at cancer, chemo, and rising gas prices on the poor vending machine.

I notice the Cheetos just barely beginning to budge. It's working!

Dropping to my knees, I shove my entire arm into the hole where the Cheetos are supposed to fall, and try to reach up and grab them. "Come on! Come on!" I say with frustration, getting into every weird position I can to try to reach my prize. Finally, with my body pressed against the floor, and my shoulder thrust up into the bowels of the vending machine, I think I feel my fingers brush against the sharp corner of the plastic bag.

"Yes!" I say. "Right there—I've got it!"

But then I manage to push the Cheetos up a few inches, instead of pulling. And they still don't fall. It's completely out of reach. My shoulder happens to get a bad cramp at the same time, and I wince, letting out a string of curse words suitable for a sailor.

This is a bad day. I feel like I was drowning at sea, and those Cheetos were the only life raft for miles. I clutch my shoulder miserably.

But then, someone behind me clears his throat. It's a masculine sound.

Kind, but filled with amusement, like he is trying not to laugh at me.

"Uh. Can I help you with that, Miss?"

CHAPTER 2

When I realize the awkward position I am in, on my hands and knees in front of the vending machine, I realize that my butt must be in the stranger's face.

A small blush touches my cheeks as I quickly right myself, rising to my feet and trying to reclaim some morsel of my dignity. "I just paid for a snack, and it isn't working," I say in a small voice, trying to appear cool and conceal how emotional I am about this situation. But I'm close to tears. A quick glance at the man reveals that he is even more handsome than the fictional fellow I was just making up stories about. Dammit. Probably not single, then. I look down and fix my gaze back on my ugly sweater.

The stranger steps forward, and grasps the side of the vending machine.

He stands very close to me, and I am hit by a whiff of his cologne, which floods my senses. It leaves me dizzy—the musky scent of sandalwood and spice. Whoa. Where did he come from? I can barely process that he is firmly tapping the side of the vending machine, and like magic, the Cheetos fall. He then reaches down, and retrieves the snack, before handing it to me. "The machine is tricky. It's like a temperamental woman. You have to know just how to touch her. Yelling and cursing and shoving your arm up inside her like you're trying to deliver a baby isn't going to do the trick."

I take the Cheetos from the man, still feeling embarrassed. "Thank you for helping. So—how long were you watching me?"

"Long enough," he says with a light chuckle.

I take this moment to study his features. Something I definitely shouldn't do, because he is way too gorgeous. A full head of dark hair, and blue eyes sparkling with amusement. His jaw is sharp and defined, and I can see the outline of shapely muscle beneath his shirt. His waist is trim and small, and well, I try to force my eyes to stop roaming lower. I look

away, but his scent is still surrounding me, and making me keenly aware of his presence.

Remember that tiny spark of hope in my neglected lady bits? Breathing in the smell of this man feeds a bit of oxygen to that ember, without my permission, and the light that was about to fizzle out completely into ashes, somehow burns a tiny bit brighter. But it shouldn't. I mean—sure, he's saved my life and rescued my Cheetos—but that doesn't mean he's even straight, or interested in me, so I tell my dumb body to calm down.

“I just have one question,” he says, lifting an eyebrow as he looks down at me, with a bit of a grin. “Shake it like a polaroid picture?”

This makes me freeze.

I am keenly aware that I wore panties today with that exact phrase on them.

Everything else was in the laundry. But how on earth would anyone be able to read the words on my butt, unless—my cheeks begin to turn red-hot as I realize my skirt must have flipped up in the back while I was wrestling with the vending machine.

June. June. This is bad.

Stop standing here with your mouth open in horror. Say something.

“I am an entrepreneur,” I tell him, once I gather my composure. Lifting my head high, I smooth out my dress, making sure it is properly arranged down over my bottom, in an effort to salvage some pride. “I dabble in fashion design, and I make specialty lingerie. I was only wearing these to test out the fit and comfort.”

“Is it comfortable?” the man asks, genuinely interested. “I don't think I have ever seen so many sequins on a woman's ass since I got dragged to strippers in Vegas for a bachelor party.”

