

KRISTEN M. FRASER

SEASON
of
GRACE



SEASON OF GRACE

A HEARTWARMING CHRISTMAS ROMANCE



KRISTEN M. FRASER

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*Love prospers when a fault is forgiven,
But dwelling on it separates close friends.*

Proverbs 17:9

*I waited patiently for the Lord to help me,
And he turned to me and heard my cry.*

He lifted me out of the pit of despair,

Out of the mud and mire.

He set my feet on solid ground

And steadied me as I walked along.

Psalms 40:1-3

NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Thank you for choosing to read **Season of Grace**! I hope you enjoy this inspirational story, reminding us of God's amazing love and grace.

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NATE



“*T*here you go, Mrs. Spinks. That should be fine, now.” Nate Hollister tweaked the gold-framed portrait to the left and stepped back. A hideous monster peered down its nose at him from amid swirls of pink-ish brown and white oil paints. He shuddered at the wrinkled creature that looked more like a skinned rat than someone’s beloved pet. Estée, apparently named after the cosmetics icon—not that he had the first clue about cosmetics, his knowledge was limited to the no-name brand of body wash he used, was Marjorie Spinks’s pride and joy. He doubted the esteemed businesswoman would be thrilled to know the frightful creature was her namesake.

“Isn’t she adorable?” Marjorie appeared at Nate’s side in a cloud of lavender and camphor, cradling none other than the smooth-skinned muse in her arms.

Nate shifted his gaze as he pulled on his jacket. A non-committal mumble escaped his lips. Adorable wasn’t the word he’d choose to describe Estée. Ugly. Creepy. Weird. But certainly not adorable. He wasn’t a cat person at the best of times, but the hairless creature with its beady eyes following his every move deterred him even more from ever wanting a feline.

“I’ll probably have some more things that need hanging. And I have a list of repairs a mile long.” Marjorie opened the front door and ushered Nate outside. “After living here for so long, the house is falling down around my ears.” Her thin lips

parted and her abrasive laugh filled the air, reminding him of tiny pebbles rattling to the ground.

“You’ve got my number.” Several of his business magnets were on her refrigerator, alongside those of the local garage and the gardener. “See you later, Mrs. Spinks.” Nate tipped his head before jogging down the steps and striding toward his gunmetal gray pickup with *Holler for a Handyman* emblazoned on the side. He still had to pinch himself every time he saw the bright orange vinyl adhesive bearing the logo for *his* business. It was hard to believe such a thing was his. How he was even here was hard to believe. He didn’t deserve to be, that was for sure. And it was something he would never take for granted.

With his tools secured in the back of the truck, and a final wave to Marjorie and her blasted cat, he backed out of the drive. A glance at the dash clock revealed he had time to return to his office before calling it a day. His schedule had been full, as was the case most days, and clearing some of Mrs. Spinks’s yard was last on his list. Hanging the masterpiece of her beloved Sphinx was a last-minute request, and he’d happily obliged. Some folks considered her odd and a little eccentric. But he had a soft spot for the widow who lived a half mile out of town. They were poles apart in age and personality, but perhaps it was because they were both loners and shared an unspoken understanding about the hurts they carried that made him feel an affinity toward her.

Just her, though. Not the stupid cat.

AVA



*A*va Treadwell stomped her boots on the welcome mat and slid the key into the lock of Friar's Cabin. Lugging her suitcase inside, she gasped. The online photographs of the rental cabin didn't do justice to the real thing with its exposed beams, hardwood floors, and stone fireplace recessed into the living room wall. A large cream rug covered the floor. An overstuffed sofa and matching armchair completed the room, forming a cozy place to curl up and enjoy one of the many books in her suitcase. A two-person dining table sat in a nook off the kitchen. She hadn't even seen the rest of the cabin, but if first impressions were anything to go by, then it was sure to be just as inviting.

Walking trails disappeared into the woods surrounding the cabin, and a frozen lake was visible from the front windows. She could imagine summer would be busy, with holiday makers enjoying the water, but for now, the calm seclusion was perfect.

Decorated in neutral hues, with brown and cream accents, the cabin was delightful and just what she needed for her home-away-from-home for the next few weeks. With no neighbors, no traffic, and no distractions, it was perfect for her winter vacation and her sole purpose for visiting Oakview Falls.

Ava hadn't known what to expect after discovering her destination would be the small town in the Great Lakes region. She hadn't even heard of Oakview Falls before. But first impressions were everything, and after driving through the

quaint town, she could already sense it was a place she could easily fall in love with.

Main Street was a colorful array of awnings and festively decorated shop fronts. A town green, although mostly white at this time of year, was home to a towering Christmas tree, some buskers, and a bright red mailbox ready to receive letters for Santa. It was a delight to behold.

Ava pulled a small box of ornaments from her suitcase. She hadn't put up a Christmas tree back home in Connecticut. What was the point when she wouldn't be there to enjoy it? But it would be nice to brighten up the cabin with some festive cheer for the few weeks of her vacation, and she planned to buy a small tree at the first opportunity.

As she unpacked the rest of her belongings, hung coats in the closet, and set out her soap and toothpaste, her thoughts turned to the main reason for being here.

For the past few months, she had been experiencing some strange symptoms. Buzzing in her veins. Heart palpitations. And the feeling of always being on edge. Her internet search had returned numerous diagnoses. Thyroid issues. Hormonal changes. Anxiety. Always one to visit the doctor as a last resort, she cut back on her caffeine intake, tried to go to bed at a reasonable hour, and ensured she was getting at least thirty minutes of daily exercise. Yet, the awful feeling remained. It was as though she was living on stimulants, and her brain and body were constantly in flight mode.

Deep down, she had a hunch about why she was feeling so restless. So on edge. It was the time of year that contained so much grief, heartache, and reminders of broken dreams. Although years separated each event, the anniversaries of her brother's death, her parents' fatal car accident, and the demise of her marriage all fell within a few weeks of each other. It was a lonely time of year, and one that reminded her of all her regrets and mistakes. While everyone was getting into the Christmas spirit, she was lamenting all that she'd lost.

This year was more difficult than in previous years. Perhaps it was the knowledge that her ex would celebrate

Christmas with his new wife and daughter. Maybe it was because her brother had been gone for ten years, and she still didn't know what really happened. Perhaps it was because she was fast-approaching mid-life and was heading for the so-called crisis. Although thirty-three seemed to be too young for any crazy antics, like quitting her job or going on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land.

Over the past few years, God sure had led her on a different path to the one she'd planned. And this year, He'd led her right to Oakview Falls. Or at least she hoped He had. She hoped it wasn't her impulsiveness that led her to taking vacation time and driving over four hours from her home in Connecticut. Had she mistaken His nudging for something else? No, she felt certain God was asking her to mend the bridges that had been burning for more than a decade. For whatever reason, she knew He was asking her to seek forgiveness from the one man who'd been plaguing her thoughts for far too long. And here she was, in Oakview Falls to find him, with no idea where to look.

AVA



Accompanied by a soundtrack of cheerful Christmas music piping through the grocery store, Ava pushed her cart around, loading up with necessities for her vacation. Garlands of tinsel looped between the aisles, and sparkly decorations adorned displays of chocolate gift baskets and festive candies. Shoppers smiled and nodded as they walked by, something that rarely happened back home. People were far too busy in the city to care about anyone else but themselves. Ava was just as guilty—never paying attention to who else was around when she visited the store. She was always on a mission to get in and get out in the quickest time. Avoid the crowds and the tangible angst that radiated off everyone. But this was different. It was as though she'd stepped into a time warp of good old-fashioned friendliness.

As she browsed the aisles and grabbed extra snacks—it was the festive season after all—the tension in her shoulders eased, and she couldn't help the small bubble of wonder welling inside at how pleasant it was to not be rushed or jostled. There was no aisle-rage happening in downtown Oakview Falls.

“Did you find everything you were looking for?” The middle-aged woman behind the till asked as she rang up Ava's items.

“Yes, I did. Thank you, Valerie.” Ava glanced at the woman's name tag and smiled.

“Are you here for the holidays?”

“Mostly.” It would depend on if she found what she was looking for. The cabin was hers for three weeks, with her departure on Christmas Day. Hopefully that would give her enough time to achieve what she’d come for, before returning to her marketing job at the art gallery in Hartford.

“Well, enjoy your stay,” Valerie said, bagging up the last of the groceries. “There are plenty of things to do here in Oakview Falls. We love Christmas, so there’s not a chance you’ll get bored.”

“That sounds wonderful.” She was looking forward to experiencing a small-town Christmas and trying not to think about her ex enjoying his first with his new daughter. In fact, she was determined not to think about Rhett, or work, or much else this holiday season, other than finding closure for her brother and doing what God asked her to do.

AVA



Ava awoke with a chill. Her morning breath puffed into the air as she tugged the covers up to her chin. Her toes were numb, despite being encased in thick woolen socks, and her nose and ears felt like they might snap off. Had the fire gone out through the night? It was highly possible, given that she was not an expert in maintaining a proper fireplace with logs and kindling and all the stoking that came with it.

Pulling on a sweater and her robe, she shuffled to the living room. Orange embers glowed amid a pile of ashes in the fireplace. She tossed another log in and moved everything around, trying to bring the embers back to life to provide some heat. Blowing into her hands, she made her way to the thermostat on the wall. And there was the problem. Instead of being toasty warm like the temperature gauge showed, the cabin felt more like an igloo. She tapped the buttons a few times, hoping for an easy fix. But nothing.

Well, that's just great. What a start to my vacation. Ava pulled on a woolen cap and added a scarf to her many layers, before heading to the kitchen to call the rental agent. She hoped it wasn't a sign of how the rest of her time in Oakview Falls would be.

With a cup of coffee and one of her many books, Ava curled up on the couch under a deliciously warm blanket to wait for the repairman. Through the window, the sun glinting off the frozen surface of the lake, and the light dusting of snow covering the landscape provided the perfect distraction from

the words on the pages. She wouldn't need so many books when she could sit and admire the peaceful surrounds all day.

Before long, heavy footsteps thudded on the porch before a loud knock sounded on the door. Tugging the blanket around her shoulders, she opened the door and froze. Broad shoulders filled the doorway, blotting out most of the sun. Shaggy brown hair poked out from beneath a black woolen cap. Salt and pepper stubble blurred a harsh jawline, and faint lines bracketed a solemn mouth. Time might have taken away his soft, youthful features, but there was no mistaking the man standing before her. Nate Hollister.

Fifteen years had passed, but she would recognize those gray-blue eyes anywhere. Eyes that could be as soft as down, or as striking as a stormy ocean. Yet instead of being vibrant and full of life, they were now hard and dull. As though a light had been snuffed out.

“Nate?” His name was a whisper in the cool air. A flicker of surprise flashed across his sharp features before his gaze swept over her. She swallowed, warming beneath his scrutiny. “Wh—what are you doing here?”

“You’ve got a thermostat problem?” His gruff voice matched the harsh lines etched in his face.

“Um, I think so. You can feel how cold the place is. I tried to have a look at it, but I’m no expert.” With a frown, Ava stepped aside, making way for Nate’s solid frame to pass. His bulky winter coat brushed against her, and she breathed in a hint of pine and soap as he stepped inside. Closing the door, Ava paused a moment to gather her thoughts. He hadn’t even acknowledged her. Not even a “*Good morning, I’m here to fix your thermostat.*” Poor customer service aside, did he even remember who she was?

Fifteen years was a long time between goodbyes. Perhaps he’d forgotten all about her. No, he wouldn’t have. Not when they shared a common tragedy. She didn’t look that different from when he’d last seen her, did she? Sure, she’d gained a few more curves since then, and she now required glasses for reading. Her dark hair had some salon-assisted highlights, but

she hadn't changed so much that he wouldn't recognize her. Unless he had somehow sustained memory loss.

She glanced out the window to see a gray pickup parked in the drive. "Is that your truck?"

"Yep."

"So, you're a handyman?" *Well, duh, Ava.*

The glance Nate flicked her way told her he was thinking the same thing about her detective skills. Or worse, her intelligence.

"How long have you been a handyman?" The last she knew about Nate was that he had dreams of becoming a landscape designer after leaving the military. He'd had a plan. Serve for as long as he could. Retire from service. Settle somewhere in the mountains with his family, a four-legged friend, and run his own business. How much of that had he achieved?

One large shoulder lifted, and for a moment, Ava thought he hadn't heard her. Either that, or he was deliberately ignoring her. "Almost a year," came his eventual reply, addressed to the wall in front of him.

A year? From her snooping, she knew he'd left the military ten years ago. So, what had he done in the ensuing years? How long had he been in Oakview Falls? Was he married? Did he have children? She had so many questions.

"Can I get you a drink? There's fresh coffee in the pot."

"No, thank you."

Ava retreated to the kitchen and poured another cup of coffee for herself. If she kept up this pace, she'd be fighting off the jitters for the rest of the day. But she needed something to do so she wasn't awkwardly standing around trying to make small talk with someone who used to be the easiest person in the world to talk to.

How was Nate Hollister even in her cabin? This wasn't part of her plan. She was supposed to be in Oakview Falls for a few days before seeking him out. That would give her time

to consider her approach, formulate her questions, and work up the courage to ask them. But here he was. In her living room. Taking up most of the space with his broad shoulders, his delicious scent and his prickly persona.

