

# Melodie March



*Please, Come  
Home for  
Christmas*

**PLEASE, COME HOME  
FOR CHRISTMAS**

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WINTERVALE PROMISES: BOOK 10

# MELODIE MARCH



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# PROLOGUE

## HARMONY

“*H*ow could you, Blake? *How. Could. You.*”

Harmony Sutton stood in the doorway of the plush Wicker Park apartment she shared with her boyfriend, Blake Ryan. She still had the keys in her shaking hand as she stared at Blake, so her rage was given a jingling soundtrack that sounded far more jolly than she currently felt. Blake was sitting at the dining room table behind his laptop, his workout clothes still on and his hair sweatily slicked back from an exhausting day of ruining people’s long sought-after dreams.

“What are you referring to, my love?” he asked as he took off his reading glasses and set them on the glass table with a *tink* that only made Harmony more angry. She hated when he talked to her like that and for some reason, he was always at his *most* condescending right after he took off his reading glasses. Harmony stomped over to the dining room and each time her heels hit the sparkling tiger wood, she saw Blake flinch at the thought of her scratching his precious floor. For the first time since she got on the train home, she felt a bit of satisfaction.

It all disappeared, however, when she grabbed the crumpled up letter that had been delivered to her by messenger

two hours ago. Blake slowly and deliberately unfolded the letter from the tiny ball she had compressed it into in her pocket.

“It might have helped if you had kept it the shape of a letter,” he said, reaching for his reading glasses again. Harmony rolled her eyes.

“Oh, don’t do that. You know *exactly* what that says, Blake. You can probably recite it from memory. I’m sure you dictated it to your assistant this morning.”

She could see the boredom in his eyes. Blake had always enjoyed teasing her and playing games with her head throughout their three year relationship, but when he lost interest, he did so quickly and without mercy.

“Yeah, I think I remember. *To the tenant of this unit, the building has been purchased for development by Ryan & Chase Land Resource Management, LLC. As of December 25th, you must surrender your occupancy of this unit as the building will be demolished on January 2nd, blah blah blah.*”

It was the “blah blah blah” that pushed her over the edge.

Harmony reached over, grabbed Blake’s laptop, and threw it into the delicately painted wall behind him.

“HEY!” he protested, even though it was too late.

“That *unit* is my bridal shop, Blake! My life’s work! I have spent *years* building up my business in that location and you, my boyfriend, buys the building to knock down? *Without telling me?* What kind of monster are you?!”

Blake turned around and looked at the broken remains of his laptop with a crinkle of frustration on his forehead. He was showing more concern for his laptop than he was for Harmony.



“Is it really necessary that you get so hysterical? I had all my pictures from the scuba trip to Cancun with my brother on there.”

Harmony felt like a tea kettle about to boil over, and suddenly she realized that she was screaming at the top of her lungs. Blake waved his hands and begged her to be quiet.

“Someone is going to call the police, Harmony! Jeez.”

Harmony stopped screaming, but only so she could look at Blake, really *look* at him, for the first time in a long time. He spent \$500 a month on making sure his dirty blonde hair didn't look, “done.” His big blue eyes were beautiful, and surrounded by injectables that he thought she didn't know about. His beard was expertly shaved by a skilled barber near his office; \$150 a week so it seemed like he'd forgotten to shave for a few days. Blake bought all his t-shirts a size too small so they showed off his abs and he had pajamas that cost more than her first car. But worst of all, most *infuriating* of all...

He was just so smug.

Even as he looked at her now, he was so self-satisfied. Harmony was sure that he thought it would all blow over, that she would calm down and realize it was no big deal he was destroying her business. It meant more money for fancy pajamas and shirts from the junior girl's department and vacations to Mexico with his stupid, pretentious brother. She felt like she was seeing Blake for the first time in a long time.

And she didn't like what she saw.

Before he could say another word, Harmony picked up her purse and stormed into the bedroom, where she started shoving everything she could fit into her three suitcases. Pictures of her family, clothes, books she couldn't part with,

and all her toiletries were jammed into the bags as Blake watched her, bemused.

“You’re overreacting, Harmony. I’ll find you another store. Eventually. They’re just wedding dresses. Maybe this was a sign that it’s time for you to stop working. We’d talked about...”

“When we were married!” she interrupted. “Someday! And you can’t *force* a sign! You shut down my business without even giving me the courtesy of a warning. That’s not a sign! Forget it, Blake. We’re done.”

Harmony shoved past him, her suitcases delicately balanced on each other, and stormed for the door. Instead of trying to stop her, Blake opened the front door for her.

“You’re going to regret this,” he said, a smirk creeping across his lips. Harmony scrunched up her face as she maneuvered the apartment key off her key ring, then threw it right at Blake’s chest.

“Like heck, I will.”

She could feel Blake watching her as she waited for the elevator, and each slow *ding* of it rising through floors was making her more indignant, so Harmony stomped to the stairs instead. After five flights down, her suitcases rocking back and forth the whole way, she finally got to the parking garage where her SUV had been angrily parked by the curb. It took her awhile to jam the bags in with the twenty wedding dresses and eight bridesmaid dresses that she’d jammed in the car after getting the letter. She had three left to finish that could be shipped to clients, and they could be finished in Wintervale.

As soon as Harmony got on the highway, and managed to calm down a little bit, she took out her cell and dialed her

mom, Tara. As always, her mom answered on the second ring.

“Hey, baby! It’s a Christmas miracle! You never call me first.”

For a moment, Harmony thought she was going to cry at the sound of her mother’s voice. But if she started crying now, Tara would flip out like the fierce mom bear she was. After she took a deep breath, Harmony forced herself to smile as she spoke.

“Hey, mom. I’m just calling to say that I’m actually on the road! I thought I’d come home for Christmas this year, after all.”

There was a long pause as if Tara wasn’t sure she believed what she heard. “Here? You’re coming to Vermont? Now?”

“Yes, mom. Now. I’m already on the road.”

More hesitation.

“Mom?”

“No, honey! That’s great! I can’t wait to see you! But you know Amber took over the old bedroom, right? You’ll have to sleep in the guest room on the third floor.”

Harmony sighed in relief. “That’s fine. As long as I don’t have to sleep in the coat closet, I’ll be happy.”

Tara laughed.

“There is always the old hideaway room.”

This time they both laughed at the happy memories that came courtesy of the room hidden inside of a walk-in linen closet on the second floor. She didn’t tell her mom, but Harmony would have slept in the garage if she had to...

As long as she wasn’t in Chicago anymore.

Every day at Wren & Candle Wintervale was busy for the restaurant's manager, Sebastian Young. But around the holidays, it always felt as if everything was just a *little bit* more chaotic than usual, to keep the staff on their toes. The sound of a tray full of glasses and plates shattering in the kitchen wasn't much of a surprise, but it was something Sebastian was going to have to deal with once he managed to clear a table for the next reservation. He could already see the embarrassed face of his assistant manager, Aubrey, looking at him through the window in the swinging door.

"Sebastian!" a familiar voice called to him from the back of the restaurant as he finished setting down the water glasses. "Sebastian, I need you!" When he turned around, he saw the restaurant's owner, Juniper Larson, waving at him from behind the bakery case. Ever since Juniper opened a second Wren & Candle location in the swanky Mountain Wolf Ski Lodge in the neighboring town of Hadley, she spent most of her time there. But once a week, she came back to the original location, which just so happened to be on the same property as her home. Sebastian saw Juniper regularly; she just trusted him to run things in Wintervale.

Once he made sure the 1pm reservation was comfortable in their seats, drinking the restaurant's signature sparkling water infused with fresh fruit, he checked on the mess in the kitchen, which had thankfully already been cleaned up, then he darted over to Juniper.

"I'm so sorry, Juni," Sebastian said as he nonchalantly tried to wipe the sweat from his forehead. *That's the last time I wear a cable knit sweater to work on a Friday*, he thought as he stashed his handkerchief in his pocket. "Aubrey accidentally double booked the communal table so we had to shuffle the tables around and it's... it's been a day."

Juniper laughed as she handed him a glass of water. "Why do you think I'm here? I left Harley at the Mountain Wolf for a few hours so I could get a break and take in some new, or old rather, scenery." Harley was Juniper's fiancé and he helped with the farm, as well as running the restaurants when they needed help.

"You left one busy restaurant to come to another?" Sebastian asked between gulps of water. "That doesn't seem like much of a break."

"I'm actually going back to the house to start wrapping presents for Enid before she gets home from school. But since she's spending the night with my aunt and uncle tonight, I thought you could take the night off and I'd run things over here."

Sebastian felt like crying. He couldn't remember the last time he took a night off. It had definitely still been warm outside. "Are you sure? Because we're fully booked. And Aubrey already asked to leave early to go to the ballet in Burlington..." But Juniper shook her head.

“It’s fine. It’s been too long since I worked a night here. I miss it. I’ll come back at five and we can swap out.”

He would have given her a hug but he felt like he was too sweaty to do that. “Thanks, Juniper. I think I’ll probably just go home and sleep for sixteen hours.”

“I know that feeling,” Juniper said, laughing as she grabbed her bag off the counter. “I’m off to cover myself in wrapping paper and glitter bows until I look like a Christmas present myself! I’ll see you in a few hours.”

Juniper scurried out the back door right before another group of people showed up without a reservation. Wintervale was a popular destination for day trips or weekend vacations during the Christmas season, due to the fact the town went all out when it came to the holiday. There were lights and Christmas trees everywhere, but the spirit of the season was something that the residents of Wintervale carried in their hearts all year long. That’s why, on the day after Thanksgiving, you might think a whole community of Christmas elves had descended on the small city. If it were up to a lot of people, Wintervale would be a 24/7/365 holiday destination.

Sebastian always loved Christmas when he was a kid, even though most of the time, it was just him and his Grandma Greta. His mom, Deirdre, had a habit of coming and going, so Sebastian moved in with his Grandma Greta when he was six. Greta did what she could to make Christmas special for him, but his favorite Christmas memories were spent with his best friend, Harmony, and her family. They treated him like he was part of their family, and it was a kindness that they’d kept up his whole life.

“Sebastian!”

One of the waiters startled Sebastian from his memories. He was waving at him from the host station and pointing at the phone.

*Great, another reservation I can't fit in,* he thought as he walked to the front of the restaurant again.

“Happy holidays! Wren & Candle, this is Sebastian. How can I help you today?”

“Well, Sebastian, you can help me by bringing one of those amazing butterscotch cakes to my house tonight.”

Sebastian laughed even though the group of people standing in the lobby were getting impatient. It was Tara Sutton, his best friend Harmony's mom.

“That's so weird. I was just thinking about you. Why am I bringing a butterscotch cake over?”

She scoffed at him. “Do I have to have a reason to invite you over to dinner? We haven't seen you since Carver came home. Plus, we're having a family dinner tonight and you are family. Can you be here at six?”

“Actually, Juniper just gave me the night off, so I can. But what's the special occasion, Tara? You don't demand Wren & Candle cake unless something is up.”

There was a brief pause as if she was planning her next move. Tara used to be a lawyer so she never uttered a word that wasn't absolutely necessary. It made her great at giving advice but she was also impossible to argue with. Sebastian loved that about her, even if it drove her kids crazy.

“Nothing is up! I just have a surprise for you. And don't be late! Six pm *on the dot.*”

One of the people in front of the host stand scowled at Sebastian and tapped his watch. Sebastian forced himself to keep his smile on and nodded as politely as he could manage. “Six. I’ll be there.”

“And don’t forget the cake!” she reminded him before she hung up the phone. He didn’t waste any time getting the impatient guests to a table, in the corner, close to the bathrooms. Once they were seated, he hurried over to the kitchen and called over to Aubrey, who was trying to help plate the lunches for the communal table.

“I’m going to get the orders from the people who just sat down. But when you’re done, can you box me up a butterscotch cake and put it in the fridge?”

She waved dismissively at him, but he was pretty sure she heard him. With that done, he went back to the craziness of Wren & Candle at lunch. But even with the hectic dining room and the madness of the kitchen, Sebastian couldn’t help but wonder what surprise was waiting for him at the Sutton house at 6pm...

And he couldn’t wait to find out.



*H*armony took a deep breath as she lay on the floor in front of the fireplace in her childhood living room, letting the scents of the Christmas tree, cinnamon candles, and her mother's baked ham with a brown sugar glaze cooking in the kitchen, all wash over her. They weren't *just* the scents of Christmas; they filled her with the comfort of being home. The sound of the crackling fire and her sister and brothers yelling at each other helped, since her siblings arguing was pretty much the soundtrack to her childhood. They never fought over important things, but a disagreement over who had to set the dining room table could go on for half an hour, and that's precisely what they were bickering over tonight.

The four Sutton kids had drifted in and out of their mother's lakeside home in Wintervale ever since they each turned eighteen. The oldest, Charlie Jr., had stayed close to home and become a teacher at Wintervale High, their very own high school where he'd been a football star. Tara tried to convince him to live at home, but he was living in a guest house on the property of Jace and Pippa Andrews, who had an amazing place called Whispering Pines up in the Green Mountains. Carver, their youngest brother, was a tattoo artist who had just moved home from New York and was working at

a shop in Hadleigh. Carver didn't talk much about his time in New York and they all knew better than to ask. He was just happy to be home with his family again.

Amber, the baby, never left the Sutton house. She commuted to school in Burlington and now was working as a pediatric nurse at Hadleigh Hope hospital. She and Harmony were best friends, but when the whole family was together, Amber had a tendency to act like the baby again...

And she was at it tonight.

"momaaaaaa, I helped you cook! Why do I have to set the table too? Make Carver do it!"

Harmony could hear Carver scoff from the living room.

"I worked all day! Amber just sat around watching TV!"

"It was my *day off*, Carver!" Harmony pictured her sister stomping her foot.

"Make Harmony do it," CJ interjected. "She hasn't set the table in four years."

That got Harmony's full attention.

"Leave me out of it!" she called into the kitchen. "I just spent fourteen hours straight in the car!"

"What kind of an excuse is that?" CJ yelled back, though Harmony could sense that he was smiling. She decided to employ one of their classic distraction techniques.

"Why don't you show me that fancy guest house you're living in, Charlie? Mom said it's bigger than our house."

The techniques rarely worked, but it was worth a try. CJ poked his head into the living room and grinned at her.

“No way. I’ll show you pictures while you set the table. Besides, we have a guest coming over tonight.”

Harmony sat up like a shot. “Who? Who is coming over tonight? I look terrible!” She was still in the same zip-up sweatshirt and jeans she’d had on for fourteen hours in her car, which were covered in cheese curl dust and a few drops of some awful caffeine drink she’d been chugging when she slammed on her breaks on the highway. Her siblings were cutting her a wide berth.

Tara, who’d been cooking all afternoon, finally chimed in from the kitchen. “Sebastian. He’ll be here at six.”

Harmony jumped to her feet and ran into the kitchen, the barely fastened bun in her hair falling loose as she slid across the floor.

“mom! I wanted to call him and surprise him myself!”

Carver looked at her disheveled appearance and snort laughed. “He’ll be surprised, all right.” Harmony stuck her tongue out at her brother and her mother smacked her on the arm with a spatula.

“Go upstairs and change. You still have half an hour.”