My embarrassment is only growing, and I clutch the Cheetos tightly against my chest for comfort. “This is from my

‘Dance Like No One’s Watching’ collection. There’s also a pair that says ‘Badonkadonk’ and ‘I wasn’t farting, I was blowing you kisses with my butt.’ I also have a Christmas collection with phrases like, ‘Ho Ho Ho’ and ‘Let it Snow Right Here.’ It’s supposed to be eye-catching, and clearly it worked. I caught your attention, didn’t I?”

“Ah, I see. So, who is your target audience?” the man asks. “People who like to put on goofy underwear and twerk in their bedrooms for TikTok posts? Circus performers?”

“If you must know, I design a lot of custom costumes for drag queens who work at The North Pole.” I try to say this proudly, but clearly I am a failed entrepreneur. Although I have sewn and sold many outfits, it hasn’t been nearly enough to pay the bills. My friend Rudy is a performer who has supported me by buying many of my creations, and recommending my work to all his friends. But I still don’t even have a few extra dollars for gas, or Cheetos.

“You’re full of surprises,” says the man. “When I first saw you, I had you pegged for a kindergarten teacher or a nun. Until you bent over, of course.”

“Why does everyone keep calling me a nun?” I say with exasperation.

“I think it’s your hairstyle,” he suggests. “It’s very old-timey and proper.”

“How dare you insult my hair,” I say defensively, reaching up to touch my braided buns. “I looked up so many tutorials on YouTube to learn how to do this style!”

“Were those tutorials from the 1800s?” he asks playfully.

“No, because there was no YouTube in the 1800s,” I respond.

“Well, I know that,” he says with a chuckle. “Just the middle part and updo reminds me of Queen Victoria.”

“And there’s nothing wrong with a bit of Victorian style. I consider it classic,” I inform him stubbornly.

“It is quite classic,” he says, reaching out to touch my braids. “May I?”

“Sure,” I say in an anxious squeak. I can feel the heat of his hand near my ear. It’s a very gentle and curious touch. Who is this gorgeous man and why is he fussing over my hair? “Are you a hairdresser or something?”

“Oh, no. Not at all. I just know a little girl who would *kill* for hair like this,” he responds.

I find the answer adorable, but at the same time a bit disappointing. He seemed intrigued and fascinated by the glimpse of my bottom, perhaps—but my hair is reminding him of a child. I seem like a cute kindergarten teacher, not someone he would ever find attractive. A sobering reminder of my failed love life.

The little spark in my tummy threatens to fizzle out. But I don’t want to let it die just yet.

“Would you like to go on a date with me?” I blurt out.

CHAPTER 3

“It doesn’t have to be a real date,” I say quickly to cover up my awkwardness, and remove any pressure on him. “You see, my mother is currently receiving chemo in the Wintergreen Wing. She was complaining that I never go on any dates, and I just want to make her happy. I don’t want to lie. I just want to tell her something real and see her smile. So, you would be doing me a huge favor—maybe we can grab a chocolate milk together down at the cafeteria or something?”

“Chocolate milk?” the man responds with amusement. “Is that the sort of thing you would normally drink on a date?”

“I don’t know,” I admit with discomfort. “I don’t go on many dates.”

“Well, I understand why your mother might be worried. If you had chocolate milk on your last date, I assume you would have been around five years old. That could have been decades ago.”

“It’s possible,” I say with a shrug, preferring this story to my actual dating disasters. “So, what do grown-ups do, since you’re such a professional at dating?”

“I don’t date much either, to be honest,” he admits. “But I’ve never been asked out for chocolate milk. That’s different.”

“Should we have coffee, then?” I suggest.

“We can do anything we want,” he answers, with a grin. “Actually, I have an idea. Come with me!”

He extends his hand, offering to take mine, and I hesitate. I can’t help wondering what kind of trouble I’m getting myself into. But the look on his face is so cheerful and childlike that I can’t help trusting him a little. Heck, I really wouldn’t mind having some chocolate milk with this man.

I take one hand off my Cheetos, and place it in his, and he leads me through the hospital halls, and into an area that I’ve never been.

“Where are we going?” I ask with surprise. “Am I allowed to be back here?”

“I have a doctor friend who has an office that he keeps stocked up with a bunch of refreshments and snacks. He’s always fighting with his wife, and being forced to spend nights here in his office, so he added a refrigerator and microwave, plus some other basic comforts.”

“Are you sure he isn’t here right now?” I ask him.