Years of military service had bulked him up. He was no longer the lean twenty-year-old she remembered. His features were softer back then, too. Brighter. Happier. Eager. Now, he seemed hard and closed off. Blunt. Unfriendly. This was not the Nate she remembered. The one she'd laughed with. The one she'd talked all night with. The one she'd beaten in a licorice eating competition. The one she'd ...

Ava lifted the steaming cup of coffee to her lips and stared out the window, trying to ignore the man tinkering a few feet away from her.

Nate's smile had been one thing that attracted her to him. His loose, good-natured grin. Cheeky and full of spark, it made his entire face light up, and his blue eyes blaze with mischief. He and her brother, Andrew, were inseparable, and people used to mistake them for brothers. Eventually, they became brothers-in-arms—something they were so proud of. But all that changed when Nate came home five years into his service, and Andrew didn't.

"I'm done." Nate's curt tone broke through Ava's trip down memory lane.

She turned, setting her half-finished coffee on the counter. "Thank you. I'm glad I won't freeze anymore. That was a shock to the system when I woke up this morning."

"Just call the agent if you have any problems."

"Okay." Ava searched Nate's features as he grabbed his utility belt, hoping for an acknowledgement. A *How are you?* Or *Why are you in Oakview Falls?* But his gaze remained lowered and his features impassive.

Ava held the door open and watched as he traipsed down the stairs. His long strides eating up the distance to his truck in no time. Folding her arms, she couldn't help but think how much the truck suited him. Big. Bold. Menacing.

“Bye, Nate,” she called, wondering if she should say more. *Would you like to get a meal? What’s been happening in your world? Are you married? Do you have children? Where have you been for the past decade?* She could go on. Instead, she remained silent, wondering what happened to the guy she’d once shared so much with.

Nate paused by the driver’s door. “Goodbye, Ava. Enjoy your vacation.” And with that, he climbed into the pickup, slammed the door closed on her bravado and any hope of further conversation.

Her stomach sank as she watched the taillights disappear around the bend in the road. What had she been thinking, driving all the way here to make amends? Why couldn’t she let the past remain where it was? She’d obviously misheard God’s voice prompting her to make amends with Nate.

With a sigh, she closed the front door and folded the blanket, placing it in a wicker basket by the sofa. It was going to be a long three weeks if this morning’s interaction with Nate was any sign of what was to come.

Happy vacation to me.

NATE



With the last job completed for the day, Nate pulled into the driveway of his two-bedroom log cabin and parked in the detached garage at the side. Snow drifts hugged the building that doubled as a workshop for his tinkering when time permitted. The cabin, with its rickety steps leading to the porch, had seen better days, but he was beyond thankful for the roof over his head. Especially at this time of year, when temperatures dropped below freezing. It had taken ten long years to get to this point, and he would never take it for granted.

With a little help from some friends, and the money he'd saved, he'd purchased the ramshackle cabin on a plot of land on the outskirts of town. With its peeling paint and creaking floorboards, he had big plans for the property, including a full refit, and a vegetable plot and fruit trees, to become self-sufficient. It was peaceful out here, with unobstructed views of the mountains. He appreciated the space, and that there were no neighbors nearby to breathe down his neck. He didn't mind the short drive into town. Oakview Falls wasn't exactly a booming metropolis, so peak hour traffic was never an issue.

Hanging his coat by the door, Nate kicked off his boots and grabbed a microwave dinner from the freezer. Such was the extent of his culinary skills. Or what he could be bothered with after his surprising day. He scrubbed his hands and face in the sink, and once the ding of the microwave sounded, he settled into the armchair with a can of soda and his plate of roast beef, carrots, potatoes and corn.

After a busy day of driving around town, shoveling snow, visiting the supply store, and doing odd repairs, it was a relief to put his feet up and unwind. He'd tried all day to forget about his second call-out that morning. His busy schedule barely allowed the fragments of disbelief to settle. But now that he'd come to a stop, there was no ignoring the onslaught of surprise and curiosity at seeing Ava Treadwell again.

Seeing her standing in the doorway of Friar's Cabin had floored him. To where he was rendered speechless and could barely offer more than a few words. Curt ones, at that. Time had been kind to her. Her chestnut hair, that she always wore in a ponytail, hung over her shoulders in smooth waves. Her emerald eyes sparked with a vibrancy that reminded him of the forest after a shower of rain. Of all the places in the world to run into her. Why was she here? The town wasn't exactly a quick detour off the interstate. Was it sheer coincidence that she was here, or something else? The last time he'd seen her had been ...

He scrubbed a hand over his face with the memory. The twinge of guilt that arose whenever he thought back to that time. He didn't need reminding of his foolish behavior. Nor did he need such a tangible reminder of Andrew, because losing his best friend was a permanent wound he carried every single day. Ava's presence had ripped the scab right off, and every memory that he'd carefully sealed away came exploding out of its box, threatening to upset his newly constructed life.

How long was she here for? Why was she even here? Was she married? Did she have children? He had seen no evidence of company in the cabin. Then again, he'd been trying to focus on the thermostat and not sneak glances at the woman he hadn't seen in years, that he'd paid no attention to anything else.

Suddenly, he craved something much stronger than the can of soda in his hand. He hadn't had such a powerful urge for over a year. His fingers curled around the tattered edges of the armchair as he drew deep breaths and focused on the mindless drone of the evening news coming from the television.

Lord, please help me resist the temptation. Thank you for rescuing me, and that I am no longer a slave to addiction.

The nearest liquor store was five miles away, and for that, he was grateful. Another benefit of living out of town. The thought of getting into his snow gear, clearing off the drive, and heading into town on the icy roads was enough to kill the desire. Still, a restlessness remained as he tossed his food scraps into the trash and cleared away the kitchen.

He'd done so well over the past year as he'd sought forgiveness and rebuilt his life from scratch. The whole reason for being in Oakview Falls had everything to do with the brunette he'd been trying to forget about for the past decade. Seeing her again triggered memories that slammed into him with the force of a hurricane. And this time, he wasn't sure if he could withstand the aftermath of destruction.

AVA



Resting her chin on her hand, Ava gazed out the window of The Chilly Bean café on Main Street. It was like looking into a real-life snow globe as snowflakes drifted from the sky, and people walked by, stopping to greet one another. Colorful wreaths and garlands adorned lampposts and store fronts, providing a bright contrast to the fine layer of white coating the town. Christmas had arrived early back in Hartford, with the malls hauling out their oversized baubles and tinsel at the end of September. Was it the same here in Oakview Falls? With its twinkling holiday lights providing a warm festive cheer, it seemed like a place that could embrace Christmas all year around.

Ava's phone chirped as the server placed her coffee and cinnamon roll on the table. She smiled her thanks, while her heart-rate spiked at the familiar name flashing across the screen. Why was Felix Shearman calling her now? He knew she was on vacation. Before leaving, she'd completed all of her tasks, and had even held a meeting with all the art gallery staff to run through the upcoming promotions. They had dot-point lists and spreadsheets spelling everything out for them. Everything was in order. So why was he calling?

Her fingers hovered over the screen before letting it go to voicemail. Just because her boss was a workaholic, didn't mean that the rest of the staff should be. To his credit, Felix expected high-quality performance, as he should. But Ava always gave one hundred and ten percent effort, often to the detriment of everything else. It was something she was slowly learning to change. Ironically, the marketing career Rhett had

encouraged her to pursue ended up being one thing that drove them apart.

Ava tucked the phone into her purse. Out of sight, out of mind. She would not let Felix ruin her vacation. After years of working ridiculous hours, relaxing was a foreign concept, but she was determined to forget all about work, and focus on the here and now, which included the delicious aroma of cinnamon and butter making her mouth water. She pulled the roll apart, popped the warm dough into her mouth and groaned as the flavors melted on her tongue.

As she savored the soft cinnamon delight, a flash of red caught her eye. Ava turned her gaze out the window to where a woman in a crimson coat was walking beside a man pushing a stroller. She watched them walk, arm in arm, looking in the store windows. A deep pang of yearning and regret tugged at her chest as the man rested his hand protectively on the woman's back. His head lowered to hers, and she smiled up at him, adoration beaming on her face.

Ava glanced away, lifting her cup to her lips. Is that what a happy family looked like? Her parents had exemplified a God-centered marriage. And she'd aspired to have such a loving relationship of her own. But a few years into her marriage, and the honeymoon phase was already over. She'd changed careers, and Rhett encouraged her to pursue opportunity after opportunity to climb the career ladder. Somewhere along the path of chasing their dreams—she an event and marketing manager, and Rhett a family lawyer—they lost sight of what really mattered.

Ava had wanted children—*one day*. *One day*, when she'd achieved her dream of owning her own events company. *One day*, when they had enough money to support a family. *One day* ... But she'd since discovered that one day was the killer of dreams. One day was a vague, mythical place in the future where everything came together so perfectly, but it didn't account for the reality of wayward plans or broken vows. It didn't account for waking up one day as a divorced thirty-something-year-old without the child she'd longed for. *One day* didn't exist. Ava realized that now.

A tinkle of the bell above the café's door broke through her thoughts. She shook her head, refusing to be sucked into the eddying waters of negativity. The downward spiral of the *what ifs* and *could have, should have beens*. She'd spent the better part of two years doing just that—questioning her mistakes and where she'd gone wrong. And while this vacation was about finding answers, it was also a chance for her to draw a line and not allow her past to consume so much of her present or future.

Ava glanced down at her empty plate. How had she eaten so fast? The cinnamon roll was one of the best she'd ever tasted, and she craved more. She eyed the counter where only one other person was waiting. Brushing the crumbs from her mouth, she downed the last of her coffee before picking up her purse and heading straight for the counter. She was on vacation, so why not? A few extra indulgences wouldn't hurt. Besides, she no longer had a husband to impress—she'd done that before, and look how that ended up.

Armed with a paper bag full of delicious cinnamon-y goodness, she exited the café and strolled along the sidewalk with no agenda or destination in mind, other than to explore the picturesque town with its historic buildings and charming stores.

A dark pickup drove by, and she couldn't help glimpsing at the side panel to see if it was Nate's. As the vehicle turned the corner, she felt a twinge of disappointment at not seeing *Holler for a Handyman* on the side. Not that she would've known what to do if it had been Nate.

The previous day's encounter with him had been the epitome of awkward. But now that she thought about it, perhaps it had been a God-thing. She'd tracked him down to Oakview Falls through some old contacts in the military, some social media stalking and good old detective skills, but had considered nothing beyond that. Suddenly, there he was on her doorstep. And he wasn't the twenty-year-old she remembered. He looked haggard. Worn out, and at least a decade older than he was. Had his time in the military caused him to look so

defeated? Would her brother have looked as world-weary if he'd returned?

It was crazy how her heart still recognized Nate after all these years—leaping inside her chest at the sight of him standing on her porch. But there was no denying his brush-off hurt. They'd been close, once. Too close. Was that why he'd ignored her? Whatever the reason, she was here to make amends for her faults. She just hadn't expected his rejection.

Ava put aside yesterday's disappointment as she strolled around. The simplicity of the small town was such a contrast to city life, where people were too busy rushing around to stop and talk. Everyone lived at such a frantic pace that they didn't have time for courtesy. Even her boss's personal assistant purchased gifts for his family because he was too busy to do it himself. Back home, the hype of the holiday season created stress, rather than the peace the world so desperately needed. The madness and chaos made it easy for people to forget why they were celebrating. To forget about the humble king born in a dirty stable when there were so many shiny things to distract. Did people even care? Or was everyone too busy trying to meet deadlines, or buy the latest and greatest to impress no one in particular on Christmas Day?

Ava was tired of it all. Tired of the madness and the hamster wheel of overfilled schedules. If the past two years of singleness had taught her anything, it was that the busyness of life and chasing after a career to the detriment of relationships and happiness was not worth it.

Heading back to her car parked near the café, she made a mental list of things to do while in Oakview Falls. Besides making amends with Nate, she was also here on vacation, and she was determined to make the most of the small-town charm.

NATE



With his thermos of coffee perched on the hood of his truck, Nate glanced over his remaining schedule. There were still a few jobs to get through before calling it a day—hanging a picture, patching a hole in a wall, changing a faucet. That was one benefit of running his own business—he could pick his hours and choose how much work to take on.

Most days, he was up before dawn. And this morning was no exception. Rising early had its advantages. There were no interruptions in his time spent with God. He could exercise and plan out his day. He could do some extra chores around his cabin. But today, he was tired, and already onto his second cup of joe.

Seeing Ava had completely thrown him, and sleep had come fitfully as he tossed and turned, reliving his youth and trying to figure out why she was in town. Deep down, he knew it wasn't a random visit.

He downed the last of his coffee and jumped into his truck, hoping the caffeine would give him enough of a buzz to complete all his tasks. With his thumb tapping a beat on the steering wheel, Nate drove into town, past sprawling fields blanketed in white. A few children were making a snowman in the park, and some older teens were sledding down the hill near the school.

He drove over the bridge, which arched over a meandering creek in the warmer months. The solid structure was all too familiar, having protected him during his first few weeks in Oakview Falls. At night, he'd bunker down out of the

elements under the wooden beams. Then at dawn, he'd sneak into the gymnasium a few miles up the road to shower. It was hard to believe he'd been scrounging for food scraps and lining up at the soup kitchen at the local church only eighteen months ago. So much had changed in that time. And he wouldn't be where he was without the kindness of Dylan and Emma Biddle. Two people who meant the world to him and had become his family.

Nate pulled his truck into the parking lot behind Shawcroft's Supply Store and made his way through the loading dock at the side of the building.