Harmony groaned in frustration but turned on her heel and ran out of the kitchen, grabbing the suitcase she brought in as she made a dash for the stairs. The guest room she’d been forced into since her sister stole their childhood bedroom was on the third floor, and she was so tired that by the time she got up there, she was already winded, which didn’t help her feel any better about seeing Sebastian for the first time since his disastrous visit to Chicago. Harmony heaved her bag on to the guest bed and opened it in a panic, hoping it was the bag she’d

put her clothes and some of her toiletries into. But before she could fully unzip the suitcase...

She started crying.

She didn't know why she was crying, only that she felt like she'd been holding the tears in for fourteen hours and suddenly they were all spilling out. Maybe it was because she was home with her family, or maybe it was because she was finally going to see her best friend again. But as she wiped the tears from her cheeks, staining the sleeves of her sweatshirt with eyeliner, Harmony was finding it harder and harder to stop. And if she couldn't tell her family about Blake, and losing the business she'd worked her whole life for...

How was she going to tell Sebastian?

Sebastian yawned as he got out of his SUV in the Sutton's driveway and stretched his arms as high as he was able. He didn't realize how tired he was until he started driving out to their house by the lake. He didn't have time to go home and change, so he was still in the same suit he'd been wearing all day during service, but he quickly untied his tie and tossed it onto the passenger seat before he started the long walk up the drive to the front door. The Sutton house was never more beautiful than it was at Christmas. It had been built in the 1700s as Winterville's only inn and tavern, but when The Middle Road Inn opened a hundred years later, the owner turned it into their home. A member of the Sutton family had been living in it since 1889.

Tara always went all out during the holidays and this year was no different. Every window was lit up by its own candelabra and surrounded by fresh garland. The trees in the living room and the dining were bigger than ever, and Sebastian couldn't help but be overwhelmed by nostalgia at the sight of them twinkling in the windows. Even though he was just standing in front of the house, the smell of Tara's baked ham was mingling with the smoke from the fireplace and he suddenly realized he was starving. He didn't stand on

ceremony at the front door and let himself in after a courtesy knock.

“Merry early Christmas, Suttons!” he called out as he took his coat off and hung it on one of the wall pegs at the door. It had been a while since he saw the whole family, though he met CJ for lunch a couple times a month when they both could get away from work. If it weren’t for the lunches, he wouldn’t know what was going on with Harmony. He didn’t hear from her quite as much lately. She was really busy with her shop and... Blake. Even *thinking* her boyfriend’s name made him cringe. Blake Ryan was arrogant and smug, two things Sebastian had no patience for. But if he said so much as a negative word about him to Harmony, she would dig her heels into the relationship even more. She was stubborn, *all* the Sutton women were, and he didn’t want to push her any further away than she already was.

Sebastian heard chit-chat from the kitchen but no one answered him when he called out, so he peeked back out through the front window curtains to check for cars. It seemed like everyone was home, even CJ, and he rarely came to the house during the week. *I wonder what the special occasion is*, Sebastian thought as he started to walk to the kitchen. He was walking past the living room when a voice called to him from in front of the tree.

“Hey, Sky. Long time no see.”

*Sky*... His initials: Sebastian Kendall Young.

No one called him Sky but...

“Harmony?” he whispered as he took two steps back and turned to the living room. There she was, bathed in the glow of the Christmas tree lights, like she’d never left Wintervale at all. She looked beautiful, she *always* looked beautiful, but she

also looked tired, as if she'd walked back to Wintervale from Chicago. He couldn't take his eyes off of her, because he was afraid if he did, she would disappear again.

“Aren't you going to give me a hug?” she asked with a laugh. He wanted to, he really wanted to, but he couldn't seem to get his legs to move.

“I don't understand. Where did you... why are you... what's going on?”

Harmony laughed at him again and put her hands on her hips. “Are you going to make me walk all the way over there for a hug after I drove all the way here from Chicago?”

Sebastian rubbed his eyes to make sure he wasn't imagining her.

“If you drove, you probably need to stretch your legs,” he said a little more sarcastically than he meant to.

Harmony rolled her eyes at him and darted across the room so fast, he didn't have time to register she was moving. Suddenly, her arms were wrapped around his waist, and he was smelling the same rose, orange, and peony perfume she had worn since high school. She was really there.

“I missed you, Sky,” she said into his shirt. He didn't answer her; he just put his arms around her and held her as close and as tight as he was able. He had a million things he wanted to ask her: why hadn't she called, why was she there, and how long was she staying? But he couldn't seem to form the words. He didn't want to ruin the moment with anymore of his stumbling questions...

He only wanted to hold her. And for a few minutes, that was enough. She was home...

His best friend was home.

*H*armony and Sebastian were still locked in a hug when Amber walked into the living room, munching on one of Tara's homemade cheesy breadsticks.

"I'd tell you two to get a room, but all the rooms are taken."

Harmony rolled her eyes at her sister as she let go of Sebastian and quickly wiped away the tears that had welled up in her eyes.

"Says the woman who took over a huge room with her king-sized bed as soon as she moved back in."

Amber finished the last bite of breadstick and put her hands on her hips. "Hey! I shared a room with you for eighteen years. I think I've earned a little space."

"You could have your own space if you moved out of mom's house and got your own apartment!" CJ called out from the kitchen, making Harmony rush to cover up a snort laugh with her hands. A pouting Amber turned on her heels and charged back toward the kitchen.

"I'm still paying off my student loans! You know that, you..." she countered, her voice disappearing down the hall. Sebastian chuckled as he turned back to Harmony.



“I almost forgot how crazy it is here when everyone is home. Are you staying in the guest room?”

Harmony nodded with a bit of disappointment because she didn't love the idea of being on the third floor on her own. She'd always shared a room with Amber, even when she came home to visit, so being up there alone felt a little creepy. Then she looked at Sebastian and suddenly, she had a great idea.

“Sky! Why don't you stay tonight? You can sleep in the hideaway room!” When he was a kid, Sebastian would sleep in the small bedroom under the stairs every time he stayed over, which was *all* the time. She thought it was a great idea, until Harmony registered Sebastian's expression; he was looking at her like she was insane.

“Are you being serious, Harmony? I'm 6'1. I'd have to crawl through the door into the hideaway room and walk around on my knees,” he said with an amused smile.

“Did you just ask Sebastian to sleep in the hideaway room?” Carver asked from the doorway where he had suddenly appeared. Neither of them said anything out loud but the grin on Sebastian's face said plenty. “Mom! She asked Sebastian to sleep in the hideaway room!” Carver yelled into the kitchen before he ran upstairs.

Harmony sighed and turned back to Sebastian, but didn't say anything for a minute, just to make sure none of her other siblings were hovering around and listening. Once she was sure they were alone, she started again.

“Okay, fine, that was a stupid idea. But you could sleep on the couch! We can hang out and watch old Christmas specials all night and eat all of those cranberry cookies mom made!”

There was something so different about Sebastian since the last time she saw him. It wasn't just the suit, though that was a big change from the relaxed hipster uniform Sebastian had favored since they were kids. He was a little more grown up, a little more polished...

And a lot more serious.

"That sounds like fun, Harmony, but I can't tonight. I have to head back to my place after dinner."

Harmony tried not to pout because she knew he would make fun of her but she was sure her disappointment was obvious. "You're staying for dinner though... right?"

"Yeah, of course. You couldn't get rid of me now if you tried," he said as he gave her another hug. "I even brought dessert."

Sebastian dashed back into the hallway and came back with a gorgeous golden cake. Harmony could smell the aroma of butterscotch from where she was standing and her mouth started to water.

"What is that?" she asked, suddenly more hungry than she'd been in about three years.

"One of the house specialties, a perk of being the manager at Wren & Candle. But I think your mom would be furious if we ate any before dinner. I could smell the ham baking from the driveway," he said as he set the cake down on the side table in the dining room.

"I don't think I even had an appetite until I smelled that cake. I haven't had anything to eat since I left Chicago," Harmony replied as she rubbed her growling stomach.

As if her "mom senses" had been activated, Tara came hustling down the hallway with the finished ham on a platter.

“You haven’t eaten since yesterday morning? Harmony Ruth Sutton, you told me you had something on the road! Amber! Charlie! Hurry up with the sides!”

Tara was in the dining room in a second flat, with all of her kids filing in behind her and sitting in the same chairs they had sat in all their life. Sebastian sat in the chair next to Harmony’s, but she hung back. For just a moment, she stayed in the doorway and soaked in the scene in front of her. It felt like she was reliving a dozen different memories, all at the same time.

Her mother had lit the “company candles” in the center of the table, so it was obviously a special occasion. The ham was in front of CJ for carving, and a half dozen side dishes were spread out everywhere: skillet cornbread, mac and cheese, roasted brussels sprouts, green beans, twice-baked potatoes, and a fennel salad. It was a collection of all Harmony’s favorite foods so she knew the meal was prepared to celebrate her arrival in Winterville. But it wasn’t the food that was making Harmony’s heart swell... okay, it wasn’t *just* the food. It was seeing her family, and her oldest friend, sitting at the table laughing and talking together, that made her feel like she was home. All of the stress and sadness she’d felt only a few hours ago seemed to be melting away.

In the four years she lived in Chicago, Harmony never felt as calm as she did in that moment.

“Harmony? Are you actually going to eat or are you just going to watch us?” Amber asked as she waved her fork to attract her sister’s attention. Harmony laughed in embarrassment and quickly slipped into her seat.

“Sorry. I guess I was just lost in thought.”

And the thought was... she should have come back to Wintervale a lot sooner.

Sebastian felt as if he'd had an entire Thanksgiving meal to himself as he walked out of the Sutton house into the cold, crisp night air. He couldn't remember the last time he'd sat down to a meal and there were no leftovers; even the butterscotch cake had been reduced to crumbs. He couldn't help but yawn at the thought of driving all the way back to his house in downtown Wintervale, something Harmony must have picked up on as she followed him outside.

"Are you sure you don't want to stay over? The couch offer still stands," she said as she gently nudged him with her shoulder. Sebastian didn't *want* to say no. At that moment, there was nothing he wanted more than to curl up in the Sutton's living room and watch the 1934 *Babes in Toyland* for the hundredth time while drinking Tara's hot famous cocoa. But he couldn't.

"I'm sorry, Harmony. I can't. Now that Juniper is spending most of her time at The Mountain Wolf, she put me in charge of the Wintervale Wren & Candle Christmas party. I have to be at the restaurant at 6am to meet the delivery trucks and it's," he paused to look at his phone, "it's already nine. Tomorrow is going to be a really long day. It's a big deal that she's trusting

me to head up this party. I don't want to mess anything up, you know?"

Harmony nodded, but he could see the disappointment in her eyes, and it broke his heart. "Is something wrong?"

"No. I mean, not really," she faltered before correcting herself. "I was just really hoping that I could talk to you. Could we have dinner tomorrow night?"

Sebastian could tell that Harmony really did need to talk. When they were kids, even though they told each other everything, Harmony was never particularly anxious to talk about her feelings. She was a lot like her mom in that way; they were so busy trying to be strong for everyone else that they forgot to take care of themselves. And when Harmony looked like she was carrying the weight of the world on her shoulders, it was Sebastian's job to help her unload some of it.

"I'm not sure about dinner. I won't know if I have to stay for dinner service until I get to the restaurant tomorrow. But why don't you come by for lunch? We keep a little family table in the back that should be open. I think we're flexible with lunch reservations so I can get my assistant manager to cover things for an hour. Come by around 1pm? I'll text you the address."

Harmony threw her arms around Sebastian again, except this time, she whispered, "thank you" before she let go and ran back in the house. For a few minutes, Sebastian stood in front of the house, staring at the windows lit up with Christmas cheer. In spite of all the happiness inside, there was no ignoring that something serious was going on with Harmony, except she didn't seem willing to talk about it in front of her family... What could possibly have happened?

The drive back to his house downtown was a quiet one; Christmas music was playing softly on the radio and snow crunched under the wheels of his car, but he was so lost in thought that he didn't hear any of it. All he could think about was dinner and how sad Harmony seemed to be despite her brothers and sister doing everything they could to make her laugh. Even when she *did* chuckle at Carver and Amber's bickering, or one of Sebastian's Grandma Greta's crazy stories from her assisted living facility, there wasn't a lot of joy in Harmony's laugh. She still seemed to be adrift in sadness.

There was much more on Sebastian's mind as he passed all of the stores on Pine Street, each one brightly lit with twinkle lights, gorgeous Christmas trees, and more tinsel than the whole of Santa's workshop. Whenever he looked at Harmony across the dinner table, dressed in a Christmas sweater two sizes too big for her with her hair in a haphazard bun, all of his old feelings for her came back. It didn't matter if she was in a ballgown or flannel footie pajamas; when he looked at Harmony, all he saw was the beautiful girl that he'd loved since he was a kid. And all of his old feelings for her rushed over him like a wave he never saw coming.

Sebastian had *tried* dating since Harmony left for Chicago. He'd gone out with friends in Burlington, had coffee with a couple of girls who gave him their number at Wren & Candle over the years, and even signed up for a dating app for two disastrous weeks. After every local woman on the app was either distantly related to him or someone he already knew from high school, he just deleted the whole thing off of his phone. In the end, it didn't matter anyway, because no one made him feel the way that Harmony did.

The last thing he wanted was to be spun around by her again, always by her side when she needed him but then

ultimately left behind. *Especially* if she was only home for a week or two to celebrate the holiday with her family. But there was something about this visit that felt different. He wasn't sure what it was but it almost felt like she was back, back in Wintervale *for good*. But that couldn't be possible, could it?

Why would she give up her life in Chicago to come back to Wintervale?



“*H*armony! Turn down your music! They can probably hear it in Canada!”

Harmony sighed as she turned down the volume on her phone. It was the second time her mother had asked her to lower her music that morning, and both times, she had caused a hearty dose of high school *deja vu*. Even though she was in the guest bathroom putting on her makeup, she couldn't help but feel like a teenager again as she swept on some eyeliner and sang along to her favorite songs. She was so distracted trying to get the perfect cat eye that she didn't even notice her sister walk in until she was close enough to hear her breathing.

“I can't believe you're going out on my first day off in a month,” Amber said as she sat down on the edge of the tub. Harmony jumped so suddenly that she swiped her black eyeliner across the side of her face.

“Come on, Amber. I almost had it!”

Harmony quickly tried to clean off the stray eyeliner without ruining the rest of her makeup, but it was a lost cause. She was going to have to start over on half her face. As she carefully reapplied her eyeshadow, she couldn't help but feel bad that she was abandoning Amber. Her sister's job in the pediatric ward of Hadleigh Hope Hospital was chaotic, and

she usually worked twelve hour shifts. Amber couldn't even get Christmas off; she was working a twelve hour shift from 8pm to 8am, starting Christmas Eve, so she was going to miss Christmas Eve dinner.

"I'm sorry, Amber," Harmony apologized for the third time. "But Sebastian wasn't sure he could do dinner so I had to agree to lunch. But I promise I will be home for pizza and movie night tonight."

Harmony finished her eyeliner and put on a quick swipe of lipstick before turning to her sister, who was watching her with fascination.

"You're getting awfully dressed up for lunch with Sebastian..."