“Quite sure. He’s currently on good terms with his wife—I always know when he’s not, because he’ll start sending me a bunch of existential, gloomy texts and memes filled with dark humor. Then he’ll invite me over for a drink, and he won’t even finish one before he starts crying.”

I giggle at this softly. “Doesn’t sound like a very healthy relationship.”

“Healthy relationships take a lot of work and communication,” the man says. “They are definitely going through a rough spot, but I know they both love each other. I hope they work it out.”

“You seem like a good friend,” I say as I follow him briskly.

“Not that good if I’m about to break into my buddy’s office and help myself to his stuff,” he says with a grin. “But I figure he owes me this, after all the hours of free therapy I’ve provided.”

When he reaches the door, he punches a code into the keypad just above the handle, and then opens the door. He guides me into the room.

I like the sensation of doing something a bit naughty, sneaking into someone’s office when they aren’t there. I never do this sort of thing.

“What on earth...” I say, looking around. “There’s a disco ball. And table hockey. Is that a pinball machine? This is more than a few basic comforts.”

“It’s his secret man cave,” the stranger says as he closes the door behind us. “Not bad for a hospital date, right? Oh, check this out. He’s also got booze—lots of booze.”

“I probably shouldn’t drink much,” I tell him as I study the table where crystal canisters sit, filled with amber liquid. “I will have to drive my mom home to Silver Mountain after this.”

“Oh, you’re from Silver Mountain?” the man comments as he walks over to the mini kitchen. “Me too. Aha! Good news. There’s chocolate milk in the fridge, if you wouldn’t prefer a more adult beverage.”

“Maybe a tiny bit adult wouldn’t hurt,” I tell him as I gaze at all the spirits. “But I do love chocolate milk.”

“Challenge accepted,” he says, cracking his knuckles. “One chocolate milk martini coming right up.”

I watch as the handsome man gathers his ingredients from the fridge, and brings them to the bar. He selects a few bottles, and pulls out a cocktail shaker. “Alexa,” he calls out. “Play date night music.”

I can’t help laughing as romantic music begins to play in the room, and the man begins to pour chocolate milk into the cocktail shaker. He follows with a splash of Kahlua and vanilla vodka, attempting to twirl the bottles and hum along with the music before each pour. He then discovers that there is also Bailey’s Irish Cream and a chocolate liqueur in his friend’s collection. With a stylish flourish, he adds even more ingredients to his concoction.

What is this adorable alchemy?

He nearly drops a bottle, but catches it, and pretends it was part of the show. I try to suppress a giggle as he shakes the silver mixer over both of his shoulders, with great gusto. Finally, he retrieves a martini glass, and uses a bottle of hot fudge to create a chocolate rim around the top. He pours the drink into the glass before handing it to me.

“Your drink, madam. Adult chocolate milk, as requested.”

Taking the glass from him, I shake my head with amazement. “That was very smooth. Have you done this before?”

“Yes, I pick up chicks at that vending machine all the time. These are my moves—Cheetos and chocolate milk are the best way to get laid around here. No, of course not,” he says with a laugh. “And try the drink before you start thinking I’m an expert.”

I place the glass to my lips and take a sip—damn. It’s heavenly. It’s creamy and rich and chocolatey, and far better than anything I ever expected to taste on a random fake hospital date. “Wow,” I say softly, staring at him with surprise. It’s the best chocolate milk I’ve ever tasted in my life, but I feel like it wouldn’t be classy to say that out loud.

I can tell that he’s satisfied with my response anyway, as he grins smugly and begins to put all the bottles away. I can’t help but stare at his body when he moves—his broad, muscled shoulders rippling beneath his shirt. Maybe it’s just the calming sound of the R & B music that has begun playing in the room that makes his every motion seem so suave. There’s a vibe around this man that feels a bit like magic.

I’m sure it’s just the music creating a weirdly relaxing and romantic atmosphere. And I am sure he meant it all as a joke a first, but it’s definitely working. I take another sip of the delicious beverage he created as I watch him pour himself a drink.

“What are you having?” I ask.

“Just a bit of cognac,” he tells me, turning the bottle so I can see the label: Hennessy XO.

I can’t stop staring at his beautiful hands. They look so strong and capable, yet elegant. Finely muscled arms with teal veins running up to his wrists where he has rolled up the cuffs of his white shirt—wait, is that a Rolex?