"You've got a visitor," Earl Shawcroft called, wiping his hands on a rag as he jerked his chin toward Nate's office at the back of the store.

"Who?" No one visited him at the store. Anyone who needed his services called his phone or spoke to him in town. He wasn't so formal or fancy to meet clients in a designated office. He didn't even need the space—that's what his truck and dining table were for. But Earl had convinced him to use one of the spare rooms for his needs. It wasn't anything special. Just a desk, two chairs and a computer. No fancy furnishings. There was no rug on the floor. No photographs or framed artwork or certificates announcing his qualifications. He had none of those, anyway.

"It's a woman. Maybe five-seven. Dark hair. Seemed shy."

Nate pursed his lips. If he were a betting man, he'd place all his chips on the woman being Ava. What was she doing here? How did she know he would be here? Was there something wrong with the thermostat? If so, she should've called the rental agent.

He thanked Earl, and with heavy steps, strode through the paint section toward his office. He glimpsed dark hair through the small window that overlooked the store. There was no mistaking who it was. Nate ignored the traitorous twinge in his chest and snatched his cap off his head as he walked in. "Is everything okay with your heating?"

Perched on the edge of the chair in front of his desk, Ava's fingers twisted together on her lap. Her vivid green eyes widened at his abrupt greeting. "Er, yes."

He glanced away. Those eyes had haunted him for years. Even amid his personal hell, he remembered just how much her eyes captivated him. How much they'd fascinated him with their flecks of gold, and how they could see deep into the core of who he was.

"So, why are you here?" He flinched, wanting to take back his words. He hadn't meant to sound so gruff, but he wanted the upper hand. Her presence had already thrown him off-kilter, and he needed some semblance of control. Otherwise, who knew what he might do? Probably crumble to the floor in a blubbering mess. He'd worked so hard to get here, and he didn't need Ava to upset his stable life.

"I wasn't sure if you would be hungry. I picked up some snacks." She placed a paper bag with *The Chilly Bean* stamped in black ink onto his desk.

"Thank you." He didn't need to know what was inside. The delicious aroma of cinnamon filled the room, and his stomach growled in appreciation. Cinnamon rolls. Only the best in town. He'd skipped lunch, and it was tempting to rip the bag open and stuff as much as he could into his mouth. But he resisted, instead, leaning back into the chair and folding his arms. "But that's not why you're here." He watched her, his gaze sliding to her throat as she swallowed.

Ava's expression remained neutral, and as she looked around the room, he wondered what she was thinking. Years ago, he knew what every expression meant. Knew what she was about to say before she opened her mouth. But too much time had passed for him to know what made Ava tick these days.

"How long have you been here?" Curiosity blazed in her eyes. Gone was the nervous woman from moments before. The woman seated across from him had an air of sophistication as she commanded the small room.

“Here in Oakview Falls? Or here in this office?” He was being facetious, but he was also desperate to hold on to every last thread of security before she unraveled it all. She didn’t get to waltz right into his carefully constructed life after so long and do whatever it was she was doing.

“Both.” She crossed one denim-clad leg over the other and wrapped her slender fingers over her knee.

Nate rubbed a hand over the back of his neck. “A year and a half,” he said. “Less in this office.” Holding his cards close, he wasn’t about to divulge all the details, or how he’d ended up in Oakview Falls.

Ava nodded as she brushed a piece of lint from her jeans. Strands of hair clung to her top, and Nate wondered if it was still as soft as it used to be. He forced away the memory of his fingers trailing through her hair, and reached for the bag of goodies on his desk. Blow it. His stomach was growling like a bear. He tore open the bag to reveal two rolls and a muffin, and it was all he could do not to salivate. He flattened out the paper and slid the makeshift plate toward Ava, gesturing for her to help herself.

“So,” he picked up a roll and took a bite, briefly closing his eyes as the cinnamon sugar melted on his tongue. If heaven were a flavor, this would be it. “I’ve answered your question. Perhaps you can answer mine. Why are you here?”

For a moment, they were back in the Treadwell’s basement playing twenty questions late into the night. He’d enjoyed those spontaneous moments while Andrew was engrossed in a movie neither of them wanted to watch. That was when he’d discovered she liked action movies, historical romance novels, cookie dough ice cream, and Ed Sheeran. Did she still like those things? Did she still have the copy of *Pride and Prejudice* he’d given her? More to the point, why did he even care?

Ava reached across the desk and broke off a piece of dough, and placed it in her mouth. Nate wasn’t blind to miss the lack of jewelry adorning her fingers. She only wore a watch and a plain silver bangle on her wrist. Interesting.

Drumming his fingers, Nate waited for Ava to finish her mouthful. He usually preferred to work in silence, but right now, the room was too quiet. Should he bring up a playlist on his phone and play some music? Or would it be too obvious that he was uncomfortable with the silence?

He curled his fist on the desk, eyeing her as she wiped her fingers across her mouth. Long dark lashes fluttered as her gaze drifted around the bare room, looking everywhere but him. She'd always been a stunner, but like a fine wine, age had only enhanced her beauty. A light dusting of makeup covered the freckles from her youth. Faint lines feathered out from the corners of her eyes, and a thin furrow ran vertically between her eyebrows. The sight of the frown line jolted him. Was that a result of her grief over losing her brother? Had he caused that?

Finally, after what seemed an eternity, Ava drew a deep breath and lifted her emerald eyes to meet his.

“I came here to find you.”

AVA



“*I* came here to find you.” Ava searched Nate’s face for a reaction. His blue-gray eyes briefly widened at her words before his hard-as-stone façade slipped back into place. She schooled her features to hide her frustration and disappointment at his self-imposed distance. This was not the Nate she knew. She’d expected him to make a joke, or at least crack a smile like old times. Instead, there was nothing.

Then again, she’d also changed since they’d last seen each other. She’d lived through a lifetime of grief and remorse and regret. That was enough to change anyone. Her outlook on life was a little more cautious now, and trust was not easily given. But what had happened to Nate? The old Nate never had a nasty bone in his body. He could have easily played the victim card, given his upbringing in foster homes, but he was an overcomer. He was always Mr. Positivity, and she’d loved that about him. She’d loved that he was so much fun and full of life. That he could find humor in any situation. She loved he made it his mission to make her laugh when she was feeling down.

Loved. In her youthful naïveté, she’d believed she loved him. Oh, how silly and foolish she’d been to share so much of herself with him, only for him to go radio silent for over a decade. If she could go back in time, she’d caution her eighteen-year-old self not to be so quick to fall so hard.

“Well, you can stop looking. You found me.” Nate spread out his large hands on the desk—worker’s hands marred with calluses and criss-crossed with small white scars. “Now, if

you'll excuse me, I have some work to finish before my day is done." He stood and moved to the door.

"Nate, I..." A tsunami of emotions surged in her chest. Who was this man? In his plaid shirt, jeans and workers' boots, he bore some resemblance to the young man she once knew. But he was a complete stranger when he opened his mouth to speak. The Nate she knew would never have been so harsh. So dismissive. So rude. She wanted to take him by his broad shoulders and shake some sense into him. To bring the fun-loving, spirited Nate to the surface.

She stood, leaving her half-eaten roll on his desk. She took one last look at him, imploring him to see her. But his gaze remained glued to a spot on the floor, as though she didn't exist.

With a heavy heart, she trudged back through the store. Nate's resistance, or refusal to acknowledge her existence, was a setback. That was all. Perhaps ambushing him in his workplace wasn't a great idea. She would've been shocked if he showed up unannounced in her office back home as well. Still, how else was she going to talk to him?

A few trinkets in the store caught her eye. *May as well make the most of my time here.* She glimpsed Nate from the corner of her eye as she unloaded her purchases at the counter.

"Did you find everything you wanted?"

"Yes, thank you." *Kind of.* She smiled at the gray-haired woman serving her. She'd found Nate, but that was just the start of what she was here for.

After paying for her purchases, Ava bid the woman a good day and stepped outside. She glimpsed Nate standing by his pickup. Ignoring him, she started walking toward her car on the other side of the parking lot, but then stopped. No more regrets. Wasn't that why she was here? To remedy past mistakes? There was no point trying to sneak away, because she'd only ruminate on the *what-ifs* later. Straightening her shoulders, she turned around and marched back across the parking lot, her boots crunching on the loose stones. It was all or nothing. She could only try.

“I saw a cute little restaurant in town. The Mount ...” She waved a hand around, trying to remember the name of the Italian restaurant next to the barber shop.

Nate straightened. His features remaining as taciturn as ever as his gaze swept over her. “La Montagna Trattoria.”

“That’s the one. I don’t know what it means, but it sounds nice. Would you like to join me for dinner?” *Breathe, Ava. Just breathe.* She clenched her hands together to stop them from shaking.

“I – I don’t ...”

“You’ve got to eat, right? I’m not asking you for the world, Nate. Just to share a meal.” That came out a little harsher than she’d planned. But the look of surprise on his face told her she’d hit a mark. “Bring your wife, too.” She had no idea if he had a family. She hadn’t seen a wedding band on his finger, but that meant little. He might remove it as a safety precaution in his line of work. Well, she would find out soon enough if there was a special someone in his life.

A few cars entered the parking lot, drawing Nate’s attention. Painstaking seconds passed by before he finally answered. “It will just be me.”

“Great!” Ava enthused as hope bloomed to life. “See you at six.”

She turned on her heels before he had a chance to back out, and it took all of her willpower not to do a victory dance all the way to her car. *Ava—one. Nate—nil.*

NATE



Nate arrived home with just enough time to freshen up and change his clothes. He pulled on a pair of jeans and a black long-sleeved tee. Shoving his arms into his fleece jacket, he grabbed his woolen cap and tugged it onto his head. When it came to fashion, he was all about simple. He'd never been one to preen. Even before joining the military, he'd been happy in comfortable, yet neat clothing. Shorts in summer. Jeans in winter. No labels. Just simple. And nothing had changed. What was the point of spending money on stuff when he hardly went out? And did anyone else care about what he wore?

A glance in the mirror revealed something akin to a mountain recluse—perhaps a distant relative of Bigfoot. With his shaggy hair and days' old facial growth, he'd even scare himself in a dark alley.

Nate sighed as he pulled the front door closed behind him. Perhaps he should make a little more effort. At least get a haircut. But as Ava said, he needed to eat. So she could take him or leave him. Appearance-wise, of course. She said she wasn't asking for the world, which was just as well, because he couldn't give it to her. At one point in his life, he'd hoped to. But he'd been a naïve twenty-year-old, unscathed by the reality of war and its atrocities. Now, he wondered if he could even give her an hour. She'd probably take one look at him and walk right out of the restaurant.

He regretted being rude to her. Again. So much for patience and kindness and self-control. But the revelation that

she was in Oakview Falls to find him freaked him out. He hadn't bothered to ask why she was looking for him, like any sane person would. Instead, he'd erected an impenetrable wall of self-preservation because he didn't want to lose everything he'd worked so hard for.

Every year that passed was another year further away from that awful day that changed the trajectory of his life. One year, turned to two, turned to five. This year marked the tenth anniversary of Andrew's passing and Nate's spiral into the pit of guilt and despair. And just when he thought he'd finally made progress, clawing his way up from rock bottom and putting his past behind him, Ava shows up. It could only mean one thing, and he wasn't ready to deal with all of those memories again.

Nate parked his truck next to the kerb, tucked his keys into his pocket, and made his way into the restaurant. His gaze drifted around the brightly lit dining area, landing on Ava seated at a table next to the window. She wasn't hard to miss, with her hair glinting in the lights. She wore a black turtleneck with a gray chunky knit scarf. Her lips were a pale wine, and silver hoops hung from her ears. He eyed her a moment as she stared out the window, her fingers trailing over the side of the glass on the table.

In an instant, he was taken back fifteen years to when they were waiting for Andrew to join them for supper. Her fingers had traced over the condensation on the glass, and the ambience in the diner had amplified her youthful beauty and mesmerized him, in the same way it was affecting him now.

Nate ran a hand over his jaw, determined not to be bogged down by memories or lured by the only woman who'd ever gotten under his skin. Could he endure an evening with the one person who might destroy everything?

As he considered leaving, she glanced up, meeting his gaze. Her lips curved into the same smile that lit her face up all those years ago. His stomach flip-flopped about without any pause, and he wondered how it was possible she could still have the same effect on him all these years later.

After alerting the hostess he was with the brunette by the window, he wound his way through the tables, sliding into the seat opposite Ava. “Sorry I’m late. I hope you haven’t been waiting long,” he said, placing his jacket on the back of his chair before grabbing the menu card off the table.

“You’re not late. It’s only just gone six. And you know me—always early.” Her laugh bubbled between them, reminding him of a fresh pour of champagne, and he found himself relaxing a little with her familiarity.

“Yeah.” The corner of his mouth twitched. Ava had been notoriously early for everything. A trait she developed out of necessity because her mother took forever to get ready and kept the rest of the family waiting whenever they went out. It was something Ava swore she would never do. And it seemed she remained true to her word.

“So.” Keen interest shone in Ava’s eyes. “What’s good here? I’ve seen a few things that are tempting, but is there anything you’d recommend?”

“It’s all pretty good. You can’t really go wrong with Italian.”