Harmony looked down at the wavy green and up to gold silk dress she was wearing, and her gold strappy heels hanging off the hooks on the back of the door. It was one of her favorite dresses and she didn't see what the big deal was...

"What's wrong with this dress? Isn't Wren & Candle kind of a fancy place? Besides, I haven't really seen Sebastian in three years. We have a lot to talk about."

Amber reached over to the sink and took Harmony's perfume, then spritzed some of it on her wrists to smell it. After she sprayed a little more on her neck, she looked at her sister intently. "Are you going to tell him about Blake?"

Harmony dropped the shoe she was trying to slip her foot into. She hadn't told Amber about Blake yet but she also wasn't surprised that her sister figured it out. They'd always been able to read each other's minds, especially when it came to heartbreak.

“What gave it away?” Harmony asked as she sat down next to Amber on the side of the tub to finish putting her shoes on.

“You showed up here out of nowhere with a car full of your stuff and all of the wedding dresses from your shop. It didn’t take a genius to figure it out.”

“The boys didn’t figure it out.”

Amber snort laughed. “Like I said.”

“Do you think mom knows?”

“Probably, but I won’t say anything to her,” Amber said with a shrug. “Tell her when you’re ready. Do *you* think *Sebastian* knows?”

Harmony had been trying to figure that out for herself. Sebastian met Blake one time and it didn’t go well. He never said the words out loud but she knew that they had no use for each other. They were two completely different people, but Sebastian’s disdain for her ex-boyfriend went deeper than that. She just never knew why.

“I think Sebastian probably suspects that something happened with Blake, but he’s never going to bring it up first. I’m going to tell him. I have to.”

Amber picked up Harmony’s lipstick to put it on but Harmony snatched it out of her sister’s hand and tossed it into her purse. Amber stuck her tongue out and crossed her arms over her chest.

“Are you going to tell him you moved home?”

Now Harmony was the one who snort laughed. “Let’s not get ahead of ourselves.”

“Oh, really? What do you call rolling up to the front door with everything you own crammed into your car?”

Harmony slipped into her white peacoat and tucked her bag under arm. “A road trip to a new life. Will you remind mom that I’ll be home at six? She went to the Red Apple Market to pick up the turkey for Christmas Eve. Apparently it’s big enough to feed the whole town.”

“Rub it in, why don’t you?” Amber called after her as Harmony carefully maneuvered down two flights of stairs in her designer heels. The last thing she needed to do was fall down the steps and break her ankle. Amber would never let her hear the end of it. Once she finally got to the front door, she was able to teeter across the cobblestone driveway to the back of the house where she’d parked her car. When she finally got on the road, she allowed herself the luxury of wondering how she was going to explain everything that happened to Sebastian. How could she begin to tell him what she was doing...

Especially when she had *no* idea what she was doing herself.

Sebastian stood outside the kitchen at Wren & Candle as Aubrey loaded finished dishes onto a huge serving tray for him to take out into the dining room. Juniper had taken a ton of lunch reservations while she was working the night before and now the dining room was full... *really* full, and no one was exactly prepared for it.

“Which table is this going to, Aubrey? There is no number on the ticket?” he asked as patiently as he was able. For a moment, Aubrey looked panicked, like she had no idea. But then one of the servers came rushing through the swinging door, his brow glistening with sweat. He audibly sighed in relief when he saw the tray.

“Oh, thank goodness. Eight just asked for an update. They’re getting impatient. Sebastian, there is a woman up front asking for you. She didn’t give me her name but she’s pretty. Like... *really* pretty,” the waiter said as he took the tray and ran back out into the dining room. Sebastian looked at his watch and groaned. How was it one already?

Once he made sure everything was going smoothly in the kitchen, he ran out the doors before anyone could ask him for anything else. At the rate the day was going, he wasn’t sure he would have as much time for Harmony as he thought. It felt

like everything in the restaurant was going wrong today, but if he could just get the staff organized for an hour, he might actually be able to sit down and focus on whatever Harmony wanted to talk about. He just needed to keep things moving as smoothly as possible for now.

Except the minute he stepped out of the kitchen and into the dining room, he was frozen in place the second he laid eyes on Harmony, who was still standing patiently next to the host's stand. He wasn't the only person in the restaurant who was staring at her because she looked gorgeous, like a movie star who had wandered into Wren & Candle by accident. She was wearing an emerald green and gold sparkling dress with matching gold shoes, and her hair was falling down around her shoulders in loose curls. She was maybe a *little* overdressed for lunch, but that was Harmony's vibe; she was always glamorous, like she was on her way to an awards show. And it suited her well.

When their eyes locked from across the room, Harmony smiled at him just like she did when they were teenagers and that was it. That was all it took.

Sebastian was overwhelmed with his love for her again. It actually made him a bit dizzy and he had to steady himself on the doorframe.

If he was being honest with himself, he'd never *actually* fallen out of love with her. He couldn't remember a day in his life when he'd loved anyone else. Two days after they met in kindergarten, he proposed to her with a giant pink plastic diamond ring he got out of a gum machine at a pizza place. She said yes and they had a wedding with all of their favorite stuffed animals in attendance. Ten years later, their friends in middle school would tease them about being a secret couple,

no matter how much they protested. It wasn't until high school when everything started to change.

It didn't take long for Harmony to fall in with the popular crowd, which made sense once they became teenagers. She was beautiful, her family had money, and all of the popular boys followed her around like puppy dogs. Meanwhile, Sebastian lived with his grandmother in a 150-year-old house in downtown Winterville, spent most of his free time in the school kitchen teaching himself to cook, and worked weekends at The Middle Road Inn, where he served a lot of his classmates. None of the other popular kids actively made fun of him, but they didn't exactly acknowledge his existence either. Sebastian didn't mind though, as long as he had Harmony. She could have abandoned him at any time, but it never happened.

They still hung out whenever she had free time and when he wasn't working, and they talked on the phone every night before bed. Even when Harmony left for design school and Sebastian stayed in Winterville, they had a standing phone date twice a week to make sure they didn't miss anything that was going on in each other's life.

Nothing about their friendship changed until Blake.

He felt his nose crinkle up at the thought of her boyfriend, and his smug face, and his shoes that cost more than Sebastian's car. He did *not* like or trust that guy, but he'd never been able to...

"Sky? Are you in there?"

Suddenly, Harmony's hand was waving in front of his face, snapping him out of the fog of memories he'd gotten lost in when he saw her at the host stand.

“I’ve been waving at you for a while. Are you okay?” she asked him. Her voice seemed to be shaking nervously, though he didn’t understand why.

“I’m fine. Perfect. I’m sorry. Things are just crazy here today and they weren’t supposed to be. I guess I got lost in thought. Come on, let’s sit down.”

As he guided her over to the family table at the back of the restaurant, he tried to take a deep breath to calm himself down. If he kept acting this silly, he was never going to make it through lunch, and right now all he wanted to do was focus on Harmony. He wished he could kick everyone else out of the restaurant so it was just the two of them...

*If only*, he thought as he pulled her chair out for her to sit down and her hair brushed against his cheek. *If only*.



*H*armony followed Sebastian through the busy restaurant, and as they weaved their way through the tables, she couldn't get over what a gorgeous place it was. When they were kids, Wintervale never would have imagined having a place like Wren & Candle in their town. But if anyone was going to do it, she wasn't surprised it was Juniper. Juniper and her brother Charlie were friends in high school and she was always the most creative one in their clique. She'd even taught Harmony how to knit when she was babysitting for them one night. Harmony made a mental note to go visit her at The Mountain Wolf one afternoon soon.

Sebastian gestured for Harmony to sit at a small table near a sparkling pale pink Christmas tree.

"Matt, can you grab Harmony a menu, please?" he asked a waiter who was rushing by. She didn't have a chance to thank a busboy for the glass of sparkling water before the waiter returned with the menu and slid it directly into her hands.

"Jeez! Everyone is really on their game here, aren't they?" she asked as she quickly scanned the menu. Everything sounded so delicious, she had no idea what to pick. "You know what I like, Sky. Pick out whatever you think is best."

Sebastian nodded and smiled before he turned to the server.

“She’ll have the pumpkin gnocchi with brown butter and shaved roasted brussels sprouts, and I’ll just take the sesame crusted salmon salad.”

“With the soy honey vinaigrette?”

Sebastian clicked his tongue in agreement with the server, who hurried off in the direction of the kitchen. Harmony was stunned silent for a moment. After she took a sip of the water, she finally managed to speak.

“You’ve really taken to working here, haven’t you?” He smiled at her and rolled up the sleeves of his cable knit sweater.

“Yeah, it turns out I’m really good at this. All it took was Juniper trusting me to trust in myself.”

They both sat quietly for a bit as Harmony took too many nervous gulps of her water, to the point she was worried she was going to have to pee if she kept it up. But when Sebastian finally broke the tension, it wasn’t much better than the silence.

“What are you doing here, Harmony?”

“You invited me...”

Sebastian tilted his head and raised an eyebrow at her like she was being silly. “Not here, in the restaurant, here. What are you doing in Wintervale?”

She took another long sip of the sparkling water and felt her stomach start bubble. *Sparkling was a very bad idea.*

“It’s Christmas! Where else would I be?”

This time, Sebastian just laughed at her. “Harmony, you haven’t come home for Christmas in four years. You didn’t tell any of us you were coming. Obviously, you came back for a reason.”

Harmony opened her mouth to spill everything, from the loss of the shop, to Blake, to the fact she thought she made a terrible mistake when... No, she couldn’t tell him any of that. The worst, most embarrassing thing that could happen to her had happened. She’d put so much faith in the wrong man, she’d somehow missed it when he obliterated the life she had carved out for herself in an attempt to drive her closer to him. Harmony had only broken up with Blake when he hadn’t given her any other choice. How could she admit all of *that* to Sebastian?

The answer was simple: she couldn’t.

“Harmony, please tell me what’s wrong?” he tried again. But rather than tell him the truth, she shrugged and shook her head.

“Nothing. It’s fine. I just missed everyone and really wanted to spend this Christmas in Wintervale. Never mind me. What have you been up to?”

Sebastian looked at her suspiciously but nodded. “Yeah, okay. Well, work is great. And Greta is doing really well at her assisted living place in Burlington. She’s even teaching a yoga class there, if you can believe it.”

“I can totally believe it,” Harmony laughed as she remembered his hippy grandmother teaching her to read tarot cards when she was ten. Then Harmony took a deep breath before asking her next question, mostly because she was trying to psych herself up to ask. “So... have you been seeing anyone?”

Sebastian stared at her, his expression frozen, for so long that Harmony thought she'd offended him. But then he started to laugh and he couldn't stop.

"I wasn't trying to be funny, but alright."

"No," he said as he gathered his composure. "It's not you. I just... I don't have time. I'm married to this restaurant now. And with Juniper over at The Mountain Wolf, the farm attached has become like my kid. If I'm not here, I'm helping her fiancé Harley with planting and harvesting and canning. I don't have time for anything else."

Harmony looked at him for the first time since they sat down, really *looked* at him, and she couldn't quite process how much Sebastian had changed. His dirty blonde hair was longer and a little more styled, his beard scruffy but polished. His clothes were way more expensive and tailored than the jeans and t-shirts she was used to seeing him in. But it was more than just the superficial; Sebastian was more self-assured and his goofiness had turned in an unexpectedly boyish charm. Plus, almost every woman in the restaurant, and a few men, was watching his every move, yet he didn't seem to notice at all. It was clear he had no idea how handsome he'd become, and Harmony was just about to tell him, when there was a sudden commotion at the front of the restaurant.

They both looked toward the host's stand and saw that a huge group of people had charged into the lobby.

"Oh, no," Sebastian said as he looked around the room for help. "There was no one else on the reservation list for today. I'm sorry, Harmony, they are going to need help with a table that big. Please, stay here and eat. I will try to get back over here as fast as I can."

She didn't have time to answer him before he disappeared into the commotion of the restaurant. She didn't even get the chance to tell him about movie night, which was something they used to do when they were kids that she was hoping to revive. Harmony finished off her sparkling water dejectedly as the server returned with her lunch. It looked absolutely delicious, but Harmony's appetite was gone.

“Can I get you some more water, miss?”

She shook her head and brushed away a curl that had fallen in her eye. “No thanks. Could you pack it up to go, actually? I forgot I have somewhere to be.”

Thankfully, the server ran off again without asking questions, giving Harmony just enough time to crunch on some of her ice to deal with her frustration. None of this lunch went the way she had hoped...

Now what was she going to do?

Sebastian had no idea how long he'd been gone from the table when he finally extracted himself from a table full of businessmen in town from Burlington. They were demanding and obnoxious, and the waitstaff was quickly overwhelmed by their requests, so Sebastian felt like he needed to help. By the time he managed to distract them with a round of triple chocolate mousse cups, on the house, Harmony had disappeared from the table. There was nothing left at the table but an empty plate and his uneaten salad.

"Matt," he called to the waiter as he hurried by with a tray of dirty dishes. "Where did my friend go?"

For a second, the waiter looked confused, but then he seemed to remember something and he handed the tray to another server who was hurrying by. Matt dug into the pocket of his apron where he kept his tips and dug out a paper napkin from the bar.

"Sorry, Sebastian. I forgot she gave this to me before she left. I uh... I also forgot to tell you that Graham had to go to the store for more camembert because the cheese people didn't come this morning. So... Aubrey is covering things in the kitchen."

Sebastian slapped his hand against his forehead. His assistant manager was great at running the dining room but the kitchen was not her forte.

“Okay, just give me a few minutes and I’ll trade off with her. Thanks, Matt.”

The server hurried off in another direction, leaving Sebastian to read the paper napkin that Harmony had left for him. When he unfolded it, all it said was, “The Sutton House. 6pm.” Underneath, she drew a piece of pizza and a vintage movie camera. He couldn’t help but laugh at the sight of one of her notes. Sebastian hadn’t gotten one since they were in high school. Harmony would leave the pictographs in his locker and he would have to decode them to figure out what their plans for the night were going to be. Sebastian couldn’t draw to save his life, but he always loved opening his locker and discovering one of the notes when they fluttered out onto the floor.

The note she left was the same one she always dropped in his locker on movie night at the Sutton’s. Back in the day, from the time they were little kids, they would have pizza and movie night every week. It was something Sebastian looked forward to more than he ever admitted to anyone, though he was pretty sure Tara knew. But suddenly, in high school, Harmony stopped showing up, even when the rest of her siblings still came religiously...

Even though Sebastian kept dropping in every week.

In their junior year of high school, Harmony made the varsity cheerleading squad and all of the football games were on Thursdays, Fridays, and sometimes on Saturday. After the games, she would go out to eat with whoever she was dating, and her friends on the squad, or sometimes she would go to

parties that Sebastian was definitely not invited to. But even then, Tara made sure that Sebastian felt at home with their family. His Grandma Greta always loved him, but until she broke her hip, she was busy with her own friends in The Green Mountain Grannies. She didn't know how to be buddies with her teenage grandson and Sebastian couldn't blame her for that. It was always okay because Tara Sutton gave him a home, and a family he could count on.