I mean, it could be a knockoff. Or it could be a cheap, second-hand Rolex. But it doesn’t look very cheap. It probably costs more than my *car*.

I suddenly realize that I don’t know anything about this man. I don’t even know his name. Does he work here at the hospital? How else would he know a doctor well enough to

just walk into his office and drink his liquor? A twinge of fear and insecurity begins in my gut.

“Why does a doctor have so much booze in his office? He doesn’t practice medicine drunk, does he?” I ask.

“I certainly hope not. No, I think it’s just for the evenings, when he’s upset about his wife. But I’m sure we’d be doing him a favor if we drank it all,” my date answers.

This has all been a bit fairytale-like. What are the chances that a man like this is even single? What if this isn’t his friend’s office, and it’s actually *his* office? What if he’s the one who has problems with his wife?

This abruptly breaks the spell of relaxing romance that had washed over me. Even if he is being honest, even if he is single—why would he ever be interested in me? He surely wouldn’t be if he knew what a failure I am.

Looking down at the Cheetos I am still holding, which I purchased with my literal last dollar, all my stress comes rushing back to me. The images of my mother receiving chemo, the pressure of going over the hospital bills with my elderly father, giving everything I can to keep us from going under and losing the family inn. Digging in the back of the couch to try find a few extra coins so that I can afford a snack at the gas station. But then needing to sacrifice the snack so I can afford gas.

Meanwhile, that guy is wearing a Rolex and drinking liquor that costs who-knows-how-much. We are from entirely different worlds. This date was doomed to failure before it begun. And that’s why I don’t date. If he knew what a disaster my life was, he would run.

“Hey,” he says, coming over with his drink. “Hey, hey—what’s wrong?”

“I just...” I don’t really know what to say. I can’t force the words out without getting emotional.

“Come sit down and eat your Cheetos,” he says, gently placing a hand on my back and guiding me over to the soft

couch. "I'm sure you're going through a lot right now. Do you want to talk about it? Get it off your chest."

CHAPTER 4

“No,” I say, shaking my head. “We’re on a date. And I’m terrible at dating, but I think I’m not supposed to complain about all of my problems... and we’re supposed to have fun. And you made such a delicious drink for me—this is fun. I’m having fun.”

“If you have to say that you’re having fun so many times, then you’re clearly not having enough fun,” he says lightly. “But that’s okay—we don’t have to pretend. We can talk about our real feelings and get to know each other, without all the first date fakeness.”

“I don’t think I want to,” I tell him softly. “If I do that, I’m just going to end up crying and you’ll get sick of me and all my emotions like a tornado all over the place... you’ll run right out of here in five minutes! Yes, let’s just keep it fun and light.”

“Now why would you think that?” he asks gently. “Life isn’t all about fun and games. We can have a real conversation without me needing to head for the hills and hide in the bushes.”

“That is not my experience with men,” I tell him with a sad smile.

“Then maybe you don’t have any experiences with real men,” he says, leaning closer, with a grin. “Maybe you’ve only dated weak little boys.”

Oh. My. Gosh.

The confident way he says that makes my tummy tingle. I have to shove my face back into my chocolate martini and take a large sip to distract myself from looking at his lips. Who is this man?

“But I understand if those toddlers on the playground weren’t ready to handle any real emotions. You were just babies having chocolate milk, after all. Now that we’re having grown-up beverages, we can surely have some grown-up conversations, right?”

“I don’t even know your name,” I say with an awkward smile.

“My name is—no,” he says, shaking his head. “If I tell you my name, you’ll just Google me and find out everything there is to know about me in thirty seconds. That defeats the purpose of going on a date, don’t you think? It removes all need for us to have an actual conversation.”

“Do you want to remain anonymous because you’re ridiculously rich?” I ask him.

“What makes you think that?” he asks with surprise.

“Your watch,” I point out.

“Oh,” he says, glancing at it. “Yes, well, that was a gift from my father.”

“Or maybe,” I suggest. “You don’t want me to know your name because you’re married, and if I discover that I’ll run out of here and throw my drink in your face?”

“Definitely not married,” he says. Then he takes a long drink of his cognac. “Well, I was. Many years ago. It’s a long story.”

“Do you want to tell me about it?” I ask.