Ava lowered her gaze to the menu, giving Nate a chance to compose himself. Or perhaps do some subtle perusing of his own. Her makeup was light and natural, as she’d always worn it. He appreciated that about her. Simple yet authentic. She’d never been a girly-girl. He liked she wasn’t afraid to muck around with the guys when they were younger. Fishing. Hiking. Playing football in the rain. Her lips pressed together as she scanned the menu, and he wondered... He averted his gaze. He wouldn’t go there. Shouldn’t go there. Needed all his self-control not to go there.

“I’ll get the tortellini.”

“That sounds good. I’ll have the lasagne.” Nate didn’t need to look at the menu. He knew La Montagna Trattoria’s menu by heart. Even knew how their scraps tasted, thanks to his prior lifestyle of rummaging through the dumpsters by the back door for food.

Pleasant music piped through the speakers in the restaurant, and the chatter of other diners ebbed and flowed around them. After placing their orders, Ava folded her hands on the table and cocked her head to the side. “So, what brought you to Oakview Falls, Nate?”

Whoa. Straight to the point. “We’re back to twenty questions?” He arched an eyebrow. He really ought to stop being a jerk, but his defenses were on high alert.

“You could call it that. Or, you could also call it old friends catching up.”

Friends. Right. Friends didn’t...

“I have the tortellini and the lasagne.” A server arrived with their meals and placed them on the table.

“Thank you.” Ava smiled while Nate nodded his thanks.

Nate shifted his silverware on the table as Ava bowed her head and closed her eyes. *Huh. Interesting.* Was she a believer? That gave him pause. He silently gave thanks for his own meal before slicing his knife into the soft layer of cheese and pasta.

Ava glanced up, her eyes full of expectation as she lifted a forkful of tortellini to her mouth.

Oh. Her question about what brought him to Oakview Falls. How much of his story should he share? “I lived in a few places before here. Moved around a bit, and this is where I’ve settled.” It was a vague answer, and a roundabout way of sharing his journey.

Ava nodded, seemingly satisfied with his response. He could easily leave it at that. They could eat their meals. Make small talk. And part ways at the end of the evening without scratching the surface of the past decade. Yet as he ate, conviction settled in his spirit. The same sense of restlessness that had been bothering him since Ava arrived in town wouldn’t leave him alone. With a sigh, he set his fork on the table and leaned back.

“I didn’t have a home when I returned from service. Before coming to Oakview Falls, I moved around a lot.

Different places. Rough places. In the elements.” He frowned at the memory of some of the situations he’d experienced. The things he’d done out of desperation. “I now have a two-bedroom fixer-upper on the edge of town. It’s home.” He held her gaze, hoping she could read between the lines.

He hated this part of his story. The ugly blemish that marred almost a third of his life. He hated admitting he’d been homeless. That he’d been reduced to a beggar on the streets. But it was his testimony. And if it weren’t for rock bottom, he would never have met Dylan and Emma, who introduced him to Jesus. And that was the turning point in his life. His saving grace. In more ways than one.

He searched Ava’s face as she processed his words. A small frown. A twitch of her lips. And there it was. Recognition of what he hadn’t said. He waited for the disgust or pity or judgment, the same expressions he’d become accustomed to during his years of homelessness and begging for his livelihood. The scorn and disdain from those who had no idea about what he’d been through. Instead, her eyes shimmered, and in their depths he saw pain and empathy and compassion.

“You were... homeless?” The furrow between her eyebrows deepened.

He nodded. Destitute. Displaced. A vagabond. However he looked at it, the status was still difficult to acknowledge.

“Oh, Nate.” Her hand reached across the table and settled over his. He jerked at her touch before the tenderness and warmth in her gesture calmed the churning of insecurity and embarrassment and shame that had made him so reluctant to meet her for dinner in the first place. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t know. That must have been... I can’t even imagine what that was like for you.”

He didn’t want her to imagine. He didn’t even want to remember his decade of darkness. His light-hearted outlook on life had been destroyed in a single moment that triggered a downward spiral into helplessness.

He'd experienced so much filth living such a destitute lifestyle. The freezing winters. The soaking rains. The cold that seeped deep into his bones. Starving for days. Sores that wouldn't heal. Lice. Rats that became bedfellows. The bottle, his best friend. Drinking himself into oblivion to numb the pain and block out the stench of alleyways and other unsanitary places.

"You weren't to know." How could she? They hadn't spoken in ten years. He'd made sure of that.

"Can I ask what happened?" Her voice was as gentle as her touch, reaching into places that he'd kept hidden for so long. That was the thing about Ava. She'd always been kind and caring. On one hand, she'd been a rough-and-tumble type gal, never afraid to muck around with the guys and get her hands dirty. On the other, she had a soft heart that burst with compassion. It seemed that hadn't changed.

Nate took a long sip of soda. Where did he even begin? He closed his eyes as the moments leading up to the present unraveled like a movie reel. Scene by scene, the memories played in his mind. He was no longer in La Montagna Trattoria's, but on the battlefield. Then in a park in Boston. A homeless shelter in Maine. His makeshift refuges under various bridges. Until Oakview Falls.

"Nate?" Ava's quiet voice broke through his walk down memory lane. Her tender touch was a salve to the tempest of emotions waging within.

"Sorry." He withdrew his hand from hers and rubbed it over his face.

"That's okay." She offered a gentle, reassuring smile. And in that moment, he wanted to tell her everything. But he couldn't. He wanted to remember the tenderness in her eyes, and once he revealed his truth, her compassion would turn to disdain. Coming from Ava, that would be unbearable. She'd always been an optimist, and he didn't want to be the one to ruin that.

No longer hungry, Nate pushed his plate of barely touched lasagne aside. "I should probably get going. Early morning

and all that.” Which was mostly true. But any longer in Ava’s presence would likely devastate her. He’d already ended one Treadwell sibling’s life. He didn’t want to be destroy Ava’s any more than he had. Tossing some bills onto the table, he grabbed his jacket and pushed back his chair.

“Nate.”

Ignoring her concerned voice, he continued walking, bumping a couple of servers along the way as he made a beeline for the door. He needed to get as far away from her as he could. Away from his past and the memories that were clawing back into his conscience. Any longer in her presence, and he would fall apart.

AVA



As far as reunions went, dinner with Nate was memorable for reasons Ava hadn't expected. The evening had started off well, then ended abruptly when he hightailed it out of the restaurant, as though a pack of wolves were on his heels.

His revelation of being homeless floored her. Nate Hollister. Tough guy. The life of the party. The guy who lit up a room whenever he walked in. The guy who oozed charm and charisma. Nothing had prepared her for discovering he was a drifter. What had happened? How had things gotten so bad for him that living on the streets was his only option? She hadn't wanted to push any further, but boy, was she curious. Now there was no way she could leave Oakview Falls without hearing his full story.

Soft morning light streamed into the living room as Ava opened the curtains. With a fresh cup of coffee, she sat on the sofa, hugging one knee to her chest. Flames flickered in the fireplace and contentment welled as she gazed around the cabin. It was looking a little more festive. A small nativity scene—with Mary, Joseph and baby Jesus in a manger sat on the mantle above the fireplace. A wood-carved *Noel* sign was at the opposite end. And a small Christmas tree sat on the table, adorned with the few ornaments she'd brought from home.

This year was certainly different from previous ones, including those when she was married. Christmas had been such a fun celebration during the early years of her marriage to

Rhett. Every year, they bought each other an ornament for the tree. It was a sweet tradition, and she enjoyed the anticipation of wondering what he'd chosen for her. Until the one year, he chose nothing. He claimed he'd forgotten. That he'd been too busy at work. It should have been a red flag right then. But it wasn't until six months later that she discovered his affair.

For some reason, she hadn't been able to part with the collection of ornaments from their married years that were still boxed up in the attic. She shook away the memories. His betrayal still hurt. Even more so that he had a daughter to dote on. But she couldn't continue to live with the pain of regret, or allow him to steal so much of her future. Perhaps it was finally time to get rid of the ornaments, especially when they only evoked sad memories of broken dreams.

Rising from the sofa, Ava carried her empty cup to the kitchen. Swiping on some lip gloss, she grabbed her jacket and purse and stepped outside where the lake greeted her in all its shimmering glory. Inhaling the crisp air, she sighed. What a glorious view to behold each day!

A flash of brown on the porch step caught her eye. She leaned down and picked up the object, turning it over in her hands. A deer. "How did you get here?" she mused, running her fingertips over the smooth wood, eyeing the intricate details of its face and ears. She noted the inscription underneath—*Redemption*. Who had left it there? And when?

Her gaze flicked up, scanning the cabin surrounds. She was sure it hadn't been there when she'd returned from dinner with Nate. Had someone been here through the night while she was sleeping? That thought sent a chill down her spine. Was she safe here? The cabin was tucked away from the main road surrounded by forest trails leading to who knew where. Other than directions, she hadn't researched Oakview Falls, so perhaps there were a higher percentage of stalkers or crazy people than in an average town. Now she was being paranoid. It might have been some kids having fun. She much preferred that thought to some weirdo loitering about.

Crisp white landscape surrounded Ava as she drove into town. Oakview Falls was picture book perfect, and soon the

surprise of discovering the figurine on her porch faded away as she admired the surrounding beauty. She could only imagine how stunning it would look in summer, with the vineyard in full bloom, and the lake a hive of activity. The city had its own unique vibe, but the hustle and hyperactivity couldn't hold a candle to the quieter pace here.

Parking at the end of Main Street, Ava purchased a coffee from The Chilly Bean café, opting for a cinnamon latte for something different. As she wandered along the sidewalk, she couldn't help but smile as she admired the colorful array of festive cheer.

Business owners had made the most of the season, decorating their front windows with various winter wonderland scenes. The flower shop, with its gorgeous display of wreaths and swatches of holly. Mayfair's Bookstore with a toy steam train chugging around a scenic town. And the gift store, with a stunning Scandinavian display featuring white, silver and gold, and wood. A sign in the window announced they'd won the town's Christmas display for the past five years, which was understandable, given everything was so mesmerizing and simply breathtaking.

Admiring each store front was reminiscent of the times Ava's mother would take her and Andrew to the city each year to look at the Christmas displays. Andrew resisted the older he got, and eventually it became a mother-daughter outing, which always included a stop at the nail salon for some festive varnish. Hindsight made her realize how much she took those moments for granted, and a twinge of nostalgia tugged on her heartstrings.

Ava sipped her coffee, refusing to allow melancholy thoughts to steal the joy from her morning. Another sign in the gift store window caught her eye.

Walk through Bethlehem. Take a stroll through Bethlehem and meet the characters from the first Christmas.

That sounded interesting. Ava read the details before snapping a photo on her phone. She may as well make the most of her vacation time and explore what was on offer.

Lured by the pretty ornaments and beautiful window display, Ava entered the store. A small, old-fashioned bell tinkled above her head, announcing her arrival. She smiled at the sound. Could this town get any cuter?

A woman wearing an apron in the shade of evergreen stood behind the counter serving a customer, while a quiet melody of Christmas music piped through the store. Her senses swooned with the scents of cinnamon, cedarwood and vanilla filling the air.

Christmas was everywhere she looked, with the store divided up into different themes. Traditional—with red, green, and gold ornaments and knick-knacks. Coastal—with silver and blue, and an assortment of seashells and other ocean-influenced paraphernalia. Then there was the Scandinavian theme. A vintage display complete with moving carousel. And an elegant theme, comprising glass baubles and gold-foil reindeer. Awestruck by the color and variety, Ava didn't know where to look.

As she browsed the shelves, a display near the far wall caught her attention. She frowned. Wooden animals, similar to the one she'd discovered on her porch, sat amidst a white faux-snow landscape, complete with miniature snow-tipped fir trees. She picked up a bear, turning it over in her hands. One word—*Redemption* was engraved in small letters on its lower leg. The same inscription as on the deer. Curious, she walked over to the counter.

“Excuse me, I’m wondering if you could tell me about these carvings?”

“They’re great, aren’t they?” The kind-faced woman smiled. “What would you like to know?”

“Where are they from?” They could well be an import for all she knew. Probably made in a foreign factory by laborers paid way less than the minimum wage.

“Oh, they’re from a local supplier.”

“They’re beautiful,” Ava remarked, turning the bear over in her hands. The attention to detail was amazing. The face.

The ears. Even the fur.

“Yes, they are. You’ve obviously discovered the display.”

Ava nodded as the doorbell tinkled and two more customers entered the store. “Good morning, Cindy!” The two women called and waved as they walked in.

“Good morning, Faith. Good morning, Thea.” Cindy waved before turning back to Ava. “Let me know if there’s anything else I can help you with.”

“Thank you.”

After some more browsing, Ava purchased the bear and continued her exploration of Main Street. As she neared the town green, she spied a familiar dark gray pickup parked near the kerb. Her stomach somersaulted. Should she approach and wait to see if Nate appeared? Would he think she was stalking him? That she even had to consider how to approach him made her realize just how fractured things were between them.

Years ago, she wouldn’t have hesitated waiting for him, probably sitting on the hood of his truck. Now? There was no chance of her doing that. Not only was she older and less agile, but they were virtual strangers, and he may not appreciate her touching his vehicle. Hopefully, she would see him around town another time. If not, then she knew where he worked.

Sweet strains of guitar music lured her to the other side of the town green, where a small crowd gathered around a young man busking. With a harmonica looped around his neck, he strummed the guitar strings and sang. His deep, soulful voice filling the air. Ava dug into her purse, finding some loose change, and tossed the coins into the cap near his feet. He nodded his thanks as she moved back into the group of onlookers. Soon, her foot was tapping in time as she soaked in the spontaneous moment.