Part of him couldn't wait to get over to the house and maybe recapture some of that old feeling they had when they were *all* together in the family room. They would hide behind pillows as they watched old horror movies or laugh hysterically at whatever terrible comedy CJ and Carver had picked out. Maybe there was a chance that tonight...

“Sebastian?”

Sebastian looked up from the note, which he'd been staring at for quite a while, and saw Juniper's fiancé, Harley furiously waving at him.

“Dude, you've been staring at that napkin for a while. Are you okay?” Harley asked.

Sebastian shoved the note into his pocket and nodded. “Never better. What's up Harley?”

“I've got a few baskets of sweet potatoes in the barn. Juniper said you needed them for the Christmas party. Do you mind helping me? There are a lot.”

Sebastian nodded absent-mindedly and followed Harley out the back door, into the cold. The air smelled like snow was coming, which wasn't unusual for a Vermont Christmas. What was unusual was that it wasn't snowing already. By the time they got to the barn, Sebastian was already shivering because



he'd forgotten his jacket. Harley chuckled as he opened the barn doors.

“Don't worry. They're big baskets. You'll heat up in a hurry. So... Juniper told me your friend Harmony is back in town.”

Sebastian chuckled as he tried to get a grip on the giant basket that was sitting on the floor just inside. “How long did it take for her to catch you up on that story?”

“Well... we were wrapping presents for Enid. We had some time. Are you doing okay?”

Harley somehow managed to pick up two baskets *and* kick the barn doors shut behind them. Sebastian tried not to let that make him feel bad about himself as he did his best to maneuver just one across the farm and back to the restaurant. “I'm fine. Why wouldn't I be fine?”

“Really?” Harley said as he laughed, sending a puff of frosty cold air out ahead of him. “Buddy, you're talking to the *king* of denial, here. I came running all the way to Vermont from Texas to try and deny the things I was feeling. But I promise, you'll feel better when you talk about... whatever is bothering you.”

Sebastian laughed so hard, the cold air actually choked him and made him cough. “Nice save, Harley. You probably know more about everything than Harmony does.”

“Don't you think you should change that?”

The duo dropped off the baskets of potatoes in the restaurant's massive pantry and Sebastian absent-mindedly brushed off his hands on his dress pants. “Maybe. I don't know. I just don't understand why she's back in Winterville,

and she won't tell me. How am I supposed to talk to her when she's hiding something?"

Harley shut the pantry doors and crossed his arms over his chest.

"She could probably say the same about you. You're hiding a pretty big secret yourself, Sebastian."

Sebastian groaned and rested his forehead against the cold exterior wall of the restaurant. How was he supposed to tell her how he felt when she was dating Blake? There was no way she felt the same way about him; they were just friends.

They had *always* been just friends...



## HARMONY - FOUR YEARS EARLIER

The sun was setting in Wintervale Park as Harmony stared at the burrito in her hand, loaded with all of her favorite ingredients from La Catedral, their favorite Mexican restaurant. She and Sebastian ate there once a week on his dinner break from work because they loved the food so much but now... she couldn't make herself even take a bite. All she could do was look at the food in her hand as her stomach did somersaults, and pray she didn't throw up in her lap, or his. It was time to tell Sebastian the truth...

But Harmony couldn't seem to form the words to say them out loud.

"Harmony? What's wrong? Is your burrito okay?" Sebastian asked before he took another voracious bite of his own dinner. She shook her head adamantly and tried to force a smile.

"No, it's great. I just have a lot on my mind, I guess."

*Tell him.*

Sebastian finished his burrito and tossed the foil left behind into the trash can next to them. "Are you sure? You look a little queasy."

*Tell him.*

“I guess I’m not as hungry as I thought I was.”

“It’s probably stress. Have you packed up your car?” he asked as he took her burrito out of her hand and started eating it himself. Harmony glanced out of the corner of her eyes and watched him happily chowing down on her fried tuna and Mexican slaw burrito. She couldn’t help but smile at him as her heart started to dance in a strange new rhythm.

*Tell him, Harmony. Tell him that you love him...*

“Yeah, all packed,” she said instead. “CJ loves packing cars. He treats it like he’s doing a puzzle. He even managed to cram my drafting table in there. I thought I was going to have to buy a new one when I got to Chicago.”

*Ask me to stay, Sky. All you have to do is ask me to stay.*

“I hope you packed all your winter coats,” he said as he finished her burrito too. “I’ve heard it’s pretty cold in Chicago.”

Harmony laughed even though she really didn’t feel like it. She had made the plan to move to Chicago three months ago and even as she was finding an apartment, signing a lease, and packing her car, she hoped that at some point, Sebastian would stop her. But they barely talked about it. Instead of stopping her, any time Harmony would bring up her move, he would change the subject. For a while, she thought that meant he wanted her to stay. But any time he had the opportunity to ask her, the moment would pass. Now, her boxes and suitcases were in the back of her car, and this was the only moment he had left to stop her.

Harmony looked up from her lap and watched the setting sun as it turned the Winterville sky pink and purple and orange. The snow on the ground and trees in the park reflected

the colors and suddenly, Harmony was crying. She quickly turned her head and wiped away her tears before Sebastian could see, but she was confident he had anyway. Her heart was breaking and it would have only taken one word to heal it...

*Stay.*

“You’ll come see me in Chicago, won’t you, Sky?” she asked as she tried to conceal a shiver. Sebastian shrugged and crossed his arms over his chest.

“I don’t know. It’s pretty cold out there, right? You know I don’t like the cold.”

They both knew it was a joke but neither of them laughed. All Harmony could do was nod her head because no matter how hard she tried, no matter how much she wanted to tell him, her brain refused to listen to her heart. She felt like she was going to cry again when Sebastian reached out and took her gloved hand in his own.

“I’m going to miss you, Harmony. It won’t be the same here without you.”

*Come on, Harmony. Tell. Him.*

She took a deep, slow breath, and smiled at him, though there was no joy in her smile. “I’ll miss you, too. I’ll... Sebastian... I need to tell you something. I don’t think you know that... what I mean is... I...”

Suddenly, her throat closed up like she had swallowed a lungful of ice cold water. The words were choking her and all she could do was stare at him with her mouth slightly open as she gasped for air. Sebastian wasn’t even looking at her, though. He was staring out at the ice skaters on the frozen pond.

*Why won’t you say anything, Sky?*

“It’s getting late, Harmony. I need to get back to work. Will you call me before you leave in the morning?” he asked as he was already standing up. Harmony couldn’t seem to get her legs to work.

*No! He’s leaving! Don’t let him leave!*

“Wait, Sebastian. I didn’t get a chance to...”

He looked at his watch and shook his head. “I’m already late, Harmony. Call me tonight, okay?”

Sebastian ran across the street, back to The Middle Road Inn, and left Harmony standing alone in the park. She didn’t even remember how she got home, but as soon as she got there, she crumbled into Amber’s arms in tears. Only her sister knew that she had feelings for Sebastian, but had been hiding them since they were twelve because she was afraid to lose her best friend. Harmony had hoped that this move to Chicago would give her the courage to tell him the truth, or for him to be honest with her. Instead, she spent the entire night crying, before she left for Chicago the next day at dawn.

And she never called Sebastian before she left.





## SEBASTIAN

**B**ecause she overbooked the farm restaurant for lunch, Juniper showed up at 5:30 to let Sebastian leave early, which was a rare treat. He rarely had any time off, and now his boss was letting him kick off early two nights in a row? He knew the most likely reason was because Harmony had reappeared in Winterville and everyone in town fancied themselves amateur matchmakers. But until he had time to talk to Harmony and find out *why* she came back this year, and why was acting so odd, he couldn't even think about anything romantic with her.

Well, okay, he could *think* about it, but not a lot.

When he got to the Sutton house, everyone was home again, and the house was even brighter and cheerier than it had been the night before. Sebastian walked inside and took off his boots and jacket, then found the family in the living room, surrounded by bowls of freshly popped popcorn. But it only took a second for him to realize that Harmony wasn't there. His stomach dropped to his feet as he was overwhelmed with memories of coming to the house those nights when they were in high school and discovering that she had blown them off once again.

Sebastian was still frozen in the hallway when Harmony came around the corner out of the kitchen, carrying a bowl of her signature recipe sweet and spicy popcorn. She popped a kernel into her bowl and laughed at him.

“What are you doing in the hallway? It’s freezing out here,” she asked as she gracefully drifted by him and into the living room. Harmony plopped down on a sofa in the corner and patted the seat next to her, which Sebastian was happy to take. The whole family was wrapped up in blankets with their own bowls of popcorn, but Harmony put hers between her and Sebastian, then handed him his own flannel blanket. Carver handed their mother the remote so she could scroll through their movies.

“It’s mom’s pick tonight,” Harmony said, leaning over to whisper to Sebastian. “I bet you a cookie from Belle’s bakery that it’s *Miracle on 34th Street*.”

Sebastian laughed. “That’s a sucker bet. I know I’m going to lose.” Harmony poked her elbow into his ribs.

“Come on!”

Sebastian relented. “Fine. But obviously I’m buying you a cookie tomorrow.”

Tara continued to scroll for a bit until she finally stopped, and the whole family collectively groaned.

“Come on ma, not *Miracle on 34th Street* again,” Carver said as he threw a piece of popcorn at his mother.

“It’s my turn to pick, so we watch what I want. Now hush up and watch the movie.”

Before she hit play CJ raised his hand like he was a student in one of his classes. “Just letting you know that I may have to leave early. Tomorrow is the last day of classes for the year

and I have to get there early to finish decorating for our class party.”

“*Psh*, that’s a likely excuse,” Amber said from across the room. “You know mom is going to make you stay over as soon as classes are out, right?”

They continued to bicker even though Tara told them to knock it off so she could start the movie. Harmony looked over at Sebastian with a sweet smile and he knew she was thinking the same thing that he was...

*It’s nice to be home.*



They had paused the movie half-way through when Charlie announced that he needed to leave. He hadn’t actually managed to leave the house yet though, because the protracted business of actually making it out the door was something else entirely different. As soon as Tara started packing up leftovers from their dinner for CJ to take with him, Harmony and Sebastian snuck out the front door with blankets and took up residence on the porch swing. They sat there quietly for a few minutes, swinging back and forth quietly in the cold night air. The only sounds they heard were the creaking of the swing and the rustling noise of an occasional branch overloaded with snow, finally giving way and collapsing under its own weight. Finally, when Sebastian couldn’t stand the silence anymore, he turned to Harmony.

“Hey, you never told me why you came back to Wintervale this year.”

For a second, she looked panicked. But then she shook her head. “Yes, I did. I told you. I missed everyone.” Sebastian

raised his eyebrow at her.

“We both know that’s not true. What happened in Chicago, Harmony?”

For a moment, it seemed like she was finally going to tell him the truth. She even opened her mouth to speak. But then the whole family suddenly spilled out onto the porch, drowning out the awkward silence with the chaos that came from anyone leaving the house.

“Charlie, you’re coming over to stay this weekend right?” Tara asked as she handed him a plastic container full of something that Sebastian couldn’t make out.

“Yes! Yes, I will come this weekend. But you have to actually let me leave first,” he said as he walked backward to his car. Amber just stood in the doorway, shaking her head at the commotion, which made Harmony and Sebastian both laugh. Except the process of watching CJ try to leave reminded him that he needed to go as well.

“I should be going, too,” he said as he stood up from the swing. I have another early morning tomorrow and it’s going to be a very long and busy day. But hey, I took Saturday night off to hang out with James over at The Middle Road Inn. He’ll be working through the dinner rush though, so why don’t you all meet me at The Inn for dinner at six? I know James will be happy to see you, Harmony.”

James Everley, the owner of The Middle Road Inn, was a couple years older than them, but he had dated their friend Belle in high school. Now, James and Belle were married with two little ones, and kind of a culinary power couple in Wintervale. James and Sebastian had stayed friends their whole lives, but now they had to schedule their hangs a few weeks in advance because of their crazy lives.

Harmony was quick to answer for the whole family.

“Six on Saturday sounds good. We’ll see you then,” she said before she ran back inside, waved to him through the open door, then disappeared up the stairs. Tara rolled her eyes.

“Sorry, she’s been in a mood since she got back.”

Sebastian laughed awkwardly, because he didn’t know what else to do. “I’ve noticed. Goodnight! See you Saturday!”

They all hugged goodbye and waved a second time before Sebastian was actually able to get in his car and drive away. It had been a really good night but Tara was right... Harmony *was* in a mood.

And Sebastian needed to know why.



## HARMONY

The lights in the third floor guest room were off except for the TV and a small Christmas tree that Tara had set up in the window when Harmony took over the room. It was almost midnight, but Harmony sat up in bed, eating cookies from a Christmas tin and watching a sitcom she hadn't seen since she was a kid. The only thing missing was Amber chattering in her ear while they watched, but she'd been asked to come into the hospital when another nurse called in sick. Harmony thought she was the only one in the house who was awake...

Until she heard a knock on her door.

"Come in," she called out quietly with a mouth full of chocolate peppermint cookies. The door opened and Carver stepped half-way inside the room. He was wearing an exceptionally ugly Christmas sweater, stylish jeans, and hiking boots. Harmony couldn't help but laugh. "Why are you awake and dressed?"

Carver waved his finger at Harmony's flannel pajamas, which were covered in puppies wearing Santa hats.

"Why are you in bed and dressed like that?"

Harmony rolled her eyes. “Where else would I be at midnight, Carver?”

“Out? We do have bars here. And parties. And a restaurant that stays open until 2am.”

Carver sat down on the edge of Harmony’s bed and snatched a few cookies from the tin. She smacked his hand but it didn’t stop him from grabbing as many as he wanted first.

“If it’s so lame to be at home, why are you here?” she asked as she put the lid on the cookie tin to keep her brother out.

“I’m just about to head out and meet some friends from the shop at a bar in Hadleigh for a drink. I’d rather stay home, honestly, but when you’re an apprentice, you do what you’re told. And this is an impromptu Christmas party I guess.”

Carver was apprenticing at a shop called Celestial Ink in Hadleigh. It was the only tattoo parlor in about forty miles but it also happened to be one of the most highly rated in Vermont. They had incredible artists working there and Carver was really lucky that they’d taken him on as an apprentice. Even though he had a lot of experience, and was an exceptional artist, he’d left his last shop in New York with no notice and came back to Vermont with no references. Anywhere he worked right now, he was going to have to start at the bottom. Harmony was sure it wouldn’t be long until he had his own space at Celestial, though.

“Come on. Everyone at the shop would be stoked to meet my sister,” he said as he gave her a gentle shove. She pushed him away and adamantly shook her head.

“Look at me. I’m clearly *not* going anywhere. Besides, I’m exhausted. I feel like I haven’t slept in years,” Harmony said



before she yawned unexpectedly. She wasn't lying to her brother; she really was tired. But Carver stared at her like she was speaking in a different language. "What? Why are you looking at me like that?"

"Why did you come home, Mony? I mean, *home* home. I saw all the dresses in the back seat of your car, so something is obviously up. Mom doesn't even know, though I'm sure you told Amber."

Harmony shrugged. "I didn't tell her, actually. She figured it out on her own."

"So, the rest of us are going to have to read your mind if we want to know what's going on?"

"I'm just not ready to talk about it... like you're *still* not ready to talk about why you left New York."