“Absolutely not. It’s probably a bit too heavy for first-date conversation,” he admits. “I would rather not tell you my name at this moment, but you’ll find out quite soon. Can you just trust me if I promise you that I’m not a sleazeball?”

“Okay,” I respond, against my better judgment. “I trust you.”

“Thank you,” he says gently. “I’m not great at dating either. I don’t really want to tell you about my job, or my past relationships, or my family—I want you to know *me*. But I don’t even know how to tell you about myself without everything else.”

“See?! This is hard,” I tell him. “What do we talk about? What do we do?”

“I don’t know. But I can tell you what I’d like to do,” he says, staring at my lips.

“What’s that?” I ask, feeling the fire grow in my tummy again.

“You’ve got a bit of chocolate sauce—right here,” he says, gesturing up at his own lips. “May I?”

Feeling a bit strangely bold, I lift my drink to my lips and smear more of the chocolate all over them. “Where?” I ask innocently. “Here?”

He laughs softly, causing the cutest crinkle to form around his blue eyes. He reaches out to place a thumb on my cheek, and I can see that he wants to kiss me. Ugh, I am dying to know what his name is. The mystery of it drives me a bit wild, to be honest. I’m sure it’s something masculine and strong—maybe a bit wintery, as with most people who are native to Silver Mountain.

“My name is June,” I tell him softly.

“June,” he repeats. “Like the Juniper berry.”

As he strokes his thumb delicately across my cheek, I can’t really take the suspense. So, I lean forward and close the distance between us, to press my chocolate-covered lips against his mouth.

He seems startled for a moment, but then his lips soften against mine, and he kisses back—his tongue slipping out to taste the chocolate on me.

Oh my god. This chocolate thing may have been a bad idea, because my tongue naturally comes out to meet and play with his, and this kiss deepens. His lips devour mine, sending shivers to every part of my body, and fanning that ember into a baby flame, a warm, spreading heat in the center of me.

He tastes amazing—and it’s not just the chocolate and cognac mingling on our tongues. He tastes fresh and clean like he’s never smoked a cigarette in his life, and he flosses regularly, and he chews spearmint gum. He’s the cleanest, healthiest, tastiest man I’ve ever tasted, and I find myself wanting more, and more.

My body moves closer to his, seeking his touch, and his hand slides around my waist.

The kiss gets so deep, so fast, that I don't even notice when he puts his drink aside, and takes my drink out of my hand, before he puts both hands around my waist and easily lifts me over to sit on his lap. I find myself straddling him, without knowing how I got there, as we kiss each other hungrily. I sigh into his lips.

I don't even realize that my own arms have wrapped around his neck, and our bodies have melted together. I can feel the hardness of him pressed against me through both of our clothing—and my silly, silky panties—which I am now very thankful to have worn.

I slowly rock my hips against him, and he groans against my mouth.

“Slow down,” he says gently, letting his hands drift up and down my back. “We have time.”

“Chemo finishes in about an hour, and I will have to go,” I tell him. “So not that much time.”

“Not that much time *today*,” he corrects.

“Will there be more days?” I ask, with surprise.

“If you want them,” he says, as his hands reach up to undo my buttons. “This is a lovely sweater, by the way. It's so soft and cozy.”

“Thank you! I knitted it myself.” *Take that, Mrs. Merriweather. This gorgeous man loves my sweater, so it can't be that bad.*

He pulls it off me, and tosses it onto the couch, creating a pillow that he then gently guides me down onto. He follows, never breaking the contact of our lips for very long, kissing me and sliding his hands up under my skirt to squeeze my ass as he grinds his arousal against me.

I wrap one leg around him to drag him closer. I love the feeling of his hardness through our clothes—it makes me wish we were both wearing a lot less clothing. I realize that this is

crazy, and getting kind of intense, and I barely know this man... but I want this so badly. I want to forget about everything bad in my life for a few minutes, and just feel good.

And he's helping me do that way better than Cheetos ever could.

But just then, my stomach happens to growl, and he pauses our hot and heavy make-out session. He looks at me with surprise. "Oh, you never ate. You must be starving."

He abruptly climbs off me and hands me my junk food and my chocolate martini.

"No, no, I'm fine," I assure him. "There's probably tons of sugar in this drink, so it's kind of like a meal all by itself." I take the drink from him, and I pour the rest of it down my throat to demonstrate. "See? I'm good."