“He’s good, isn’t he?”

Ava turned at the sound of the woman’s voice. “Yes, I’m very impressed.” She wasn’t a musician, but she could tell when someone had talent, and this guy had it in spades.

“I’m Emma, by the way. Are you new in town?” With warm brown eyes, the woman appeared to be of a similar age to Ava.

“Oh, I’m just visiting.” Ava smiled at the blonde-haired woman whose cheeks were rosy in the cold air. Her dark eyes sparkled with warmth and kindness. A light pink woolen cap sat snug on her head, and she wore a matching scarf and gloves. “Although I could easily get used to living here. It’s a beautiful place.”

“It sure is. Where are you from?”

“Hartford. Connecticut.” Ava clapped along with the small crowd as the busker finished a song.

“I haven’t been there in years. I remember visiting a superb coffeehouse there.” Emma sighed. “Anyway, what brings you to Oakview Falls? Do you have family in town?”

Ava shrugged her purse straps onto her shoulder as she considered her response. Who was Nate to her? A friend? An acquaintance? Somebody she used to know? “I’m hoping to catch up with an old friend.” *And hopefully break through his hardened exterior to make amends. I know the old Nate has to be in there somewhere.*

“That sounds lovely. Well, it was nice meeting you, Ava. I hope you enjoy your stay.”

“Thank you.” Ava watched Emma walk away, unable to imagine holding a similar conversation with a stranger back home. People were always too busy. Instead of stopping to listen to the sidewalk buskers, they blindly tossed coins as they hurried past.

A few people moved away as the young man launched into a new song. Ava stood at the edge of the green, soaking in the atmosphere and enjoying the rare chance to people watch. From the corner of her eye, she saw Nate step out of a store onto the sidewalk. He lifted a hand to wave. Ava grinned, but as she raised her hand to return his greeting, she realized he wasn’t waving to her, but to the woman she’d been speaking to moments ago. Her arm fell to her side, and her smile faded as

Nate stopped and wrapped Emma in his arms. Wow. She'd forgotten how much his face lit up when he smiled. How handsome he was. His smile transformed him from an abrasive giant into a gorgeous mountain man that romance novels glorified. Or so she assumed. They pulled apart, and Nate wiped his thumb over the woman's cheek. Their familiarity with each other was effortless, and as she watched the pair converse, a small twinge of jealousy tugged inside. Which was ridiculous, because she had no claim over Nate.

Ava glanced away, annoyed at herself for staring. Of course he'd be in a relationship. Why had she thought otherwise? Is that why he left their dinner in a rush? It made perfect sense now. He was seeing someone.

Oh, how foolish she'd been to think that Nate would drop everything and pick up where they left off fifteen years ago. He had his own life now. What made her think that anything she said would somehow make things right, and they could resume their friendship? No wonder he'd been hinting he didn't want to see her. Well, that was that.

Did I misunderstand You, God? Did I allow my thoughts and feelings to get in the way of Your purpose?

Clutching the bag with the gift store purchase close to her chest, Ava turned away from Nate and Emma and made her way back along the sidewalk, away from the town green and the festive cheer that had sparked joy only moments ago. She refused to allow discouragement and the wounds of regret hold her in their snare.

Still, seeing Nate embracing another woman shouldn't hurt as much as it did.

NATE



“A little birdie told me you’re involved in the Christmas pageant this year.” Emma grinned up at Nate.

“I wouldn’t call it a pageant,” he mumbled. It wasn’t a musical theater production, and sitting on a stool carving wood in a pretend town of Bethlehem wasn’t exactly Oscar-worthy material. Still, he’d rather blend into the background than have one of the main acting parts. He was no Julius Caesar, or Joseph, or wise man, that was for sure.

“I’m so proud of you, Nate. You’ve come a long way.”

He couldn’t disagree. This time last year, he was still raw, trying to make a go of his second-chance at life. He thumbed an eyelash off Emma’s cheek and glanced up just in time to see a flicker of brown dart across the town green. *Ava?* She wore a gray cap with a matching coat, and was clutching a bag to her chest, as though cradling something precious. Nate frowned, tracking Ava’s steps as she dashed along the sidewalk with her head lowered, as though she was in a hurry to get somewhere.

“Are you still joining us for the Christmas meal at church?” Emma asked, reminding him they’d been in the middle of a conversation before Ava distracted him.

“Yes. I’ll be there.” He wouldn’t miss out on supporting the very thing that had helped him. He was looking forward to helping in the kitchen, serving meals to those in town without friends or family around, or those on rock bottom like he’d been.

“We’re so blessed to have you, Nate. See you around.” Emma waved as she crossed the street.

He briefly nodded before stepping off the sidewalk and craning his neck to find Ava. But she’d disappeared.

Snow flurries were falling by the time Nate arrived home. He offered a prayer of thanks for the roof over his head and the food on his table. He couldn’t believe it had only been a little over a year since the Biddle’s found him huddled in the foyer of the recreation hall. Hypothermic and in threadbare clothing. Winter had come early, and he’d been desperate for warmth. Desperate for something to change. In his despair, he’d cried out to God for help. The first time he’d acknowledged the possibility that God existed, beyond cursing Him for the atrocities he’d seen while serving his country.

His whole life changed that day, when a kind-hearted woman looked him in the eye and saw him for who he was—a broken man in desperate need of saving, rather than a bum on the streets for people to spit at and ridicule, or ignore. Emma and Dylan had taken him home. Fed him. Clothed him. Given him a bed. And most of all, showed him what true Christianity was. He’d never experienced such kindness before, and he longed to be as generous as them. To show hospitality to others without bias.

Then why are you treating Ava so harshly? Doesn’t she deserve kindness, too?

As he sat down at the table with his laptop, the gentle nudge in his spirit was enough to draw his heart to repentance. He owed her an apology.

AVA



*A*va's feet crunched over the forest trail, and her breath misted in the air. Her cabin came into view as she rounded the corner. Her lungs burned, yet the cold air was invigorating. The brisk walk was just what she'd needed to clear her thoughts. Returning to the cabin, she stamped her feet on the doormat before going inside.

Today's mission was to finish decorating the cabin. Her phone buzzed as she shrugged off her jacket. A glance at the screen revealed it was Felix. Again. She hadn't listened to the last message he left. Nor had she checked any emails. Why couldn't he value her vacation time? Just because he worked long hours and never took time off, didn't mean anyone else in the office should aspire to the same heights of workaholism. She'd been there. Done that. And look where that had landed her. Divorced and childless, with insomnia and recurring migraines.

Funnily enough, she'd slept like a log every night since being in Oakview Falls, and she hadn't suffered a single headache. There was something to be said for taking time to rest. It was something she was learning to appreciate. Work had consumed so much of her life. And while she enjoyed what she did for a living, she was learning it wasn't the be all and end all that the world would have everyone believe.

She'd been misguided for so many years, living a life lured by the highs of success and the benefits and recognition that came with that. But no matter how hard she worked, no matter how much money she earned, or how many accolades she

received, it hadn't brought her happiness. It hadn't fulfilled her. And it was only through the demise of her marriage that she realized working to the detriment of all else wasn't worth it. If only Felix could see things in the same light.

Could I stay here? For a moment, she entertained the idea. There were many benefits to small-town living. One of them being away from her workaholic boss hounding her every second of the day. Then there was the slower pace of life. The friendliness of the townsfolk. Nate. *Don't be silly, Ava. Your home is in Hartford.* Still, it was nice to dream.

As she hung some twinkle lights in the front windows, her thoughts drifted to the last time she'd seen Nate before his deployment. They'd shared so many fun times over the years, and there were plenty of highlights from their friendship. Although she wouldn't call their last time together a highlight. For the first few years after he left, it was all she could think about. She daydreamed he would return for her, swooping in like a knight on his magnificent steed, or at least in his Dodge, and they'd ride off into the sunset together. How foolish she'd been. How naïve.

She looked back on that time with shame and regret, and wished she could go back and make different choices. Which was why she was here. Did Nate even remember? So much life and tragedy had happened in the ensuing years, so perhaps he'd forgotten. But she hadn't.

The thought of confronting Nate made her uncomfortable. Perhaps a phone call or an email would be so much easier. Why couldn't God have suggested those options? Why did she have to see Nate in the flesh to put the past to rest? Why was obedience so hard?

Even though he was with another woman, she still believed God was asking her to apologize, and she needed all the courage in the world to do just that. It had nothing to do with a yearning for what could've been. It was pure conviction, for whatever reason, to apologize for what she'd done.

NATE



“*H*ow are all your orders coming along?” Tucking a pencil behind his ear, Earl stepped off the last rung of the ladder and turned to face Nate.

“I still have a few to work on. A few more came in this morning.” Nate hiked his duffle bag onto his shoulder, eager to retreat to his office and sift through the orders on his desk. It still blew him away that people wanted something from him.

Emma mentioned a few more people were interested in his carvings. She also suggested he needed a website where people could look at his creations. But he wasn’t interested in that side of things. E-commerce stuff was a bunch of gibberish, and word-of-mouth suited him fine. Between his odd jobs and the orders, there wouldn’t be time for much else before Christmas, but that was okay. He wasn’t a social butterfly, and he had no big plans.

“That ought to keep you out of mischief.” Earl chuckled, sliding the ladder along to another section.

“Should do.” At least the increase in orders would help keep his mind off Ava. He wondered if he’d run into her again. He should reach out to her—he couldn’t keep pretending she wasn’t in town. Especially knowing where she was staying. But what would he say? He would not drive out to Friar’s Cabin and pour out the past ten years of his life in a pitiful plea for forgiveness. That would guarantee to scare anyone off.

Once in his office, Nate dropped his bag to the floor and shrugged off his jacket. A pile of papers sat on his desk with a bright yellow post-it note on the top—*A plant would brighten up your office.*

He chuckled at Emma's note. Of course she would say that. She and Dylan owned the garden center in town. He folded into the chair and glanced around the drab room with its concrete floors and pallid walls. The naked fluorescent bulb on the ceiling made it look like an interrogation room rather than a place to do business. Emma was right. It could do with some color. He hadn't cared before, but if he was going to spend more time in here doing paperwork, which he loathed, then perhaps he should take up her suggestion.

He shuffled through the orders, making a mental note of how each figurine could look. They were all easy enough. He would be busy, but at least the extra work would keep him occupied. He still couldn't believe that people would pay for something he created. Him. Nate Hollister. War veteran. Homeless bum. Murderer. If they knew what he'd done, they'd burn his creations in a flash.

After spending some time sorting through orders, updating accounts and checking over the week's schedule, he grabbed his keys and jacket and closed the office door. Calling out a goodbye to Earl, he headed over to his truck.

Mid-afternoon, he drove out to Mrs. Spinks's house. Music filled the cab and his thumb tapped a beat on the steering wheel. What was Ava doing now? Was she sitting alone in her cabin? Or was she out exploring the town? Perhaps she was enjoying a craft evening or watching a movie. Why was he even thinking about her?

He had a couple of choices. He could ignore her until she left town. Eventually, his curiosity about her presence would fade, and he could get on with his life. But guilt would eat him up, and there would be no closure. Or he could man up and be honest with her. He'd avoided her for so long, always in the back of his alcohol-muddled mind, wondering what he'd do if he ever ran into her. But she was here now, and he'd run out of excuses, especially after their dinner that he ran out on.

He pulled into the drive and killed the engine. Grabbing his utility belt and tool kit, he made his way to the front porch to begin repairs on a loose floorboard. He set to work, thankful he was outside and not having to deal with that awful cat. It also meant he could work in quiet without Marjorie chattering away. Not that he minded her talking; he knew she was lonely. But it usually meant the rest of his schedule fell behind.

After some time, he removed his jacket and guzzled some water. The front door creaked open, and Mrs. Spinks stepped onto the porch, cradling Estée in her arms. Drat. Just when he thought he might get away without seeing the cat.

“Good afternoon, Marjorie.” He stood, brushing off his jeans, unable to control the shudder rippling through him at the sight of the wrinkled feline. Funny how he could handle all kinds of creatures—he’d come face to face with rats and other vermin while living on the streets—but that ugly hairless thing gave him the jitters.

“Have you any plans for Christmas?” Marjorie asked, her fingers stroking Estée’s bald head.

“Helping at the church. How about you?” He gathered up his tools and set them on the top step.

A faraway look descended over the older woman’s face as she sighed. “Nothing, really. My family live abroad, and I haven’t seen them in some years.”

Nate’s chest tightened at her admission. He hadn’t realized her family lived so far away. He assumed they were interstate, not in another country. “That must be hard for you, not seeing them. Especially at Christmas.”

It was one of the hardest times of the year, and he was beyond grateful for the people in town who’d taken him in as a friend. Loneliness had been his companion for so long, and to have people to call family, although not blood-related, meant the world to him. His heart ached for Mrs. Spinks and how lonely she must be.

“My son has his own family now. We stay in touch by... What’s that thing called?” She waved a hand around as though

to pluck the words from the air. “That video face thing.”

“FaceTime?” Nate raised an eyebrow, his mouth curving up at her attempt to remember the technology.

“That’s the one. I can’t keep up with all the whizz-bang things these days. Technology is not my thing, but it’s Phil’s, and it’s the only way I can see my grandchildren.”