Carver's face scrunched up in annoyance, but Harmony knew she'd made her point.

"Point taken. But mom isn't going to let you get away with that forever. Pretty soon she'll start pestering you, and harassing you... and withholding food."

Harmony couldn't help but laugh. "I'll get there eventually. Maybe we can spill our secrets at the same time and just get it over with."

"I didn't say I wanted to kill her," Carver said with a wink as he grabbed the tin of cookies and stole another handful, before tossing the tin back to Harmony. As he walked out the door, he called over his shoulder, "I'll tell all my friends you said 'hi.'"

"I don't know any of your friends! Don't tell them I said anything!" she shouted at Carver as he ran down the stairs. Once he was gone, she got up and shut the door again, then

crawled back into the soft bed and pulled the fluffy comforter up to her chin. As she sunk back down into the mountain of pillows behind her, she sighed and changed the channel to a Christmas movie that she and her siblings had watched so many times, her mother banned it from their house for two years. The movie was comforting but as she looked out the top floor window at the snow that had gently begun to fall, she couldn't help but feel a little sad.

Carver was right; she needed to tell the rest of her family what had happened in Chicago. Because the sooner she told them, the sooner she could find the words to tell Sebastian...

And that was going to be the hardest thing of all.



## SEBASTIAN

Sebastian got to The Middle Road Inn at 5:30 because his concern over being late to things had a tendency to make him chronically early. As soon as he walked in the door, the entire restaurant turned to stare at him, which didn't surprise him. For some reason, he thought it would be funny to wear one of the ridiculous Christmas sweaters that his Grandma Greta made him. It had a giant reindeer on it with a bright red 3D nose, and against all logic, it was wearing a pair of big black hipster glasses. He expected that a few more people at The Inn would be dressed in festive holiday attire, but he was *super* wrong. Even the servers had abandoned their seasonal Santa hats because the restaurant was so crowded, and the fireplace was burning so bright, that it was unusually hot in The Inn. Sebastian immediately regretted his choice and rolled up his sleeves as he scanned the crowd for James.

He was just about to give up and go outside for some fresh, *cold* air, when he saw James waving at him from behind the bar. Sebastian forced a smile, wiped the beads of perspiration from his forehead, and pushed gently through the crowd to join his friend.

“Hey, man!” James said excitedly as they shook hands and hugged over the bar. “I feel like I haven't seen you in a

month.”

“It’s been a couple weeks. How are the kids?”

Sebastian had barely sat down on one of the bar stools before James had his phone out to show him Christmas pictures of Finn and Daisy, his adorable kids. Sebastian and Harmony were in the same high school class as James’s wife, Belle. Sebastian spent a lot of time in the school kitchen with Belle as they both practiced cooking and baking, and now Belle owned The Flour Girl, the most popular bakery in Vermont. They’d all grown up together, so they were like family.

“The kids are great. Finn is trying to talk and it’s adorable. He’s trying to keep up with Daisy, who is ten going on twenty-five. So...” he paused for long enough that Sebastian started to worry something was wrong. “I heard Harmony is home?”

Sebastian laughed nervously. *Of course.*

“Good news travels fast, huh?”

James slid a beer across the bar to Sebastian. “*All* news travels fast in Wintervale. Have you had a chance to hang out with her?”

“The whole family is coming here for dinner tonight. I figured we could eat before you finished up for the night. Don’t worry; I called for a reservation this morning.”

James laughed as he wiped down the bar. “I’m surprised you got one. We’ve been crazy here this month. How are things at Wren & Candle? Have you been fully booked for the month?”

“Almost. Occasionally we’re double-booked if Aubrey is taking the reservations. I figured Belle would be here with the kids tonight. Where are they?”

For a moment, James looked wistful, and Sebastian found himself longing for that kind of love. Now that James and Belle were married, they hated to be apart, and their kids were their life. That's what Sebastian wanted more than anything... a family. He wanted a family like the Suttons, like James had, the kind of family that made you excited to go home every night. He'd never had that. It seemed like such a simple dream, but it's something he desperately craved.

"Belle and her grandmother took the kids to Florida for a whirlwind theme park tour. Meg is spoiling them rotten. When they FaceTime me at night, I swear the stuffed animal pile just keeps getting higher and higher. They're coming back Christmas Eve Eve, so they don't miss the Christmas Festival. Are you working the night of the festival this year?"

Sebastian took a long sip of his beer to try and calm his nerves a little. He had no idea why he was so on edge, but he suspected it had something to do with Harmony's impending arrival... and the embarrassing reindeer sweater he had on.

"No, my assistant manager offered to work that night for time and a half. She's saving up for culinary school. I'm supposed to spend the night with the Suttons."

"Harmony?" James asked, his forehead crinkled like he was confused.

"No, I was invited before Harmony came back. It's a nice bonus that she'll be there though."

James shook his head and pointed at the door. "No, man. Harmony. She just walked in." Sebastian turned around and saw that only the Sutton ladies had come to dinner. "You're a lucky guy tonight, huh?" James said with a wink.

Sebastian couldn't focus on anything else that was happening around him once he locked eyes with Harmony; she looked like an angel. She was wearing a winter white sweater and pale denim jeans, with knee-high chestnut brown boots. Her hair fell around her shoulders in long, loose waves and her cheeks shimmered like they had been kissed by starlight. For a moment, it was as if they were the only two people in the restaurant: her, looking like a snow angel, and Sebastian, wearing the ugliest Christmas sweater in the history of ugly Christmas sweaters.

"Go to the booth, man," James said as he gave Sebastian a shove off the bar stool. Sebastian tried to swat him away, so James walked out from behind the bar and waved the Sutton women over. "Hey, ladies! Welcome to The Middle Road Inn! It's great to see you, Harmony."

Harmony gave him a hug and as she moved past Sebastian, he could smell her perfume again. Why did it always make him a little dizzy?

"It's good to see you, James! I called the bakery to see if Belle wanted to grab lunch and Gladys McGowan said Belle and the kids are in Florida?"

James and Harmony chatted for a few minutes more and the whole time, Sebastian tried to will himself to speak up or to do more than just stare at his beautiful best friend. But more than anything, he tried to will himself back in time so he could make a different clothing decision. Even Amber was looking at him out of the corner of her eye and trying to stifle a laugh.

*What was I thinking? Why did I even keep this thing?*

He couldn't remember the series of decisions that led to his current situation. But he did know *one* thing for sure; it was going to be a long, humiliating meal.





## HARMONY

*H*armony couldn't believe how tightly packed The Middle Road Inn was; it was always crowded when they were teenagers but nothing like this. James had done a great job establishing it as the "it place" to hang out in the years since he bought the restaurant from the original owner. Everywhere Harmony looked, she saw friends and neighbors, people who had known her since she was young, and there was something comforting about that. But she also felt a hundred pairs of eyes on her as soon as she walked in and she felt a sudden urge to shrink down and hide behind her mother.

"Is that Sebastian by the bar? In that... reindeer sweater?" Amber asked as she barely concealed a laugh. Tara slapped at her youngest daughter's hand to get her to be quiet.

"Stop it, Amber! He looks adorable. Sebastian!" Tara called out to him over the crowd. Sebastian and James waved them all over to an empty booth in the corner that had already been set with a pitcher of iced tea and a basket of golden buttery rolls. Harmony was desperate for a glass of tea; between the fire and the crowd, she felt like she was going to melt inside of her sweater.

“Hey!” Sebastian said loudly in Harmony’s ear as he appeared beside them. “You came! I mean, three of you did. Where are Carver and CJ?” It sounded like he was trying to shout over the crowd even though he was directly next to her. Harmony took a step away so he didn’t shatter her ear drum.

*Why is he acting so weird? And wearing that reindeer sweater...*

“Carver got a client at the shop so he couldn’t leave,” Tara answered. “And CJ forgot he had a holiday party with the other teachers tonight. So, it’s just us! I hope you don’t mind.”

Sebastian nervously rolled his sleeves up again, even though they immediately fell right back down again. “Of course not! This is great! Let’s sit down!”

Harmony laughed and set her hand gently on Sebastian’s arm.

“I know it’s loud in here but we can hear you, Sky. You can stop yelling.”

Sebastian’s cheeks turned red as he nodded and slid into the booth. Amber took the spot next to Sebastian, leaving the other side for Harmony and Tara, which was fine by Harmony. She preferred sitting across from her best friend, because then she could look into his eyes, and try to sort out what was going on in his head. She had never seen him so rattled before, even when they were in high school and he was still a slightly awkward kid.

She also couldn’t take her eyes off the hipster reindeer with the bright red nose.

“Harmony!” James said as he appeared at the table. He reached for her hand and gave it a gentle squeeze. “It’s so awesome that you’re back! You look gorgeous. I talked to

Belle last night and told her you were here. She said you better be staying for the Christmas Festival.”

Harmony glanced at Sebastian for a second but quickly looked back to James and grinned at the sight of her high school friend, all happy and handsome. She could practically see the joy in his eyes.

“I wouldn’t miss it! mom said you and Belle combine your talents in the baking competition now. Does anyone else even have a chance?”

Tara huffed dramatically and waved a dismissive hand at her daughter. “Are you kidding? They might as well just name the competition after these two! They’re unbeatable.”

“Well, I don’t want to brag,” James said with a chuckle. He was just starting to tell the Sutton’s about the amazing baked goods at The Flour Girl when a server appeared with a tray full of plates of food. “I figured you all would be hungry so I went ahead and had the kitchen make you up some appetizers. On the house!”

Plate after plate was set on the table: spicy wings, seared ahi tuna, homemade mezzaluna and fresh marinara sauce, mussels steamed in white wine, and fresh crab dip with slices of focaccia bread brushed with garlic butter. Harmony wasn’t terribly hungry when they got to The Middle Road Inn, but suddenly, the scents of all the different delicious foods were making her mouth water. James brought them menus along with their plates but Harmony wasn’t sure she’d have room for anything else after the appetizers.

“James, this is a far cry from the cheese fries and chicken strips they served her when we were in high school. It all looks amazing!” she said as she reached for one of the mussels.

“We still have the cheese fries and chicken strips,” James said as he waved at a couple who had just walked in. “They’re just on the kids menu. If you’ll excuse me for a second, I need to go say hi to Hannah and Jack. Order whatever you want!”

He hurried off toward the front door, leaving them all to look at their menus, though Sebastian didn’t even pick his up off the table. They all sat there quietly for a moment, looking for something to eat, or staring at the food in front of them, but no one said anything, until finally, Harmony could tell that Amber was about to explode.

“Amber, please...”

It was too late.

“Sebastian, what in the heck is going on with that sweater? Are you going to an ugly Christmas sweater party later or something?”

He laughed awkwardly for a moment and shrugged. “Greta made it for me a few years ago. I honestly don’t know why I put it on. I was feeling festive, I guess.”

Harmony was just about to tell him the sweater was cute when they all heard Sebastian’s phone vibrating in his pocket. He sighed and shook his head.

“I’m sorry. That has to be work. Can you give me one second...” The Sutton women all nodded as he answered the call. “Yeah, Aubrey, what’s up?... No, I’m not home. I’m having dinner with... What? Why wouldn’t you... But why don’t you just keep them on the same ring... right, no, I know that’s not helpful. Isn’t anyone at the house?... Of course. No, it’s fine... I said it’s fine. I’ll be right there.”

It wasn’t hard to guess what Sebastian was about to tell them, but he still looked disappointed and a little embarrassed

as he put the phone back in his pocket.

“You have to go?” Harmony asked sadly.

“I do. I’m so sorry. My assistant manager left the keys to the restaurant in her apartment which is in North Hadleigh and it would take her an hour and a half to go there and back and then home again. I guess Juniper and Harley are out. I have to go lock up. I really am sorry,” he said as he and Amber were already sliding out of the booth.

“Wait, Sebastian!” Tara said before he could apologize again. “Why don’t you take Harmony with you? You shouldn’t have to drive out to Wren & Candle alone. Amber and I can stay here and put a dent in this amazing meal, and we’ll pack up leftovers for you two for later. Does that sound okay, Mony?”

Harmony *did* want to go with Sebastian but she didn’t want her mother to pawn her off on him like the spinster daughter in a Jane Austen novel either. “mom, maybe Sky doesn’t want me to...”

“No, you can come. I’d love you to come. I mean, if you want to, of course.”

Harmony couldn’t help but smile at him. He may have grown into a handsome, stylish, serious man, but Sebastian was still the boy she fell in love with all those years ago.

“I’d love to come,” she said. Before she could tell her mother goodnight, James appeared next to them holding two to-go bags.

“Your server overheard you say you’re leaving,” James said as he handed them the bags. “I grabbed these for you from the takeout window. We’ll just make more for whoever ordered them. It’s tonight’s special: red wine braised short ribs

with roasted fingerling potatoes and our secret recipe green bean casserole. Let me know what you think!”

James gave Sebastian and Harmony quick hugs and then rushed off again to take another family to a table that had just opened up. Sebastian took Harmony’s bag as well, so she didn’t have to carry anything, and gestured to the door.

“Shall we?” he asked her, his cheeks rosy from the heat of the fire.

“We shall,” Harmony answered. As they walked out into the cold night air, she couldn’t help but notice the butterflies she felt dancing in her stomach. And much to her surprise...

She liked them.



## SEBASTIAN

The drive to Wren & Candle from downtown Wintervale was relatively quiet, except for the radio humming quietly in the background. It felt like every song that was playing was a sad one about missing Christmas with your family and Sebastian really wanted to turn the blasted radio off. But since Harmony wasn't voicing any objections, they just continued down the dark, snowy road as Judy Garland elegantly bummed them out from the speakers. Sebastian wasn't sure what he would say to her when they got to the restaurant but as his headlights illuminated the parking lot in front of them, he was thrilled to see that he didn't *have to* say anything. Aubrey was standing outside talking to Harley and they both waved when they saw him.

"Wait... why is Harley here?" he asked out loud even though Harmony obviously didn't know either.

"Harley? Isn't that Juniper's fiancé?"

Sebastian was already taking off his seatbelt and opening the door in frustration. "Yeah, and he has keys to the restaurant."

Harmony laughed as she followed him out of the car.

"Uh-oh," she whispered.



“Hey, man!” Harley called over as they walked up. “You didn’t have to come all the way out here. I have keys. Which you know...”

Sebastian couldn’t help but scowl at Aubrey, who was hiding her face behind a giant scarf. “Yeah, I know. But I was told you weren’t home.”

Harley chuckled and shook Sebastian’s hand.

“We were watching a movie in the living room and had the lights off. It was a fair mistake. But if you two want to head out...”

“It’s no problem. Harley Thatcher, this is Harmony Sutton, my best friend and CJ’s little sister. Harmony, this is Harley. He works on the farm and is a volunteer firefighter with the Winterville FD. I think you saw Aubrey at the restaurant when you came for lunch...”

Everyone shook gloved hands with Harmony and much to Sebastian’s surprise, she actually seemed a little nervous as he introduced her to new people. Back in the day, Harmony wasn’t scared of anything.

“If you two want to head out,” Harley said as Aubrey waved and ran off for her car before Sebastian could chastise her for not checking to see if Harley and Juniper were home. But Sebastian held up the bags of food from The Middle Road Inn.