"There's no nutrition in that," he informs me skeptically. "I feel awful—you asked me on a date, and I should have taken you down to the cafeteria for a proper meal."

"I'm not hungry anymore," I tell him, putting down my empty glass. "I promise. Please don't even worry about that. This is the nicest date I've been on in years. I'm only hungry for you, now. Seriously."

To encourage him, I reach down and grasp the hemline of my dress, and drag it up over my head, exposing my custom-made bra, which is also covered in glitters, to match my panties. I remove my dress, and written across my chest are some very ridiculous words: "MILK JUGS." One word on each boob, complete with a cartoon rendition of a bottle of milk. He immediately begins to laugh when he sees the silly bra, and while I am very embarrassed, and did not expect anyone to ever see me wearing this, I am glad that it helps to break the ice. And I'm very proud of my unusual lingerie designs, anyway. This is just my first time testing them out on a male member of the human species.

(My male cat never seemed very impressed.)

The music is still playing, so I stand up, with my cheeks a bit flushed. I begin to do a dumb, sexy little dance for him. I even reach up, and grasp my hair, which is tightly wound up in the braided buns, and I undo the style, letting my reddish-brown locks fall down around my waist. I sway my hips from side to side, in what I hope is a seductive manner, and I watch as the arousal grows in his eyes. His hands reach for me.

But then a weird beeping noise causes us both to look toward the door.

Someone is trying to enter the room.

“Over here. Quickly,” he says, grabbing my hand and swiftly leading me to the closet.

CHAPTER 5

My handsome stranger and I barely manage to get into the closet and shut the door before the person enters. There is a small gap in the closet door that we can peek through, and we both see that it is only the janitor. There was probably no need for us to hide in the closet, but now that I am only dressed in my bra and panties, it feels a bit silly for us to step out.

Meanwhile, the janitor has begun to dance to the R&B music while he vacuums up the office.

I can feel my date's body gently rumbling with laughter behind me. His hands wrap around my stomach, holding me against him firmly. It feels a bit naughty and high school to be hiding in the closet like this, and I can't help grinning, too. There's a little thrill of danger, the excitement of possibly being caught.

When I feel his lips against my neck, and his hands sliding up to massage my breasts, I moan softly.

"Is this okay?" he whispers against my ear.

I nod.

Quickly and expertly unclasping my bra, he slides it off my shoulders and lets it hang on the doorknob of the closet. He then takes both of my breasts into his hands and begins to knead them gently, slowly, and thoroughly.

Oh. God.

I let my head fall back against him as the pleasure courses through my body. He takes his time. He massages every inch of my breasts, in a slow and tantalizing way. Then he lets his thumbs roll over my nipples, which are erect and sensitive due to my arousal and the cool air. I gasp, feeling the heat and wetness grow between my thighs. He toys with them until my knees feel weak, and I am completely putty in his hands. I almost think that I might be able to orgasm from *this*.

Then, when I think I might not be able to take anymore, his hand slides down over my stomach, and cups the mound of my sex, over my panties.

He kisses my neck again, and whispers again in my ear. “Do you want me to keep going?”

I nod again. “Please,” I whisper. I have completely forgotten that there’s another person on the other side of that door, and I don’t care. The vacuum cleaner and music are blasting, and I’m sure he can’t hear anything. I just feel dizzy and blinded with pleasure.

My mysterious stranger keeps one of his hands on my breast, but slides the other into my panties. He pushes the folds of my skin apart, and tests my wetness.

“Fuck,” he whispers gruffly against my ear, when he sees how turned on I am.

“I want you,” I murmur to him softly, grinding my butt back against him. Even as I say it, I wonder what’s come over me. I can’t believe the words leaving my mouth. It’s not like me at all to be so open and trusting of a stranger I’ve only just met. And there wasn’t really enough booze in my chocolate milk to get me drunk—just barely a nice buzz that’s only just starting to creep in.

Actually, I think it’s just all *him*. He’s just so handsome, sweet, and adorable that it feels really *easy* to be like this with him. He seems like someone I’ve known for years, somehow. And the feeling of him pressed so closely to me, and his masculine scent invading my senses—it makes me lose my mind a little bit. Oh, it’s just heavenly. I am drunk on him. He makes me forget about everything.