Misty-eyed, Mrs. Spinks’s gaze drifted to somewhere in the front yard, and a weary sigh escaped her lips. At that moment, Nate saw a sad, lonely widow rather than a cantankerous old lady who lived in isolation. A flare of anger and protection surged through him. He didn’t particularly like Phil at that moment.

Leaning against the railing, Nate searched the older woman’s face. “Why doesn’t your son visit?”

“We had a falling out several years ago. I said and did things I regret. I apologized for my mistakes, but the damage was done. I have to keep praying that God will work in Phil’s heart.”

Mrs. Spinks drew a breath and tilted her chin in determination. “Life’s too short to live with regrets. Seeing my grandchildren with the face thing is a start for now, and I appreciate those precious moments. Even if I can’t always work the blessed computer.”

Nate’s preconceived views of Mrs. Spinks faded like his breath misting in the air. She might be a little on the eccentric side. And he might not like her cat. But his heart went out to her. Did other people in town know her story? That she was lonely, and her abrasiveness was probably more from being hard on herself than being annoyed at everyone around her. She wasn’t the crotchety old woman people assumed.

“You should come along for the Christmas lunch,” he suggested. “We’re hosting a meal every day for four days before Christmas. I’ll pick you up and you can enjoy a nice hot meal with all the trimmings and some pleasant company. It’ll beat sitting in your living room with...” He glanced at the cat, schooling his disgust. “Estée.”

“I don’t...”

“How about on the Wednesday? I’ll pick you up around eleven.” Nate didn’t give her a chance to protest. “Stay for the food, and if you’re not comfortable, I’ll bring you straight home. Deal?”

Mrs. Spinks pursed her lips, reminding him of a fragile bird in need of some tender loving care. “You’re very persuasive, Nate.”

“I can be.” He gave a wry grin. With some things, he could be very persuasive. Being persuaded to resolve the past? That was a different story.

“Let me think about it.”

Estée slithered from her arms and sashayed toward him. He narrowed his eyes and lowered onto the next step. At the last second, the cat tilted its nose into the air, dismissing Nate, before wandering over to the rickety rocking chair and rubbing its spine against the legs.

The feeling’s mutual, Estée. Not that he would ever divulge his opinion to Mrs. Spinks. Now that he knew part of her story, the cat was probably her only comfort and friend.

Bidding her goodbye, Nate carried his tools to the truck. He waved once more before backing out of the drive.

Life’s too short to live with regrets. Mrs. Spinks’s wise words floated through his mind as he drove home. He had a lifetime of regrets. And although they’d left a blemish on his past, he realized they no longer needed to ruin his future.

AVA



A harsh scraping sound drew Ava from her sleep. The gray light of dawn swept over her covers, and she stretched, pointing her toes, basking in the warm cocoon of the bed. She made a starfish shape, enjoying the spacious mattress. If there was a plus to being single again, it was having the whole bed to herself, and not having to put up with Rhett's annoying bedtime habits.

His nightly routine comprised snorting his nasal spray—two squirts in both nostrils. Then he'd swipe on some lip balm containing menthol and camphor that stank out the room. And finally, he would climb into the bed, fluffing up the covers. All the while disturbing Ava's sleep. Come morning, his alarm would blast like a freight train rattling through the room. And boy, could he snore. She'd lost count of the number of times she'd wandered into the spare room to sleep. Was it any wonder some couples ended up sleeping separately for life? Thank goodness someone else had to deal with all his gross habits now.

The scraping noise had finished by the time Ava finally climbed out of bed. After a slow morning of eating breakfast in the dining nook, and a luxurious soak in the tub, she peered out the window and eyed the tiny flakes fluttering from the sky. A magical white wonderland awaited, as though someone had sprinkled a generous amount of icing sugar everywhere. Oh, how she could get used to the breathtaking view.

The sun was trying to break through the gray clouds by the time Ava was ready for the day. She stepped onto the porch

and paused. Another figurine sat on the railing. A lamb, this time. She picked it up, smoothed her fingers over the ridges in the wood and glanced at the etching on the bottom. *Redemption*. Who kept leaving the carvings? Perhaps she should return to the gift store and ask some more questions.

Tucking the figurine into her purse, she paused on the bottom step. Snow drifts banked on either side of her driveway, and the path leading from her car to the road had been cleared. Was that the odd scraping noise that had woken her? She shivered. Someone had definitely been to the cabin and onto the porch while she was asleep. Who? And why? Had they peered into any windows? Had they seen her? Could they get inside? Should she notify the sheriff?

MAIN STREET WAS QUIETER than usual when Ava drove into town. Only a few people were on the sidewalks as a snowplough slowly made its way along the street. Perhaps the overnight snowfall had kept everyone indoors. *Pick the tourist*, she chuckled. Still, she was determined to find a tree to liven up the living room of the cabin.

Giant red bows and baubles coordinated with large green boughs looped across the front entrance of the garden center. A nativity scene was front and center in the main window, and the fact there wasn't a Santa Claus in sight surprised her. Taped to the inside of the window was the same flyer advertising the Bethlehem event she'd seen in the gift store.

A gust of wind carried her inside, along with a small smattering of snowflakes. She removed her gloves, shoving them into her purse as she observed the store, trying not to let her jaw hit the floor. It was as though she'd stepped into a magical kingdom of Christmas trimmings. Wreaths, in a variety of sizes and materials. Baubles. Garland. Living Christmas trees. What was it with this town, and every store being so other-worldly and memorizing?

The garden center was more than just a plant shop. Various artisan wares and other items—candles, trinkets, and home decor—occupied the front section of the store. The delicious

aroma of freshly ground coffee beans wafted from a café that blended seamlessly into the back corner.

Just like the gift store, Ava didn't know where to start. So many beautiful items vied for her attention. Hand-poured candles. Notepads and other stationery items. Wind chimes. She could easily spend a fortune. And there, over in the corner by the front window...

She wound her way past some glass bottles and miniature plaques inscribed with inspirational words to a display of wooden figurines. Ava picked up a sparrow, admiring the details the artist had given the wings.

"Can I help you with anything?"

Ava glanced up and recognition dawned as the woman approached. Her blonde hair was in a neat ponytail, and she wore a cranberry-colored apron with the store's name embroidered on the front.

"Oh, we've met before. I'm Emma." The woman smiled.

"Yes, at the town green." Ava nodded. *Nate's girlfriend*. "I'm Ava. These carvings are gorgeous. I saw similar ones at the gift store in town. The owner couldn't tell me much about them, other than that they were from a supplier here in town." Should she mention the ones she'd discovered on her porch? That they kept appearing was a little concerning. Was some weirdo playing games with her? Perhaps it would be wise to mention, then if anything happened to her, at least someone would know there was something suspicious going on. "I've found two on the porch of the cabin where I'm staying."

Emma's eyes widened. "Oh, that's interesting."

Interesting indeed. "That's why I was curious about them. I don't know who's been leaving them. Whoever made them has an incredible gift." She returned the sparrow to the display.

"They sure do." Emma smiled. "Are you happy to continue browsing, or is there anything else I can help you with?"

"Actually, I'm looking for a small tree for the cabin where I'm staying. The living room's a little bare at the moment, and I need to liven it up."

“What’s Christmas without all the trimmings, right? Follow me.” Emma turned on her heel and led Ava through the store.

“This looks like a fantastic place to work,” Ava remarked, admiring the greenery and all the trinkets and gifts.

“It is. We love it.”

“I can see why. It’s magical.”

A few moments later, they arrived at a display of fir trees of various sizes. “Take as much time as you need. And just ask if you need any help.”

“Thank you, Emma.” Ava wandered through the aisles, her fingers brushing over the branches as she searched for the perfect tree. She finally settled on a cute fir with a pot wrapped in burlap. Carrying the tree on her hip, she paused by the display of carvings and selected another one for her growing collection.

“Have you any other plans while you’re in town?” Emma asked as Ava placed her selections on the counter.

“I saw the flyer for that Bethlehem thing, so I might go along to that. And I saw something about a gingerbread house workshop, which sounds like fun.”

“Oh, great. Definitely go to those.” Emma pulled out a small sheet of brown paper and folded it over the sparrow, securing it with a piece of tape. “The Bethlehem walk-through is at our church. We’re also hosting a week of Christmas meals if you’re still around. You’re more than welcome to come along.”

“Maybe I will.” Not having to prepare a meal sounded divine. Besides, it wasn’t like her schedule was jam-packed.

As Emma rang up her purchases, she glimpsed a familiar broad-shouldered figure weaving through the displays. Her pulse sped up. She’d been wondering when she’d see him again, and there he was.

“Would you mind if I caught up with Nate?” Ava gestured across the store as she paid for her purchases. “We’re old

friends.”

“Oh, I...” A brief frown creased Emma’s brow. “Of course not.”

“Thank you.” She made her way toward the exit, scanning the store to see if Nate was still around. With no sign of him, she crossed the parking lot and secured the tree on the front passenger seat of her car and set the other package on the floor.

“Ava.”

Nate’s smooth, deep voice startled her. She closed the door and turned. Wearing jeans, a flannel jacket and a black woolen cap, his attire made him look like most other men in Oakview Falls. But it was the dark shadow on his jaw, and the intensity in his blue eyes that made her feel like she was eighteen again, infatuated with her brother’s best friend. *No. He’s with Emma. Lord, forgive me.* She shook her treacherous thoughts away.

“I saw you inside, but then you disappeared. I was...”

“Would you like to go out for dinner tonight?” He asked, cutting her off.

“But...” She glanced across at the front windows of the garden center. Could Emma see them? Did she know Nate was asking her out for dinner? She wasn’t about to put herself into a situation that could have the potential to ruin a relationship or create gossip. “Is that okay with Emma?”

“Emma?” His head tilted to the side.

“Won’t she mind?” How could he not consider her feelings?

“I don’t think she cares who I go out for dinner with. She’ll be too busy with her husband to care about what I do.”

“Her...” Oh. So, he wasn’t in a relationship with Emma.

“And no, there’s no one else.”

Oh. Her insides leaped for joy as relief washed over her. *There’s no one else.* That meant that she could go out for dinner with him and not have to worry about small-town

rumor mills. “That would be nice,” she said. “Could we make it early? I have a thing at seven.”

“A thing?”

“I’m going to a gingerbread house building workshop.” She held her hands out and shrugged. She’d seen similar things advertised back home. They’d sounded fun, but she’d never had the time to go. “I thought I may as well make the most of the festivities while I’m here.” And make the most of any opportunity to catch up with Nate, now that she knew he wasn’t married or seeing anyone else. The thought that he was as free as a bird sent hope soaring.

A smirk twisted his lips. “That sounds...”

“Fun. It sounds like fun, Nate,” Ava said, dismissing his sarcasm. “Why don’t you come along? We can eat first and then go to the workshop.” Who was this bold woman suddenly making demands?

“You want me to do what?” He looked at her as if she’d asked him to wax his chest hairs.

“Make a gingerbread house. You’re a handyman, aren’t you? You’d be good at it.” She willed the nerves in her stomach to settle as she glanced around the parking lot.

Nate mumbled something under his breath. With hands on his hips, he tipped his head back, as though his answer was written in the gray clouds above. Cold, wet drops landed on Ava’s cheeks, and the faintest of plops sounded as they landed on her coat.

“Okay,” he finally huffed. “Okay. I’m game to feel emasculated for the sake of catching up with an old friend.” A deep chuckle rumbled in his chest.

“Great!” Ava’s thoughts whirled as she tried not to jump out of her skin. *Don’t overthink it. He’s agreed to go, and that’s enough. But he said friend! Surely, that has to mean something.*

After arranging to meet at the restaurant, Ava returned to the cabin, trying not to let her excitement get the better of her. Dinner and gingerbread house building. She could do that.

Lord, I pray that You'll give me an opportunity to seek Nate's forgiveness. I pray for courage to be honest with him, and not shy away from what You've asked me to do.

She didn't know what to expect from the evening. It could end up with Nate walking out on her again. And if all she came away with was an ill-formed gingerbread house, then so be it. At least the time together would be a little more progress than what they'd been making.

NATE



Gingerbread house making. What on earth had he been thinking?

Nate fastened the top button of his shirt and eyed his reflection in the mirror. After changing shirts several times, he'd finally settled on a dark blue plaid. Paired with jeans, his boots, and fleece jacket, he looked presentable. He ran a comb through his hair that was curling at his nape. Perhaps he ought to visit the barber soon. Should he shave? He eyed the stubble covering his jaw. Ugh. Since when had he started caring about his appearance? *Since Ava Treadwell went all sassy and suggested you make a gingerbread house.*

With her red scarf and cap, Ava stood out like a beacon in front of the Land of the Rising Bun. Her legs marched up and down in the cold, and each breath elicited a small cloud in the air. Nate glanced at his watch. He was five minutes early. How long had she been waiting? Poor thing must be freezing.

"You have to stop being so early," he remarked, holding the door open for her. Warmth enveloped them as they stepped inside and removed their jackets.

"I can't help it. It's ingrained in me. Besides, being late is so disrespectful."

"I agree." Running his own business taught him the value of time and integrity.

Ava unwound the scarf from her neck and shook out her hair. The scent of vanilla drifted toward him as loose brown curls like reams of silk floated around her shoulders. Nate ran

a hand over his jaw, averting his attention to the server gesturing toward a table near the front window.

They placed their orders, and the tension eased from Nate's shoulders as they talked. What his day was like. What she'd filled her time with. Mention of Mrs. Spinks's cat. Ava's Christmas decorating. How she'd discovered where he was living. It differed from the last time they'd eaten together. It was somehow easier.