“I’m not sure it will survive another drive. We’ll just lock up after we eat.”

Harley saluted them as he turned to go back to the house. “Nice meeting you finally, Harmony,” he called over his shoulder.

“You too!” she answered before she hustled into the warmth of Wren & Candle. All of the lights in the restaurant were off except for the twinkle lights that had been strung all over the walls and the lights on the Christmas tree in the middle, which bathed a warm, cheery glow over the entire dining room.

“It’s so beautiful in here, Sky,” Harmony said as she unwrapped her scarf and took off her coat.

“Wren & Candle is a heck of a place but it’s never prettier than it is at Christmas. Juniper really went all out this year. Take whatever seat you want! I’m going to run in the back and get a bottle of wine.”

Sebastian hurried into the kitchen, which was where their temperature regulated wine room was hidden. It was a small space just off the pantry but it was the perfect space to store all of their best bottles of wine. They actually had their own top rated vineyard in Wintervale, where Sebastian had worked for a summer as a teenager. He became friends with the Ricci family, who were the owners of Wintervale Valley Vineyards. Their son, Luca, was still one of Sebastian’s best friends. Because of that connection, Wren & Candle got great deals on their wine. Sebastian grabbed a bottle of Wintervale Valley Marquette and then hurried back out into the dining room...

Where he found Harmony crying into her scarf.

“Harmony? Harmony, what’s wrong?” Sebastian said as he ran over to her and put the bottle of wine down on the table. “What happened?”

When she looked up at him, her cheeks were streaked with eyeliner and mascara and her eyes were red. She tried to wipe the tears away with her scarf but that just made the mess of

makeup worse, so he handed her one of the soft cloth napkins from the table next to them.

“I’m sorry,” she said as she dabbed at her eyes. “Sebastian, I need to tell you something...”

And suddenly, Harmony was spilling a story that Sebastian never could have imagined in a million years. That jerk Blake bought and sold her store out from under her and she’d basically fled Chicago in an absolute fury. He could picture her speeding down the highway with her car full of wedding dresses, and the more he thought about it, the more he wanted to punch Blake in the face.

“I’m so mad at myself,” she said as she sniffled at the end of her story.

“What? Why are you mad at *yourself*? This is all Blake’s fault!” Sebastian said angrily. Harmony laughed sadly and put her hand on Sebastian’s.

“It’s *mostly* Blake’s fault. But it’s also kind of my fault; for trusting Blake when my friends in Chicago told me not to. For not realizing that my whole business had been tied up in Blake, and not just the building. But also my living situation, my security as a designer. I never trusted myself and instead, I put all my trust in him. Look where I ended up.”

She paused like she was waiting for Sebastian to argue with her... but he couldn’t.

“That doesn’t sound like the Harmony Sutton I know. The Harmony I know would have known from the start that Blake wasn’t good enough for her. It breaks my heart that he tore you down like that, and made you think he was better than you.”

She nodded and wiped the napkin across her eyes again. “I know. I just felt really alone in Chicago. My friends there

weren't really people I could count on. Once I established the business, and it was going well, I didn't feel like I could leave. Then I started dating Blake and you stopped visiting, my family stopped visiting... I felt trapped, I guess."

Sebastian didn't know what to say. He wanted to defend himself, to tell her what happened the first and only time he came to see her, but he couldn't do that. Not now, when she was so vulnerable. All he could do was break down too.

"I'm sorry, Harmony. I'm so sorry. If I had known... but that doesn't matter. I should have known. I wish I could..."

She didn't give him a chance to finish his sentence; instead, she leaned over and threw her arms around him, holding him as tight and as close as she was able. They stayed like that for a while, until Harmony stopped sniffing again. When she finally pulled away, she was smiling.

"It's okay, Sky. You're here now. Hey, we should eat this before it gets any colder. It smells amazing."

Sebastian opened the bags and put the to-go containers on the table. Harmony dove right in like she hadn't eaten in days, but he was having a difficult time focusing on anything but her...

He loved her so much. What was he going to do now that Blake was out of the picture?



## HARMONY

As Harmony climbed the stairs to the third floor guest room, she felt lighter and less overwhelmed than she had in years. She and Sebastian had a real conversation for the first time in a *long* time and it was like he'd lifted a huge weight off her shoulders. Harmony knew she'd missed him while she was in Chicago but she didn't realize just how much until she was with him. She wasn't sure she wanted to be apart from him again...

It seemed like anyone who was home had gone to sleep, so Harmony decided to change into her pajamas and quietly go back downstairs for some eggnog and a Christmas cookie or three. But when she opened the door, she screamed so loudly she was sure that she woke up people in Hadleigh.

"Mom, why are you sitting in my room in the dark?" she asked as she threw her bag in the chair next to the door.

"It's not dark," Tara said. She turned on the bedside lamp anyway. "The Christmas lights were pretty up here and I never get to enjoy them. How was your dinner with Sebastian?"

Harmony rolled her eyes as she flopped down on the bed next to her Mom.

"Is that why you're waiting up? To find out about dinner?"

Tara slid a pillow over to Harmony to put under her head. “Maybe. When are you going to see him again?”

“He wants to take me to this new shop in town, Sparkle Couture? He said I’d really like Liza, the owner. She may even want to sell my dresses.”

Sebastian had only suggested the idea casually. Harmony didn’t know who Liza Matheson was, but her daughter Theo married their friend Brady just over a year ago. She remembered getting the invitation to the wedding but it was the same weekend as a bridal convention in San Francisco and she’d already paid a booth deposit. According to Sebastian, Liza was supposed to be at the same San Francisco convention with her bridesmaid collection but cancelled because of the wedding. It felt like it was fate. After Harmony finished telling her mother all of that, she realized that Tara was staring at her.

“What? What did I say?”

“You’re moving back here? To Wintervale?” her mother asked, her eyes wide in surprise and confusion. Harmony realized that she’d talked herself into a corner and now she was trapped.

“I don’t know... I was thinking about a change, I guess. Mom...”

And for the second time that day, she spilled the story of the entire Chicago debacle. Except unlike with Sebastian, Tara didn’t even let Harmony finish.

“I never trusted him,” she interrupted. “Smarmy. That’s what he was. Smarmy. You were too good for him, Harmony.”

Harmony couldn’t help but laugh. “Are you turning that into song? That was a decent rhyme. Anyway, you never had a

problem with him because if you did, you absolutely would have told me so.”

Tara adamantly shook her head.

“No, I didn’t. He was condescending and he treated you like you were his assistant, not his girlfriend. Your father wouldn’t have liked him, either.”

As much as the Suttons tried to talk about Charlie Sr. whenever they could, it had gotten more difficult as they got older. Their father had passed away suddenly right after Amber was born, so she didn’t know their father at all and Harmony was too young to remember much. Carver and CJ remembered more, but they avoided talking about their dad because they’d never gotten over the loss. Tara did her best to tell stories about their father whenever she could, but for the most part, that was all Harmony had left of her dad... stories.

“Sebastian though,” Tara said suddenly. “Your father would have liked him a lot. Sebastian is kind and creative and loyal. He’s a lot like your dad, actually.”

Harmony sat up and leaned back on her elbows so she could look into her mother’s eyes. “Why does it matter what dad would have thought of Sebastian?”

Tara raised her eyebrow and shook her head like Harmony was being a silly kid.

“Harmony Sutton, you know full well why.”

Harmony sank back down onto the bed. Of *course* her mother knew; she’d never been able to hide anything from Tara, so there was no way she could start now.

“Yes! Okay, fine. I love him.”



Tara threw her arms in the air and shouted, “Hallelujah! Finally! Now tell him!”

Harmony covered her face with one of the pillows and screamed into it in relief, then playfully threw it at her Mom.

“I don’t think I can. Not after...”

Tara covered her face with her hands and sighed loudly, then laid down next to her daughter. “Is this about what happened when he came to Chicago? You never told me that whole story. What *did* happen?”

Harmony turned away from her Mom and tried to hide the tears that were welling up in her eyes.

*What happened? I wish I knew*, she thought as she brushed the tears away... *I wish I knew*.



SEBASTIAN - TWO YEARS EARLIER

“So, Sebastian... you’re a busboy at a pub?”

Sebastian cringed as he looked across the table at Blake Ryan, Harmony’s boyfriend. When she invited him to Chicago, she had mentioned Blake in passing, but she’d left out the fact that he was a smug, self-satisfied jerk. Harmony wanted to go to a pizza place by their apartment for dinner, but her boyfriend insisted they go to some super exclusive fusion restaurant where he had to give the host a \$200 bribe for a table. Harmony and Sebastian were both in jeans and sweaters, but Blake was wearing a three piece suit that was essentially a walking price tag. Sebastian couldn’t stand him.

And he didn’t understand what Harmony was doing with a guy like that.

“Blake, he isn’t a busboy! I told you. He just got a job as the assistant manager at a restaurant that is opening in our hometown. It’s going to be a really nice place,” Harmony protested before she took a gulp of her wine. She was trying to look relaxed, but the harder she tried, the more stressed she was getting. It was written all over her face.

“An *assistant* manager? Your mother must be so proud,” Blake said with a sarcastic laugh as their food arrived.

Sebastian was so uncomfortable that he couldn't remember what he ordered; he wasn't remotely hungry anyway. The mention of Sebastian's mother didn't help his appetite; he hadn't heard from her in ten years, which was why Harmony tried her best to change the subject.

"Blake, why don't you tell Sebastian about your new project?" she said cheerily. It was pretty clear neither of them were interested in talking to each other but Blake was not about to miss a chance to seem superior.

"You should be interested in this, Sebastian. I'm a partial investor in a new restaurant that's opening in The Loop. It's going to be incredibly exclusive. I pitched the idea of doing a credit check before you can make a reservation but my fellow investors said that was a step too far."

Sebastian didn't mean to roll his eyes but he did it anyway, and both Blake and Harmony both noticed. Blake's face settled into a sour expression that made Harmony clear her throat nervously.

"Can you guys excuse me for a second? I'm just going to run to the ladies' room." Then she literally ran to the other side of the restaurant like she'd been chased away by the unpleasant atmosphere her best friend and boyfriend had conjured up. As soon as Harmony was out of sight, Blake turned back to Sebastian with his eyes narrowed.

"Have you ever told her that you're in love with her?" he asked before taking a deliberate sip of his top-shelf bourbon on the rocks. If Blake had said something like that to Sebastian earlier in the night, he might have reacted with surprise. But by that point, he was so used to being attacked by the jerk, it was just another arrow not quite piercing his armor.

“How I do or don’t feel about Harmony is none of your business, Blake.”

Blake snorted at him. “I’m her boyfriend. I think it *is* my business. And even if I wasn’t, you aren’t good enough for. You’re the *assistant* manager of a dumpy little restaurant in the Middle of Nowhere, Vermont. I have money, a sensational job, and a future. What do you have?”

Sebastian quickly ran through an inventory of all the things he had that Blake probably didn’t: friends who loved him, a job he actually enjoyed, and the knowledge that he’d never done anything to ruin anyone’s life. Sebastian was pretty sure that Blake had both literal and figurative bodies buried in his past. But then he thought about how happy Harmony had looked when he got to her apartment, and how beautiful her shop was, and how much she wanted Sebastian to like the complete creep she was dating...

Maybe Blake was right. Maybe Sebastian *wasn’t* what Harmony wanted. Was he just fooling himself?

When Harmony came back to the table, they ate their dinner in relative silence, which was only occasionally interrupted by stilted conversation about the food. All Sebastian could do was poke at his pho-ritto until Harmony and Blake were done eating and they could leave the pompous, overly-crowded restaurant. When they got outside, the streets were full of people doing last minute Christmas shopping and happily leaving other restaurants. There were twinkling lights everywhere, and somewhere in the distance, Sebastian could hear people singing carols. It should have been an amazing night.

But Blake’s presence had made it impossible for Sebastian to even look at Harmony without feeling guilty, though he

didn't know what he felt guilty for. He just knew he couldn't be in Chicago.

“So, are we going to get coffee and dessert somewhere?” Harmony asked happily. Sebastian tried to smile, but instead, he was suddenly yawning and stretching his arms.

“I'm actually pretty tired, Mony. I think I'm going to head back to the hotel and get some sleep.”

Harmony pouted but Blake immediately smirked, like he knew he'd gotten to Sebastian. Sebastian didn't even care if he'd given Blake the satisfaction of knowing he'd rattled him... he just needed to go home.

“Okay,” Harmony said sadly. “I'll see you tomorrow?”

“I'll call you okay,” Sebastian said as he gave Harmony a carefully distanced hug. When he pulled away, he could see the confusion in her eyes, but he knew he had to get away before he said something he'd regret.

As soon as he got to the hotel, Sebastian checked out of his room, got in his car, and started the drive back to Vermont. And neither of them spoke about his brief visit to Chicago again...



## HARMONY

The interior of Liza Matheson's shop, Sparkle Couture, was as gorgeous and stylish as anything in Chicago, and her bespoke dresses were stunning. Everywhere Harmony looked, she saw another dress that she would love to take home, even though she didn't exactly have anywhere to wear it at the moment. There was even a wedding dress on a mannequin near the back that looked like it had been made by one of the *haute couture* design houses.

"Liza, your work is *exquisite!*" Harmony said as she ran her fingers across a breathtaking summer maxi dress made from bamboo fabric. "And you make all of these dresses yourself?"

Liza was in the process of hanging up a collection of bridesmaid dresses that were made from the same lovely silver organza but all finished in completely different styles. "Every one of them! I've gotten a lot faster since I opened the shop. Back when I just used to design for Theo, or a friend here and there, it would take me a month to finish a dress. Now I can have one done in a week."

Sebastian was wandering around the accessories section of the store, looking for something for his grandmother, as Harmony and Liza talked about Liza's proposal.



“I’ve seen your dresses online, and a few in magazines, so I would be *honored* to have you designing here with me, Harmony. Since I think it’s safe to say that your dresses would bring even more people to Sparkly Couture, I’ll give you your own corner of store space next to my bridesmaid dresses. Then, if you’d like, I have a small design space in the back that I’d be happy to rent to you. I do most of my designing at home anyway.”

Harmony flinched. Her rent at her shop in Chicago was almost \$15,000 a month. Most of the time, she was barely surviving month-to-month, so she hadn’t managed to save a lot of money. Harmony wasn’t sure what she could afford right now...

“How much would the rent be?” she asked with a slight flinch. Liza scrunched up her face as she thought.

“Let’s say... you take me for a mocha latte at Bean There, Done That every weekday before the shop opens?”

Harmony stopped flinching and opened her eyes. “A coffee?” she said in shock. “That’s all you want for *rent* in your shop? A coffee?”

“Well, if we’re being technical, it’s more like twenty lattes every month. But it will be plenty until everyone realizes that you’re selling your dresses at Sparkle Couture now. We can renegotiate then.”

She didn’t even pause to think about it; Harmony threw her arms around Liza as she tried not to cry.

“Thank you! Thank you so much, Liza! This is going to be amazing!”

Liza patted her gently on the back. “No problem, Harmony. Now, you kids get out of here. It’s supposed to be a

really pretty night for star-gazing.”