“Not yet,” he whispers to me, as he uses one finger to draw slow circles around my clit, spreading my wetness around tortuously. The sensation makes my whole body tremble with pleasure, which I’m sure he can feel. He then slides his hand lower, and inserts one finger into my wetness, gently pulsing in and out of me.

I turn my head to the side and press my face against his shoulder, as my breath starts to come in short, shallow gasps. I can’t think as I press my body against his hand, seeking more. One of his hands continues to knead my breast while the other fingers me, and soon I’m just a mess, writhing and moaning

against his shoulder. He takes one of his knees and uses it to push my legs apart slightly, to get better access. I can feel his erection pressed up against my ass as he pleasures me, so I know that he is enjoying this too.

He inserts a second finger into me, and pulses a bit more roughly, and I moan, panting, and enjoying the sensation, but wishing it was him filling me up instead.

The vacuum cleaner stops abruptly. The man takes a hand off my breast, and clamps it over my mouth to muffle my moans. He then slides his fingers out of me, pulling a string of my hot wetness out, and spreading it around my most sensitive nub. He uses the same two fingers to gently stroke back and forth across my clitoris, rubbing and rubbing until the pleasure builds in me, and I forget where I am.

I arch my back against him, and moan into his hand, which he holds tightly over my lips.

“Come for me, June,” he whispers gruffly into my ear, before gently biting my earlobe. Oh, even that tiny sensation of his teeth against my skin drives me wild. I let my head roll back against his shoulder, turning to press my face against his, feeling his lips against my temple, and the shallowness of his hot breath against my cheek. His hand moves faster against my clit, sending shockwaves through me which build and build until my whole body is trembling with pleasure.

When my orgasm hits, it explodes, and the sensations tear through me like a riptide. I am so weak and shuddering against him, that I would surely fall if he wasn't holding me tightly. And I would surely scream if his hand wasn't clamped around my mouth—which somehow feels intensely erotic as well. I am so glad for the darkness of the closet hiding my facial expressions, because I'm sure that my eyes rolled back into my head and I must have looked possessed.

He holds me tightly against him as I come down from the high, and he removes his hand from my mouth, allowing me to catch my breath. He kisses the side of my head as I gasp for oxygen madly, like I have never breathed before. I don't know why I suddenly need air so badly. I guess with all the muscles

in my body clenching tightly like that... orgasms must require a lot of oxygen.

I don't really know. I haven't had enough to tell. I certainly haven't any like this.

I'm not sure how long I stand here, catching my breath and panting in his arms. But at some point, he reaches out and grasps the door handle, allowing the closet door to open. The janitor must have gone. I didn't even notice. I was in another world entirely. He seems to understand how I feel without me needing to communicate, because he picks me up and carries me over to the couch, laying me down gently. He reaches for my sweater, and arranges it around my naked chest, and then finds a folded blanket. He lays beside me and pulls me close, before pulling the blanket over both of us.

"What about you?" I ask, as I blissfully cuddle up against his chest, feeling cocooned and peaceful, and perfect.

"Just get some rest, sweetheart," he says gently.

And somehow, I've never felt so cared for.

CHAPTER 6

When a beeping alarm wakes me, I open my eyes in total shock, and cannot remember where I am. I try to move, but find there are iron bars around me. Then I remember that they are only a man's arms.

"Oh my god," I say in dismay. "I forgot about the chemo!"

He stirs then, and clears his throat, reaching for his phone. "It's okay. You've got fifteen minutes until her session ends. I set an alarm."

"Oh—you did?" I say with surprise. I feel like I've been sleeping all day, but it must have been no more than a small nap. Maybe less than half an hour. Why does it feel like the best sleep I've ever gotten? "Thank you."

"You're lucky you have a good excuse to leave me," he says with a smile. "The next time you wake up in my arms, I'm not letting you rush off so easily."

"The next time?" I ask with a puzzled smile. "That's a bit presumptuous. I don't even know your name."

"You will," he says, kissing my nose. "Now get your cute butt up and get dressed." He abruptly stands up, pulling the blankets off me and making me squeal with dismay with the cold air hits me.

When I reach for my bra, a flush of hot embarrassment hits my cheeks. "Oh my god, I can't believe you saw my underwear."

"I saw a lot more than just your underwear," he says with a chuckle.