Perhaps God was softening his heart. Perhaps it was the words from Mrs. Spinks on repeat—*Live without regret*. Or maybe it had something to do with the woman seated before him who sparked a warmth inside that he hadn't felt in years. Whatever the reason, he wasn't complaining because each moment with Ava was feeling like old times.

“Are you married Ava?” *Whoa. Where did that come from? Talk about getting straight to the point.* The startled look on Ava's face revealed she was thinking the same thing.

Nate gulped some water, using the moment to gather his sanity that seemed to have vanished the moment he saw her standing out the front of the restaurant. “I apologize for my bluntness.” He wasn't usually so candid. Reserved, yes. Nosy, no.

“No, it's okay.” She shook her head. “It's a valid question. Fifteen years is a long time between friends.”

Yes, it was. And it would've been a lot less if he hadn't made the biggest mistake of his life.

Ava drew a deep breath before turning her gaze to his. “I was married. But it didn't work out. It ended two years ago.”

“I'm sorry to hear that.” Ava was divorced? What about children? He didn't know where to begin or what else to say. What had happened? Whoever he was, was a fool to let her go.

“It's for the best, now. I learned many lessons and have realized it was all a part of God's plan for bringing me to where I am now. Not that divorce is what God wants, but I wasn't a believer then.”

Hope flared in his chest at the mention of her faith. He'd witnessed her interlude of grace both times before their meals, and he was curious. "How long have you been a believer?"

"Not long after Rhett walked out on me. So, close to two years." Her eyes shimmered and a gentle smile touched her lips.

"That's incredible." Nate's heart ached for her marriage breakdown, but rejoiced with her salvation. He searched Ava's face, as though seeing her through a new lens. A friendship was special, but sharing a faith added an extra dimension of meaning. *A cord of three strands is not easily broken.* How he wish he'd known God all those years ago.

"It really is. You know, Andrew and my parents used to talk about God all the time, but I wasn't ready to listen."

"Yeah, your brother did that with me, too." Nate tugged a hand through his hair. He recalled his best friend reading his small black leather-bound Bible by flashlight. His gentle words as he shared his faith, encouraging him to find salvation before it was too late. Nate had been too high on life to even consider God back then. And when he hit rock bottom, the only time he thought about God was to blame him for his pitiful circumstances.

Nate was thankful it hadn't been too late for Andrew, even though he was wholly to blame for his best friend's death. Looking back, he could see God's hand of protection over his life, even when he wasn't a believer. He was eternally grateful his Heavenly Father pulled him from the pit of despair to give him a second chance.

"And now?" Ava's bright eyes, swimming with hope, met his. Full of something that reached inside him, thawing places that had been frozen for years.

"I surrendered my life to the Lord about a year ago. Not long after moving to Oakview Falls." Psalm 40 had become his life's scripture. God had certainly lifted him from the pit of despair, literally out of the mud, and set his feet on solid ground.

“That’s... I’m so happy for you, Nate.” Ava’s smile beamed like the summer sun, bathing everything around her with its warmth and radiance. He wanted to capture the essence of her unabashed joy and tuck it into his memory for the nights when shame and regret threatened to pull him into a dark abyss. Her eyes shone, and suddenly, he was that twenty-year-old guy again. Untouchable. Full of life. On the cusp of something amazing.

Ava’s phone buzzed. And in that moment, her bubble of joy burst as she glanced at the screen. Her brow furrowed, her spark faded, and Nate wondered if he’d only imagined her delight from moments earlier.

“Excuse me. I should take this.” With shoulders slumped, she slid out of the booth, leaving Nate to wonder if never finishing a meal together was going to become a regular thing.

AVA



“Hi, Rhett.” Ava’s voice was devoid of emotion as she answered her phone, glancing across the restaurant to where Nate sat alone. She was in two minds to end the call and return to the table to resume their conversation. Why had she answered Rhett’s call when she and Nate had been making some ground? She’d ignored Felix’s calls, so why not this one? Why was Rhett even calling her? The last time they’d spoken had been to sort out some furniture before he moved out of their house. Everything else had been communicated through their lawyers. So why now, after all this time? Surely, there was nothing left to sort out. That part of her life was over.

“I know it seems strange of me to call you, Ava.”

She grunted in reply. Strange was one way of putting it.

“I’m calling about Scarlett.”

“Who?”

“My daughter.”

“Right.” Ava slumped against the wall. His words sliced through her resolve. His daughter. The one with his new wife. The daughter that could’ve been hers. She kneaded her brow. No. She would not fall down the rabbit hole of envy and self-pity. The past was behind her, and it was a blessing a child wasn’t part of their messy divorce. Still, she obviously had some hurts to overcome.

“She’s unwell, and I’m not sure what to do.”

“And you’re calling me because?” What happened to Evelyn? No, that wasn’t her name. Eva. Eve.

“Everleigh’s away with some girlfriends.”

Right. Everleigh.

“So, call her.”

“I have. She’s not answering. You are the only person I thought of who could help.” Desperation and apology laced his tone. And she could imagine him running a hand through his fine blond hair while he paced. This call would kill him. Rhett never asked for help, or admitted when he was wrong.

At one point in time, Ava may have felt a smug sense of satisfaction that he’d thought of her. That he still needed her. That his new wife couldn’t help. But she was beyond that now. There was no point being petty or playing games when they were both adults. Besides, God had softened her heart. Who was she to deny her ex the same grace that had been extended to her by her Heavenly Father?

“What’s wrong?” Pinching the bridge of her nose, she listened as Rhett informed her of Scarlett’s symptoms. Coughing. Wheezing. Crying. Why he’d called her and not a clinic was beyond her. It was nice that he’d considered her after the pain and animosity they shared. But where was his common sense? What was he expecting her to do?

“You need to call the hospital or urgent care,” Ava said, moving to stand in front of a colorful abstract painting in the lobby. “With the colder weather, it could be viral, or it could be asthma, or something else. I’m not a doctor and I’m not there to see what’s happening. If she worsens, call 911.”

“You’re right. I’m sorry to bother you. I was just...”

“Scared. Worried. I understand.” Two years ago, she wouldn’t have been so gracious. Her self-control would’ve snapped, and she probably would’ve said some unsavory things to him.

“Thanks, Ava. I ...”

“Go look after your daughter, Rhett.”

Ava's breath whooshed out of her as she clutched the phone to her chest. Hearing Rhett's voice after all this time was strange, to say the least. That he called her for help - she didn't know what to make of that.

"Is everything okay?"

Straightening her shoulders, Ava turned at the sound of Nate's voice. He walked toward her, holding out her jacket.

"Thanks," she murmured, sliding her arms into the sleeves. "It was Rhett. My ex. After all this time, he suddenly needs my help."

Nate held the door open for her to step outside while Ava looped her scarf around her neck and tugged on her gloves. "I'm sorry, Nate. I didn't mean to interrupt our evening. It's just..." She glanced up, hoping he wasn't annoyed at her for taking the call and disrupting their meal. She'd been enjoying their conversation and the hearing the joyous news of Nate's salvation. "I haven't spoken to Rhett since our marriage ended. He called and asked what he should do about his baby."

"He didn't think to ask the mother? Or someone else?"

"I asked him the same thing. I was a nurse before I changed careers, so perhaps he thought I could help." She outlined her conversation with Rhett and was surprised to discover that it no longer hurt to talk about him like it used to. Gone was the bitterness and jealousy and disappointment over broken dreams and broken vows. It was only with God's grace that she'd been able to forgive him.

"He was lucky to have you." Nate cupped her elbow, moving her away from the road and the spray of sludge as a car drove by.

Ava's abrupt laugh stabbed the air. Lucky? Tell that to Rhett. "Yes, well, I'd rather not let my failures ruin our evening." She smiled, admiring the sharp planes of his face in the streetlight's warm glow. He really was a handsome man. That hadn't changed.

Their warm breaths smoked on the air as they walked toward the community building that was also home to the

library, some offices, and a function room. As they crossed the street, her shoulder brushed against Nate's arm, and she caught herself just in time before she reached for his hand. It had been second nature, once. They'd shared a once-in-a-lifetime familiarity, where Nate would casually drape an arm over her shoulder when they were at the beach with friends. Or wrap her up in a bear hug and swing her around until she begged for him to release her. Their affections for one another had been completely platonic. Until ...

"Is this where we're going?" Ava tugged on Nate's arm, pointing to a sandwich board on the sidewalk announcing the gingerbread house workshop.

"Looks like it. I guess it's time to be put to shame."

"Stop it." Ava laughed at his theatrics, playfully slapping his chest as he held the door open for her. "It will be fun. Where's your optimism?"

"I'm a realist." He arched an eyebrow as they entered the function room, where tables laden with bowls of candy and edible decorations were grouped together. A sea of predominantly white and gray hair filled the room, causing Nate's eyes to bug. Dorothy, from The Chilly Bean café was dressed in an elf costume, complete with a pointy hat, striped stockings and oversized green spectacles.

"Nate and Ava! Welcome to our gingerbread house workshop! Find a seat and have fun," she greeted them.

"Thanks, Dorothy," Nate mumbled, shuffling his feet as Ava led him into the room.

"Come on, Mr. Handyman. Let's see what you've got." They greeted the other people at their table, and before long, were busy assembling their houses.

"How's business, Nate?" one woman asked, digging into her bowl of candy.

"Keeping me out of mischief," Nate said.

"That's good to hear. Although, I wouldn't mind seeing you in a bit of mischief." The woman winked, and the other women at the table snickered.

Ava pressed her lips together as a deep shade of pink crept up Nate's neck to the tips of his ears. Funny how someone pushing seventy could make him blush.

Soon, conversation flowed freely, and the ease with which Nate interacted with everyone, as though they'd all known each other for years, enthralled Ava. It was strange witnessing this side of him, and it was obvious the women respected him and enjoyed his company. Something akin to pride or admiration tugged in her chest for the new life that he'd forged for himself.

"Whoa. What have you done there?" Nate pointed to her construction that looked more like a dilapidated shack than a neat house. Blobs of white icing clung to the roof. Peppermint swirl candies were sliding off the chimney. The door hung at an odd angle.

"I'm not good at construction." She reached for some candy at the same time as him, bumping the dish. Bright colored candies spilled onto the table.

"Sorry." He laughed, popping an M&M into his mouth.

"I can't take you anywhere." She grinned, scooping them up and sticking some to her less-than-perfect house. "But at least your effort is better than mine. You could go into business. Maybe sell some in town."

"No, thanks. I already feel less manly about being here."

"I think it probably makes you more manly, being the only male in the room," Ava whispered. "Some of these women seem to be quite excited about that fact."

It was all she could do not to burst out laughing as a look of horror descended over his features. "I'm joking, Nate." Had she overstepped a line?

He reached up and tweaked her ear, as he'd so often done when they were young. "I see you are still a tease," he hissed.

Ava glanced around the room, wondering if anyone had noticed their bantering. Were the older women of Oakview Falls prone to gossip? Were she and Nate going to be talked

about over peppermint fudge and cups of cocoa? Oh, well. Let them think what they liked.

Despite all life had thrown their way-Nate with his homelessness, and her with her misguided focus and marriage breakdown-it was good to laugh with each other again. God was good, and she was thankful for the walls crumbling between them.

As the evening drew to a close, they boxed up their completed houses, ready to collect the following day.

“I don’t know what you were so worried about,” Mrs. Elf, aka Dorothy, said as Nate slid his box onto the table at the front of the room. “Perhaps you could come and help teach a class. I need a Mr. Elf.”

“I-I-I’m quite busy,” Nate stammered, his cheeks flaming bright pink once more. Ava sniggered and slipped past Nate to escape his fan club. He really had the women of Oakview Falls tripping over their feet to speak with him.

“Here’s Mr. Popular,” she said, as he finally joined her outside.

“Hilarious.” He looked most unimpressed as he tugged on his cap, leaving strands of dark hair poking out at odd angles.

“Well, for all you’ve been through, Nate, I’d say you’ve made some good friends here.” *Does he have room for one more?* She silenced her inner voice as they walked back to the restaurant where they’d left their vehicles. There would be time to ponder that question later.

“Thanks for a lovely evening, Nate. I had a wonderful time.” Ava clicked the fob on her keys and turned to face her evening’s companion.

“I had a great time, too,” he said, reaching out to tuck a strand of hair behind her ear.

His fingertips brushed her skin, and her cheeks blazed at his touch. A nervous laugh bubbled out. “I’m sure that was difficult for you to admit.” Although she sensed he was speaking the truth. Despite his protestations, he seemed to enjoy himself. The ease of their conversation and good-

natured jesting reminded her of halcyon days with Nate and Andrew.

And with one thought of her brother, her elated spirits plummeted. She was here for closure, not to get caught up in fanciful daydreams about her brother's best friend.

"I should go," she murmured.

Tiny white flakes settled on Nate's woolen cap and coat. His eyes glistened and his cheeks were flushed. From the cold or from exhilaration, she didn't know. As tempted as she was to press up on her toes and kiss his stubbled cheek like she would've done without hesitation years ago, she resisted.

A fun night out did not mean she could get carried away and forget all about what she came here for.

AVA



Daydreams of gingerbread houses and the memory of Nate's fingers brushing her cheek filled Ava's head as she hiked the forest trail near her cabin. Icicles hung from branches, shimmering in the winter sun like precious jewels. Her feet crunched over the ground and her lungs burned in the frigid air.