Sebastian bought a scarf and a pair of earrings for his Grandma Greta, Harmony shook Liza’s hand for the third time, and then they walked out into the chilly night air. Liza was right; the sky was totally cloudless for the first time since Harmony came home and they could see every star twinkling in the sky. Tourists and locals mingled on the sidewalks as they checked out the shop windows, which had all been decorated for Christmas. In the distance, Harmony could hear Christmas carols being piped out onto the patio of Bean There, Done That, which were echoing up the street.

“I forgot how beautiful it is here at Christmas. You don’t really appreciate it until you’ve been gone for a while,” Harmony said as they stopped at an intersection where a crowd was waiting for the traffic to stop so they could cross over. As she looked around at the lights and the wreaths, and the happy families celebrating Christmas early, she couldn’t help but wish she never had to leave.

And maybe she didn’t.

“Hey,” Sebastian started to say before he was interrupted by Harmony’s phone ringing. She quickly dug through her giant purse to answer it.

“I’m sorry. Just one second. I left a message for mom so it could be her.” But when Harmony took her phone out of her purse, it was a number she didn’t recognize with an area code she’d never seen before. “Huh. Never mind. It must be spam.”

When Harmony looked up, she realized that she had crossed the street next to Sebastian, and they were standing in front of the park where she had almost confessed her feelings to him four years earlier. The Christmas Festival in Wintervale had continued to grow bigger and bigger over the years to the

point that the holiday marketplace had spread out into Wintervale Park. Some people were still setting up their booths in preparation for the Festival, but quite a few were already up and running so they could sell to the tourists. There were people selling crafts and decorations, homemade children's toys, and a few selling hot chocolate, cookies, and other festive snacks.

Sebastian looked over at Harmony with a smile.

“Shall we?” he asked as he held his arm out. She wrapped her arm around his as they walked into the park.

“Let's,” Harmony answered. She didn't know if the romantic music she was hearing was playing in the park or in her head, but either way, for the first time in a long time...

Harmony was really happy. And she didn't want the feeling to end.



## SEBASTIAN

Sebastian stopped at a small booth that Molly Winters from Bean There Done That had set up for people shopping in the Christmas Festival Marketplace. She was selling hot cocoa, peppermint mocha lattes, and a variety of delicious Christmas snacks. As good as *everything* looked, Sebastian forced himself to look away from the pastries and ordered two peppermint hot cocoas for himself and Harmony. There was quite a crowd already forming in Wintervale Park, but Harmony managed to find an empty bench away from the hustle and bustle of holiday shoppers. In fact, Sebastian thought it might be the same bench they said goodbye on before she moved to Chicago. He tried to put that night out of his mind as he handed her the cocoa and took a seat next to her.

“Liza was right. It’s a really pretty night, huh?” Sebastian asked clumsily before he took a long sip of his cocoa. It was hotter than he expected and he choked on it, which made Harmony laugh.

“Are you okay?”

Sebastian blew some cold air through the hole in the lid. “Only first degree burns. I should be fine. So... you’re going to take the space at Sparkle Couture?”

Harmony took a careful sip of her cocoa and smiled.

“I think so. Liza is a great designer, and it seems like it would be fun to work with her. Plus, the shop is gorgeous.”

Sebastian tried to seem nonchalant but he felt like he had Christmas elves dancing in his stomach.

*Is she really coming back? For good?*

“That’s great! And that means... that you’re...”

He needed her to say the words. He was sure that if he said them, he’d put some sort of jinx on the whole idea and she would disappear again. Sebastian wasn’t sure he could stand losing her a third time. Harmony didn’t seem worried, though. All she did was grin and look at him with wide, beautiful eyes over the top of her cocoa cup.

“Yeah, I think I’m going to stay here for a while. I’m sure mom won’t mind if I move back in for a little while. I’m not stoked about the idea of living on the third floor, but I don’t see Amber sharing our old room with me any time soon. Once I save up some money, I can get an apartment... somewhere. We’ll see.”

Sebastian was so happy that she said the words herself, that he leaned over to give her a hug. But when he got close to her, she leaned closer to him and suddenly...

They were kissing.

All of the noise in the park disappeared. All of the complicated things that had been drifting around in his mind for days completely drifted away. He was kissing Harmony, *his* Harmony. And for a second, nothing else mattered.

“NO WAY!”

Sebastian and Harmony pulled away from each other when they heard the sound of Belle Harrison-Everley shrieking happily from across the park. They both laughed awkwardly at the realization that they had an audience, which should have gone without saying, given how crowded it was. But Sebastian had been so lost in the moment, it didn't even occur to him that anyone they knew would be watching.

Belle and James came strolling up to them, with baby Finn riding in a baby carrier on James's back. Sebastian knew he was blushing but there was no point in trying to hide it. As Harmony stood up to hug Belle, James winked at Sebastian over the top of the ladies' heads.

"What is going on here?" Belle asked as she took Harmony's hand and squeezed it. "Are you two finally happening?"

Sebastian and Harmony both laughed awkwardly and it seemed like neither of them knew what to say. James appeared to pick up on the fact that they'd accidentally walked into a private moment, so he wrapped his arm around his wife's waist and pointed toward the back of the Marketplace.

"Hey! Belle! I think I saw one of those chess sets that Daisy asked for. Why don't we go check it out?"

Belle rolled her eyes at her husband's obvious attempt to extract themselves from the situation. "Fine. Harmony... call me later. Love you both! Keep... doing what you were doing!"

As Belle and James walked off into the crowd, Harmony and Sebastian were left to consider the seismic shift that had just occurred in their relationship. Sebastian hoped that she'd say something first but it felt like they were standing there for an eternity, waiting for the other to talk first. When he finally

couldn't stand the silence anymore, he reached out and took Harmony's hand.

“Are we doing this?” he asked, repeating Belle's question. When he felt Harmony squeeze his hand in return, he knew that something was about to change in his life forever.

“I think we are.”

As he pulled Harmony into his arms, Sebastian felt like all of his dreams had finally come true.





## HARMONY

*H*armony hadn't told her family about the kiss she and Sebastian shared in the park, but it was obvious that something had changed between them and she was sure everyone could see it. As soon as he was able to get away from work, Sebastian came over to the Sutton house so he could see Harmony. They'd talked about going somewhere to have dinner and talk, or maybe to a coffee shop in Hadleigh where no one knew them so they could discuss this crazy, new situation in private. But the minute Sebastian walked through the door and saw the fire burning, the tree twinkling, and *It's a Wonderful Life* on the TV, he collapsed on the couch next to Harmony. Now, it was three hours later and neither of them had moved except to get more cookies and eggnog.

In spite of the side-eye and occasional looks of confusion from her family, Harmony was perfectly content curled up next to Sebastian, wrapped in a blanket with her head on his shoulder as one holiday movie drifted into another as the stars came out.

"Can we just stay here forever?" she asked as she nuzzled deeper into his sweater. When he kissed her on the top of her head, she felt warm fuzzies tingle all the way from her head to her toes.

“I’ve got nowhere to be until tomorrow morning. And we probably have at least two more hours before Amber or your mom come charging in here, demanding answers,” he said as they both laughed.

“One hour tops,” she answered.

Harmony was reaching for her glass of eggnog when she saw her phone ringing silently on the coffee table. It was that same number that had called her before.

“This number again? They are *persistent*.”

“Who is?” Sebastian asked before shoving an entire cookie in his mouth.

“I have no idea. It’s a 786 area code. This is the second time they’ve called.”

Sebastian covered his mouth since it was full of cookie, but through chews, he said a muffled, “Miami.”

Harmony laughed.

“How do you know that?”

Sebastian swallowed the cookie and took a gulp of eggnog to wash it down. “Right before Dierdre left for good, she spent some time in a motel in Miami. She’d call a few times a month from the landline. It was the last number she called from before she took off indefinitely, so I guess it’s ingrained? But it’s definitely Miami.”

“Huh,” Harmony said as she stared at her phone. “I guess I should call it back? Just one minute.”

Harmony walked into the dining room and shut the French doors behind her out of habit; nose-y siblings made her value her privacy. She recalled the number and it only rang once before a woman with a cheery voice answered.

“Enchanted Weddings! This is Monica. How can we make your wedding magical?”

Harmony scrunched up her face in confusion. “Hi, Monica. My name is Harmony Sutton. You’ve called my number a few times...”

“Harmony! Oh, what a pleasure! I’m so glad you called me back. Your voicemail was full so I couldn’t leave a message.”

She’d been ignoring calls from Blake demanding to know where to send the rest of her things since she got back to Wintervale. He must have overloaded her voicemail.

“I’m so sorry, Monica. I’ll take care of that when we hang up. What can I do for you?”

“Well, a little birdie in Chicago told me that your shop had been shut down as part of some property development nonsense. I’ve been following all of your social media accounts for years and I’m sure you don’t remember, but we met at a bridal convention in San Francisco a few years ago.”

She was right. Harmony didn’t remember.

“Anyway, my business partner and I were wondering if you’d be interested in a position as our exclusive designer. We have an entire building next door that is dedicated to design and fittings, so the space would be yours, and we’d make you a junior partner in Enchanted Weddings. We are one of the most exclusive wedding boutiques in all of Miami, plus you can’t beat our location. There is a full ocean view from the front of our shop! What do you say? Does it sound like something you might want to explore?”

Harmony was frozen in place as the weight of what was being offered to her washed over her. Junior partner? Her own

building? *Miami*? It was incredible. But she'd just had that talk with Liza and Sebastian...

*Sebastian.*

What was she going to do?

“This is all really overwhelming, Monica. Thank you so much. But can I have some time to think it over? It's such a big decision.”

“Of course,” Monica said quickly. Harmony could hear the sound of door chimes in the background, so a customer must have walked in. “Just let me know before the new year! Merry Christmas, Harmony!”

Monica hung up before Harmony could respond, which was for the better, because she felt a little tongue-tied. What was she going to do? And more importantly...

What was she going to tell Sebastian?



She told Sebastian.

“What? Miami?! You're not seriously considering this, are you?”

Harmony could see the heartbreak in his eyes the minute she told him about the phone call. With every word, it looked like his entire spirit sunk a little deeper, until he was almost a puddle on the floor.

“I don't know what I'm considering, Sky. It's a huge offer. They're offering me a partnership in the shop and they barely know me, which means they must really trust my work...” she paused for a moment and whispered her next words, because

she knew in her heart that they were ridiculous. “You could come with me. To Miami.”

He laughed at her incredulously and she couldn’t blame him.

“You want me to *leave* Wintervale? Harmony, my whole life is here. My job, that I love, and my friends. And you, I thought.”

“Sebastian...”

He shook his head as if he already knew what her decision was. “You’re going to leave again, aren’t you?”

She crossed the room and sat back down on the couch next to him. “I’m not leaving! I haven’t made a decision. But I’d be crazy not to consider the offer, right?”

Sebastian’s shoulders were slumped so low, Harmony thought he was going to melt into the couch. Before she could say anything else to him, he jumped up from the couch and charged out into the hallway.

“I have to go,” he said as he grabbed his coat and ran out the front door.

“Wait! Sky, don’t...”

But he slammed the door behind him before she could protest. Harmony was still sitting on the couch, stunned into silence, when Carver and Amber came charging out of the kitchen.

“Harmony,” Carver asked as he looked out the curtains at Sebastian’s car speeding out of their driveway, his back wheels catching on the ice and skidding a little as he went. “Where is he going? What just happened?”

“What did you say to him?” Amber followed up, accusingly, which caused Harmony to roll her eyes.

“I don’t *know* where he went, but I definitely think I screwed things up again.”

Carver sighed as he sat down next to Harmony on the sofa. “He finally told you that he loves you, didn’t he?”

Harmony’s mouth fell open.

“He what? He *does*?”

Amber and Carver both looked at their sister like she was crazy.

“Mony, how oblivious are you girl?” Amber asked. She sat down in the chair next to the couch and reached out to pop her sister gently in the back of the head, which only annoyed Harmony more.

“Why didn’t you tell me if it was so obvious?” she asked as she slapped her sister away.

“Because,” Carver protested, “We thought you knew! Everyone in school knew. All of your boyfriends knew. The *teachers* knew, Harmony. How could you not know?”

Harmony dropped her head down into her hands. How could she have been so clueless? How could she have wasted all these years not telling him the truth? How could they *both* have wasted so much time?

“We... we kissed. So, I knew. But I didn’t *know*, you know?”

“For heaven’s sake, Harmony,” Amber said as she picked up the empty glass on the coffee table. “Have you had too much eggnog?”

“What do I do?” she asked in a panic.

“Go talk to him!” her siblings shouted in unison.

Harmony reflexively jumped up from the couch and ran to get her coat off the peg in the hallway. “Right. Right. I’ll go talk to him. Where do you think he went?”

Now it was Amber who rolled her eyes. “The restaurant, Harmony. Jeez.”

*Right. Right, he cooks when he’s upset. The restaurant.*

Harmony didn’t even say “bye” to her brother and sister. She just took the first pair of keys on the keyring and ran for her sister’s car. She had to fix this. She had to tell Sebastian she loved him too.

She just hoped it wasn’t too late.





## SEBASTIAN

Sebastian knew the quiches he was making for the next morning would be fluffier if he folded crab, gruyere, and spices into the egg with a gentle hand. But he had been so frustrated since he left the Sutton house that it felt like he was working out his feelings with the whisk and spatula. There was precedent for this; whenever things weren't going his way in high school, he would lock himself in the school kitchen and cook until he had some sort of revelation. But tonight, as he tried to gently pour the egg and crab mixture into the pre-baked mini crusts with shaking hands, it didn't feel like he was any closer to an answer.

When he woke up that morning, Sebastian was truly happy for the first time in a long time. And it wasn't just because he and Harmony were officially "together." It was also because Harmony looked so excited when they were in Liza's shop. She seemed content, and her happiness was infectious. It always had been. But then, she got that call from Miami and everything was changing... again.

"Miami!" Sebastian said out loud in disbelief as he started to chop scallions to top the quiches. How could she possibly want to move to Miami? Sure, this shop was probably bigger and more expensive than Sparkle Couture, and she'd make

more money, so she could afford her own place... maybe on the beach.

*Harmony always loved the beach.*

Sebastian started to prep the asparagus for the side dish on the quiche and as he chopped, he sighed.

“I’m being selfish,” he said to himself. And suddenly, with every asparagus he chopped, he felt more and more guilty. This was a huge opportunity for Harmony. He couldn’t be responsible for holding her back.

If she wanted to go to Miami, he had to let her go.

Sebastian was just about to put the asparagus in the walk-in fridge when he heard a light knock on the front door. He set the tub of asparagus down on the counter and walked out into the dining room, where he saw Harmony outside, bathed in the light of the Christmas trees next to her. She looked so beautiful, even in her oversized sweater and baggy sweatpants, and for a moment, Sebastian was sure his heart stopped beating. When she waved at him, he realized that he needed to unlock the door, and he hurried over to let her in.

“Hi,” she said sheepishly when he opened the door.

“Hey,” he answered softly as he locked it behind her. “I’m making quiche for tomorrow. Do you want to come back to the kitchen?” She nodded and followed him through the restaurant, which suddenly felt really empty. When they got in the kitchen, he turned on a few more lights so it didn’t feel quite as gloomy as it had before. Sebastian assumed they would both stand there in silence, like they always had when something had changed between them. Instead, Harmony exploded like she’d been rehearsing her speech the whole ride over.