I am surprised to find my clothes neatly folded in a pile near the couch. When did he get a chance to do that? There's even a packet of baby wipes to help me freshen up. I'm sure my makeup is smeared all over my face horribly, and I'm quite messy in other locations, too.

He's thought of everything.

I dig into my big comfy sweater for my phone, and see that I do, in fact, have a few minutes to get ready before picking my mom up. So, I get dressed and freshen up as best as I can, while the man stands over by the window, texting someone on his phone. Last of all, I place my Cheetos in my pocket. Something to look forward to later.

“Okay,” I say awkwardly. “I guess... I’m going to go now.”

He turns back to look at me. “Wait a minute—I still feel awful. I would have really liked to take you on a proper date. This is not like me, at all.”

“It’s okay,” I tell him. “It was lovely, really. The nicest, unexpected, random, crazy date in the middle of the day at a hospital.”

“Will you let me take you on a real date someday?” he asks.

“Well, yes,” I say softly. “Of course.”

“Good,” he says, walking over to me. “Now sit down.”

A bit puzzled, I follow his instruction. I am startled to find him pulling a brush through my hair, and then using his fingers to create a part down the middle. He then expertly braids my hair, and fastens it back up into two buns, exactly as it was before. I reach up and touch it with amazement, and stare up at him in disbelief. Then I stand up and run over to a mirror to double check his work.

“How did you do that? This is an extremely difficult hairstyle!” I turn from side to side, completely stunned. “It looks exactly like it did before.”

“I watched the YouTube videos,” he says with a grin. “I wouldn’t want your mom to be suspicious or worried and ask too many questions.”

“It took me hours to learn how to do this style! How did you manage this in seconds like that?” I ask him.

He shrugs. “Maybe I’m a genius. Maybe I’m just good at stuff and things. You’ll have to spend more time with me, in

order to find out.”

“Well, how am I supposed to see you again if I don’t have your name or number?” I ask him. “Those seem like very basic things you should give me after a great date. Maybe even before a great date.”

“This was only an okay date,” he tells me, stepping closer. “That’s my fault. I should have taken you on a properly great date, and I will someday. But for now, take this.” He hands me a card.

“What’s this?” I ask, seeing that the card belongs to a Michelin-starred restaurant. *The Willow*. Does he work there?

“I’m not sure how your mother feels after chemo—some people lose all appetite, and some people are hungry as horses. Either way, that restaurant is on the way home to Silver Mountain, so if you stop there, you can grab dinner together. I recommend the seafood chowder—it might be gentle enough for your mother to handle a few bites, if she has trouble eating.”

“I could never afford this place in a million years,” I tell him, although my stomach growls at the thought, protesting against my words.

“The owner of *The Willow* is very close to me, and she owes me one or two or three million favors. I already texted her that you’re on your way, and made reservations. So, dinner’s on me, and get whatever you like. Even the most expensive things on the menu. Whatever your heart desires. And feel free to invite whoever else you like. Any family or friends.”

“That’s so kind of you,” I say gratefully. And I mean it. I feel tears touch my eyes. A few hours ago, I was screaming at a vending machine about a snack worth a dollar. A few minutes ago, that snack was all I had to look forward to. And now he’s giving me this. It’s definitely the best date I’ve ever been on.

“I told you I’m not a sleazebag,” he says with a sheepish grin.

“I believe you,” I tell him. Then I glance at the time. “I’ve really got to go. But I hope I’ll see you again.” I move over to him and press a small kiss against his lips. Oh, God. I hope it’s not the last time I kiss him. I hope this dinner isn’t a goodbye gift.

“Silver Mountain is a very small town,” he says, kissing me back. “I’m sure we’ll run into each other soon enough.”

“Well, I’ve lived there my whole life and I’ve never run into you before.” A small ache of anxiety begins in the pit of my stomach. What if I never see him again? The thought is incredibly depressing. That would certainly push me closer to contacting the convent and becoming a nun. Or is it an abbey? *Get thee to a nunnery, go.* I think that’s from Hamlet. One of Shakespeare’s greatest tragedies. How will our story end, I wonder? In tragedy or comedy? Or is it already over, before it’s begun?

The mysterious stranger wraps his arms around me, securing me in a firm hug. “We will meet again, Juniper. I promise.”

The use of my full name gives some gravity to his words. So, I nod, and exit stage left.

Nothing else I can do.

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