“Sky, I’ve done a lot of thinking... in the last twenty minutes. And I realized that I’ve spent my life chasing the things I thought I wanted; the big city, the fancy shop, acclaim. But when I got back home, when I saw you again, I realized that *isn’t* what I want. I miss Wintervale. I really miss my family. And I missed you, more than I was willing to admit to myself, because acknowledging that meant I had to acknowledge I was in love with you. And I am, Sky. I’m crazy, head-over-heels in love with you. I have been since before I even knew what that meant, since you gave me that plastic diamond ring. I love you, Sebastian.”

He had dreamed of this moment his whole life and he never imagined that he would feel so miserable when it finally happened. He couldn’t let her give up on her dream for him. Sebastian took Harmony in his arms and held her close, relishing the way she felt when he held her. Especially because he was afraid it was going to be the last time they were together.

“Harmony,” he said as he pulled away. “This job in Miami is a huge deal. It’s everything you’ve been working toward your whole life. I can’t be the reason you don’t go after your dreams.”

Harmony reached up and brushed a piece of hair off of Sebastian’s forehead, then let her hand linger on his cheek.

“Sebastian... my dream is *you*.” Harmony wrapped her arms around him again. “And this is exactly where I want to be.”

When he saw the smile on her face as she looked up at him, he knew she truly felt that way.

He felt it, too.

“I love you, Harmony Sutton,” he said as he set his cheek on top of her head.

“And I love you, Sky,” she whispered into his sweater.

Those three words were the best Christmas gift he’d ever received.



## HARMONY - CHRISTMAS EVE

The Sutton house was bustling with all the scents and sounds of Christmas that Harmony had missed so much when she was living in Chicago. The Christmases she spent with Blake were bordering on depressing; they would go to a fancy Italian restaurant, watch thirty minutes of news when they got home, then go to bed early so Blake could make it to his 24-hour, 365 gym at 6am. The exchanging of presents was more a formality. They got each other only what they asked for, and Blake always paid someone else to wrap the gift. It was the exact opposite of what Harmony grew up with, and she didn't ever want to go back to that kind of emotionless existence again.

Now she never had to.

Harmony carried a tray of peppermint cheesecake slices out to the living room, where she found Sebastian and Carver shaking the presents with their names on them. Sebastian's Grandma Greta, who had come from her assisted living center in Burlington for the holiday, poked at her grandson with her cane.

"Stop that, you nut. It could be something breakable! You don't know."

Sebastian stood up and gave his grandmother a kiss on the cheek. “Only because you asked nicely,” he said with a laugh. When he noticed that Harmony was watching him, he snatched a piece of mistletoe from the wreath that was hanging in the hall and walked over to her with it hanging over his head. “Can I trouble the beautiful lady with the cheesecake for a kiss?”

“You bet you can,” Harmony answered, barely containing her joy when he leaned in to kiss her softly. It made her heart flutter a little every time. They were still kissing when the front door opened suddenly, sending a gust of frigid air and snow blowing into the hall.

“Break it up, kids, or I’ll have to tell mom what you’re doing in here,” Amber said as walked in and took off her coat and scarf. She was still wearing her scrubs, but they were covered in jolly Christmas cartoon characters and she looked adorable.

“Amber! You were supposed to be working all night,” Harmony said as she shoved the tray of cheesecake into Sebastian’s arms and ran over to give her sister a hug. They almost fell backwards into the door, which caused them both to giggle.

“We were doing a Secret Santa gift exchange and the new guy, George, was my Santa. His gift was working Christmas Eve for me! I have to go in tomorrow morning at ten, but he knew how much I wanted to be here tonight. Heck of a gift, right?”

“Amber!” Tara yelled from the kitchen. “Is that really you?”

“She probably wants me to help with the turkey,” Amber said with a roll of her eyes.



“I need your help with the turkey!” Tara shouted. Amber left for the kitchen and Harmony followed Sebastian into the dining room, where he was setting down the cheesecake on the dessert table. Harmony watched Sebastian as he stole a taste of icing from a beautiful Christmas cake that Greta made and she couldn’t help but notice the joy that was radiating from him. Sebastian had always loved Christmas, but this year... he had a little extra spring in his step.

Harmony felt it too.

“I have to say, Sebastian Young, you’re looking awfully handsome in that Christmas sweater.”

He was wearing another sweater that Greta had made for him, but this one had a giant Santa face on it, and the Santa looked like he’d had a few too many glasses of eggnog. It was funny and Sebastian looked adorable in it. With a huge grin on his face, he slid over next to Harmony and pulled her into a hug. They could hear the commotion of the rest of the family as they started getting dinner together to bring to the dining room. Amber, Carver, and CJ were bickering over who should carry what, Tara and Greta were trying to direct the madness, and “I’ll Be Home for Christmas” played softly on the record player in the other room.

“Can every Christmas be like this for the rest of our lives?” Harmony asked as she picked up the abandoned mistletoe from the dining room table and held it over their heads. Sebastian kissed her again, and this time, it seemed to drown out the rest of the chatter. Harmony only heard his voice as he said,

“You can count on it.”

It was a Christmas promise that Harmony knew her best friend, her love, would keep.



## HARMONY - NEW YEAR'S EVE

*I*t seemed as if the excitement of Christmas had come and gone in an instant, and suddenly, it was Harmony's first New Year's Eve in Wintervale in four years. When she and Sebastian were young, the Suttons would always go to the Chinese restaurant in Hadleigh for dinner on New Year's Eve. Then, they would hurry home to watch the ball drop as they toasted with sparkling grape juice and listed all the things they wanted to accomplish that year. But this year, Sebastian suggested they all go to the New Year's Eve party at The Middle Road Inn. All of their friends would be there and he thought it would be a fun way to ring in their first year as a couple, since James really went all out celebrating.

And Sebastian wasn't kidding.

The restaurant had been decorated from the floor to the rafters; there were black and gold balloons everywhere, twinkling lights were hung over anything that would stand still, candles and beautiful winter flowers adorned every table, and no matter where you looked, you could find a glass of champagne or a gorgeous golden cupcake made by Belle. As soon as Harmony walked in, she knew they'd picked the perfect spot to spend New Year's Eve.

When the rest of her family followed her into The Middle Road Inn, the noise in the restaurant increased exponentially. A group of servers carrying trays of hors d'oeuvres immediately rushed over to offer them little crab puffs, skewers of mozzarella, tomatoes, and basil, and figs wrapped in prosciutto. The guys grabbed two of everything and then ran off in search of their friends, while Tara joined Liza Matheson and Allison Rieger at a booth in the back. Amber followed their mom, though she seemed to be keeping a close eye on Harmony, which was unusual. But Harmony was too excited to dwell on it for long.

She and Sebastian had both decided to dress up for the party and Harmony loved any excuse to dress up. She wore black jeans and a gold and black sequined top that she made herself, while Sebastian had on a gray suit with a black t-shirt. He looked so handsome that every time Harmony looked at him, she couldn't believe how lucky she was.

"I can't believe how lucky I am," Sebastian said as if he'd read her mind. She couldn't help but laugh as he took her hand and kissed the top of it.

"Ditto," she answered, then gently nudged his shoulder with her head. "Everything is so beautiful tonight. I couldn't imagine a more perfect place to spend our first New Year's Eve as a couple."

Sebastian's face lit up.

"I was hoping you'd say that."

Suddenly, James was turning down the lights in the restaurant as he waved at them with a huge grin. A sweet song that Harmony remembered from when they were in high school began to play and it was then that she realized every eye in the restaurant was on them. And her mother was crying.

“Sky... what is happening?” she asked as she turned around to look at him again. But he wasn’t next to her anymore...

He was kneeling on the floor in front of her.

“Sebastian...” she said breathlessly. All he could do was smile at her as he took a small box out of his pocket and opened it slowly. Inside of it was...

A giant pink plastic diamond ring.

The same one he’d given to her when he’d proposed on the playground a million years ago. She couldn’t help but laugh.

“Sebastian, what are you doing?” Harmony asked as she wiped away tears that were suddenly rolling down her cheeks. When he took the plastic ring out of the box, Harmony noticed there was a second ring behind it. It was clearly an antique; the setting was gold, and it had a beautiful garnet stone in the middle, surrounded by four little diamonds. It was the most perfect, lovely ring that Harmony had ever seen.

“Harmony Sutton, these rings represent our history. The pink diamond represents the first moment that I knew I loved you. The garnet ring has been in my family since 1884, when my grandfather Fletcher Young fought his way through a war to get back to his one true love, Eleanora. And Grandma Greta gave it to me, to give to you. *My* one true love. Harmony, will you do me the honor of allowing me to be your husband?”

Harmony’s hand shook as Sebastian held the garnet ring out to her. “Sky... it’s only been a month.”

“Twenty-four years and a month!” she heard her sister yell out over the crowd, which caused the whole restaurant to laugh. Harmony brushed away her tears again.

“That’s true. I’ve loved you my whole life, Sebastian Young. And I want to love you for the rest of it. Yes, I want to be your wife. I want to marry you.”

Sebastian slipped the delicate ring on her finger and then lifted her into the air, spinning her in a dizzying circle as the whole restaurant cheered.

“I love you, Harmony,” he said when he finally set her back on the ground.

“And I love you. If this is what you planned for New Year’s Eve, I can’t wait to see what happens on Valentine’s Day,” she said with a laugh.

When he kissed her, Harmony knew in her heart that there really was no place else she’d rather be.

~The End~

# **RECIPES FROM WINTERVALE**

## SEBASTIAN'S CRAB AND GRUYERE QUICHE



This creamy, dreamy quiche is *amazing* for a fancy dinner, but the recipe can also be turned into a batch of mini-quiches for a party! You can also switch out the crab and gruyere cheese for any ingredients you prefer, like leeks, ham, bacon, broccoli, spinach, or goat cheese! Take it and make it your own.

Love and hot cocoa,

Melodie

- The Crust: I'm 100% a fan of store bought crusts or pre-made pie dough to save yourself some time. Pre-made dough is especially easy if you're doing the mini-quiches. But if you want to make your crusts like a kitchen goddess, just use your favorite recipe and blind bake it. You can do this the day before as well!

**Quiche Ingredients:**



- 4 large eggs
- ½ cup heavy whipping cream
- ½ cup whole milk
- 1 cup shredded gruyere cheese (you can be a *little* more generous with the cheese if you're feeling cheesy)
- 1 cup fresh lump crab meat
- 1 tsp Old Bay seasoning
- A dash of your preferred hot sauce
- Salt and pepper to taste
- Chopped scallions for garnish

**Directions:**

1. Have your preferred crust ready
2. Preheat your oven to 350°F (175°C)
3. In a large bowl, beat eggs, heavy cream, milk, Old Bay, hot sauce, salt, and pepper together with the whisk attachment of a handheld mixer (you can do it by hand too, you'll just have to be vigorous!)
4. Gently fold in crab and gruyere with a spatula until evenly mixed
5. Pour your mixture into the crust
6. Bake in the oven for 50-55 minutes, or until the center is not quite jiggly. DO NOT OVERBAKE
7. Allow to cool for 15 minutes before serving
8. Top with the scallion garnish and enjoy! Can be saved for up to three days

**ALSO BY MELODIE MARCH**

WINTERVALE PROMISES



A Sugar Cookie Christmas



Christmas at The Cranberry Cottage



Love and Espresso



Ice Angels



A Star-Spangled Romance



The Bridal Train



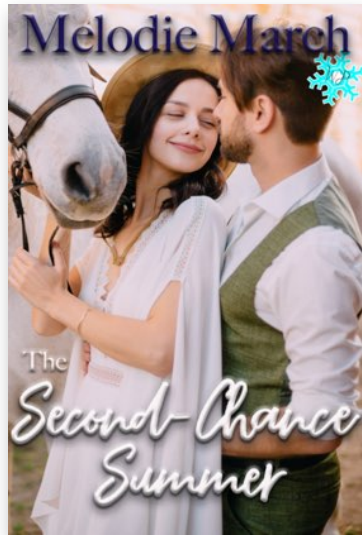
Thankful Hearts



The Ghostwriter of Christmas Present



Somebody Else's Love



The Second-Chance Summer

**ALSO BY MELODIE MARCH**



WINTERVALE MYSTERIES

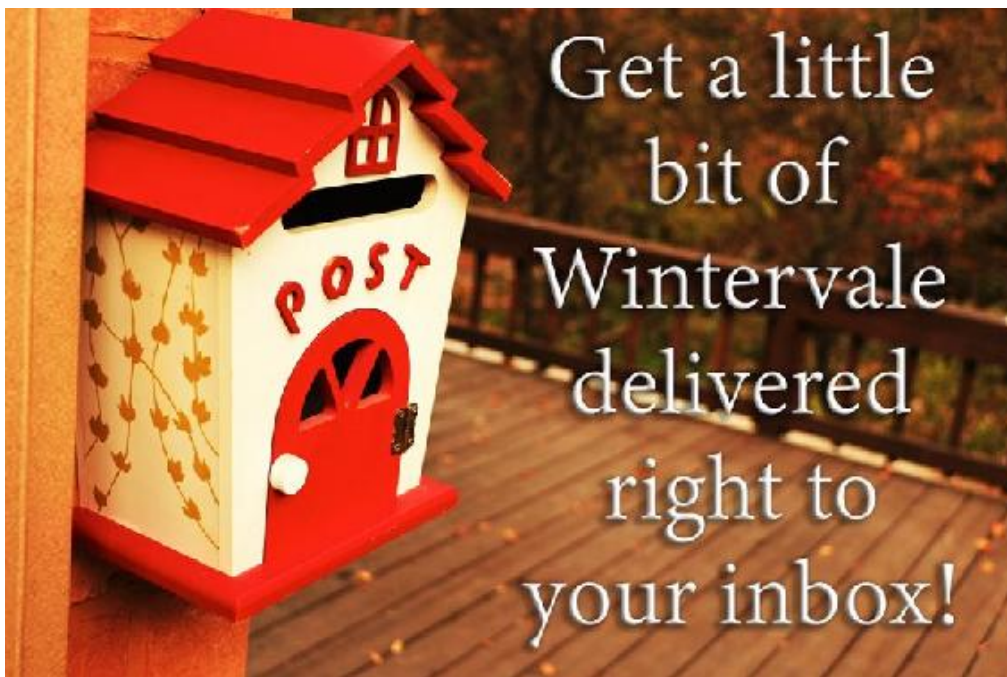


The Christmas Tree Caper



Death by Chocolate

## LETTERS FROM WINTERVALE



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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



*Author photo by Crissha Figarella*

Melodie March is a dreamer and a lover of nature who grew up in Vermont and can't imagine living anywhere else. When she isn't writing, she is drinking tea on her porch or volunteering at her local animal shelter. She could never pick a favorite holiday, but every winter, she's the first to start decorating her old farmhouse. She lives in Vermont on her very own Pine Street with her husband and rescue yellow labs, Honey and Lemon. If you'd like to contact Melodie to ask about your favorite Winterville Promises character, tell her your best Christmas story, or just have a question, join her on Facebook!