It was silly to dwell on the way Nate swept the strands of hair from her face. Although only a fleeting gesture, his light touch had been like wildfire and had transported her back fifteen years when he'd tenderly traced over her cheek, and toyed with the strands of her hair as they'd sat at the lookout watching dawn bathe the city in gold. Even after all they'd shared, it was an intimate moment, and one that she'd treasured for far too long.

She wondered if Andrew ever knew about them. Had Nate told him? Andrew had mentioned nothing over the years, so perhaps he was none the wiser about his best friend and sister.

Ava brushed the dampness from her cheek. It didn't matter now, because Andrew was no longer with them. She needed to focus on what happened with her brother, and not on the silly nostalgia Nate was unearthing.

"IT WAS good to see Nate out socializing last night," Dorothy said, sliding Ava's cinnamon latte across the counter. The delicious hot drink that tasted like Christmas was becoming quite an addiction.

“He was reluctant to go,” Ava said, eyeing the rack of cinnamon rolls in the display cabinet, tempting her to buy another bag and surprise Nate at his office again.

“Well, it was good of you to convince him to come along.”

“I think he had fun. I did. That’s the first time I’ve made a gingerbread house. Which is obvious.” She chuckled. Her house, which she’d collected prior to stopping by The Chilly Bean café, looked like a blizzard had slammed into it. Lopsided and a mess of icing, at least the candies and the gingerbread would make for a delicious snack. Never mind the extra calories.

“You should come along again next year,” Dorothy said, pouring a bag of coffee beans into the grinder.

Next year. Ava couldn’t even think beyond Christmas *this* year. Who knew what could happen in twelve months? This time next year, she would probably be back home, yearning for another vacation to escape the heavy work demands of her boss.

“We’ll see,” she replied, refusing to entertain daydreams of spending another Christmas in Oakview Falls, despite how wonderful that would be.

ANOTHER FIGURINE CAUGHT her eye when Ava returned to the cabin. Cradling the box with her gingerbread house, she carefully stooped down to pick up the carving, a lamb this time, and carried it inside, placing it on the mantle alongside the growing collection. The number of animals now gathered around baby Jesus made the nativity scene look more realistic. She smiled wistfully, wondering who was leaving the wooden carvings for her. Someone who didn’t want to get caught.

After spending most of the day reading and nibbling on gingerbread, Ava ventured back into town for the afternoon’s festivities. Following the signs, she parked in the designated parking lot and followed the line of people queuing at the church hall. Roman centurions, complete with helmets and swords, strolled by. Two donkeys brayed in a straw-filled pen

near the entrance. The smell of hay and animals and baking bread filled the air.

“One at a time. Register for the census here,” a Roman guard called as the line shuffled forward.

Ava tugged her scarf around her neck, smiling at the role-play and themed set display, with stalls, animal pens, and guards wandering through the crowd.

Each stall told a story. Some depicted a family from Biblical times, with a man, woman and child eating a meal on the ground. A woman was kneading bread in another. Some of the canvas tents were market stalls, where people were selling their wares. Pottery. Leather goods. Wooden toys. The noise from the vendors calling out to the crowd amplified the experience.

“Two silver coins,” someone called as Ava approached another stall. Her gaze drifted over the table, and she frowned. Wooden figurines, similar to the ones left on her front porch, were displayed on the table.

“Do you like these? Two silver coins to buy one.” A bearded man dressed in a robe gestured to the dish of coins on the table.

“I do,” Ava said. “In fact...” She glanced up to discover Nate sitting on a stool at the back of the tent whittling some timber. Wood curls and sawdust collected at his feet.

Stepping away from the line of people shuffling through the makeshift marketplace, she lifted a hand and waved. “I think I know you from somewhere in the future. Like, two thousand plus years from now.” She rolled her eyes at her lame attempt at humor. It had sounded much better in her head.

Dressed in a burlap robe over the top of his sweater and jeans, with an apron tied around his waist, he glanced up. His large hands paused, and a wry grin formed on his lips. He stood, brushing off his hands, and made his way to her. “Do we like each other?”

He smelled of wood shavings and pine, and the low timbre in his voice made her pulse stutter. “I—I think so.”

“Good.”

She lowered her gaze, not wanting to interpret the intensity of his. “This is such a great idea. It gives us an insight into what it might have been like back when Jesus was born.” As much as Biblical times could be interpreted with a western influence.

“Yeah.”

“And look at you.” She risked a glance, waving a hand his way. “That kind of getup suits you.” How was it fair that Nate could make anything look good?

“This old thing?” Nate chuckled.

“Is it a popular label?” Ava teased. Better to jest in self-preservation than try to read into his earlier comment about liking each other. His question had thrown her, and she didn’t know what to make of it. “These figurines are amazing. They look similar to the ones I’ve seen in the gift store and the garden center.”

“The handiwork of our Nate here.” Nate’s stall buddy with the busy beard slapped him on the back.

“Hang on.” Ava frowned, glancing from the figurines back to Nate. “You made these?” She picked up a lion and turned it over. *Redemption.*

“Yeah.”

“Nate!” Ava gasped. “These are extraordinary. I didn’t know you could do this. First the gingerbread house, then these figurines. You’re amazing.” She shook her head in wonder, realizing how little she knew about him. When had he learned to be so creative?

“Just something I taught myself.” He shrugged, digging a half-finished carving and whittling knife from the pocket of his apron.

“They are incredible.” She tossed two silver coins into the dish on the table to pay for the lion. A few more people

gathered around, paying their compliments to Nate.

Tucking the carving into her purse, she waved goodbye and continued browsing the stalls. But none of the other creations compared to Nate's intricate carvings. She still couldn't believe he made them. There were many layers to Nate Hollister that she didn't know about.

For the next half hour, Ava wandered around the Bethlehem town and selected a few items to take home. An earthen pottery dish for Shayla, her work colleague. A leather key chain for Jess, one of her friends from church.

"Ava!"

She turned at the entrance to the animal pen and smiled as Emma, dressed in a long robe with a blue corded belt around her middle, approached.

"You came."

"Of course," Ava smiled. "It's fantastic. How long has it been going for?" The concept was simple and fun, and without all the garish trimmings that came with Christmas concerts and events back home. Returning to the humble roots of Bethlehem, although pretend, drew her into the spirit of Christmas and its true meaning, more than the polished performances of the carols she attended each year.

"This is our third year running the program," Emma said, moving aside as a mother and son stepped over to pat the sheep. "I thought people might get sick of it after the second year, but it's proven to be popular. Plus, it's a great way to share the gospel message with everyone."

"It sure is." Ava darted a glance at a screen playing a clip of the Christmas story. "It's all so authentic. I loved the animals and the guards. And everything, really! And I had no idea Nate made those figurines. They're incredible."

"Yes, he's very clever. It really helps him." Emma cupped Ava's elbow, moving them out of the way from a passing family.

"Helps him?" Ava tilted her head.

“It helps keep his mind occupied.”

Ava nodded, although she didn't fully understand. She hadn't discovered that layer of Nate yet, and felt a twinge of jealousy that Emma knew more about her old friend than she did.

There was still so much about Nate that was unknown. What she thought she knew barely scratched the surface of who he was now. Would she be here long enough to get to know him all over again, and then some? She hoped so.

NATE



“Ava!” Nate jogged across the parking lot to catch up with the gorgeous brunette who was occupying more of his headspace each day.

She turned, her face lighting up as he approached. “You’ve finished?”

“For now.” He stopped near the front of her Jeep. There were enough people running the program that they wouldn’t miss a woodcarver sitting in the back of the stall. Besides, there were enough figurines on display that they weren’t about to run out soon. He rubbed his hands together, shoving them into the pockets of his fleece jacket he’d remembered to grab before chasing Ava outside.

Her vivid eyes gazed up at him, full of something he couldn’t identify. “I didn’t know you were so talented. I mean, you’ve always been talented, but to teach yourself how to carve wood like that is something else. Something I imagine an old man doing while smoking a pipe, or telling stories to his grandchildren.”

“Oh, so you’re calling me old?”

“Well...” Her lips curved into a teasing grin, and he was tempted to trace the creases at the corner of her mouth to see how soft her skin was.

Voices carried across the parking lot, pulling Nate’s thoughts back into line. A small group of people exited the hall chatting excitedly about the Bethlehem experience.

With an hour to go of the program, Nate didn't want to say goodbye to Ava. "Do you want to get a drink and go for a walk?" he blurted, not wanting to pass on the opportunity to spend more time with her.

"Sure."

His breath whooshed out at her acceptance as he waited for her to put her purchases in the car. He'd steeled himself for a rejection. An excuse that she had other plans, or wanted to spend the evening alone.

Ava turned and brushed her hand over the front of his jacket. "Wood shavings," she said as he jarred at her touch.

"They get into everything," he said, as they strolled across to a pop-up food stall. He paid for some hot chocolates and they continued toward the town green where the Christmas tree stood tall in all its glory, its lights twinkling against the night.

"Like glitter." Ava laughed. "Especially at this time of year when everything is coated in it."

"I know, right? Whoever invented that stuff must have the last laugh."

He swept a layer of snow off a bench seat before they sat—close enough that her sweet vanilla and citrus scent filled his senses, but with enough room between them to maintain the boundary of friendship.

"Did you leave those figurines on my porch?" Ava shifted on the seat, her knees whispering close to his. So much for that boundary.

He swallowed. "What figurines?"

"The same ones as your wooden carvings. Someone left a deer and a lamb on my porch. I thought someone was stalking me. It was a little creepy finding them at first, but they're quite endearing."

Oh. He hadn't meant to scare her. "Sorry."

"Huh. So it was you. At least I can sleep at night now, knowing there's not some creep out there in the woods I need

to worry about.” She nudged him, almost spilling his hot chocolate. “Can I ask why?”

Nate leaned forward, clasping his cup between his hands. Why had he left those figurines there? “Because I wanted to. Because...” He’d wanted to make her smile. He’d imagined the joy, or at least the surprise, of her discovering them. Ten years ago, he’d taken something from her, and although nothing could bring her brother back, doing something small for her made him feel good. In hindsight, it was a silly gesture.

“Thank you, Nate.” Her gloved hand closed over his forearm. If only they weren’t wearing so many layers. He longed to feel her touch on his skin again. “They are very special.”

“You’re welcome.”

“Can I ask how you got started with whittling? I don’t remember you being a boy scout.”

“Self-defense.” He glanced at her as her eyebrows dipped into a frown. “I carried a knife with me while I was living on the streets. Just in case.” Thankfully, he’d never had to use it. Never wanted to. It was there as a threat, more than anything. Sure, he’d been set upon while sleeping and beaten a couple of times. But at that point in his life, he hadn’t cared whether he lived or died.

Ava’s sharp intake of breath reminded him that this was still new for her. She was still unaware of the darkest moments in his life.

“Nate,” she said, “that breaks my heart. Serving our country was bad enough, but to come home and...” Her eyes glistened as she shook her head. “I’m sorry you thought you had nowhere else to go.”

“I didn’t.” He sucked in a few calming breaths. He’d never wanted to see his foster families again, and he didn’t return to Connecticut, knowing how devastated Ava and her parents would be. It was his fault Andrew didn’t come home with him.

Guilt was a parasite that ate away at him over the years. Though he spent most of his time in a constant haze of

inebriation, Ava was never far from his mind. Her youthful smile was etched into his memory, and he clung to that sliver of delight on those long, lonely nights where darkness and a bottle of bourbon were his only friends. He vowed to never alter the memory of her smile, or be the one to destroy it, which was why he'd remained away.

“What happened, Nate?” Ava’s gentle words wove through the tangled web of his thoughts.

Cheery Christmas music piped from the speakers around the town green, taking him back to that awful day that changed the trajectory of his life, and that of the woman sitting beside him.

“We were on a routine patrol through a village,” he began, clenching one hand into a fist. Singing along with the tinny sounds of Christmas music playing in the truck had both him and Andrew in stitches. Andrew had impersonated Dean Martin, while Nate had sung a falsetto rendition of Mariah Carey. “Andrew was excited about his next trip home, and catching up with a girl he’d started seeing at his church.”

Ava nodded. “Sally. She was so sweet. They met when he came home once, and they kept in touch.”

And yet another person whose life he’d destroyed. Would it never end? “I was planning on coming home with him that Christmas. I wanted to surprise your parents. And I secretly hoped you’d be around.” He didn’t miss the flicker of surprise on her face. But instead of coming home and celebrating, Andrew came home in a body bag while he ended up with a leg full of shrapnel.

“You didn’t make it.” Her words were soft, but carried the weight of his transgression.

“I jumped out to speak with the contact in the town we were passing through when I heard gunfire and an explosion. A vehicle in our convoy was under siege, and I called out to Andrew to remain in the vehicle and get down while I covered the building.” A tremor ran through him with the memory. The clay brick building. The taste of dust on his tongue. The unusual combination of smells in the air—spices and something

burning. His urgency, screaming at Andrew to stay. But he either hadn't heard, or ignored Nate's warning. His best friend was an open target as he crossed the road.

Nate ran a hand over his face, trying to erase the memories of that day. The high-pitched ringing in his ears. The stench of blood and burning flesh. The chaos that ensued. Andrew wasn't the only one to die that day, but he should never have been with Nate to begin with. Nate had requested Andrew to join the convoy to make up numbers, and in doing so, had signed his friend's death certificate.

Nate swiped a hand over his eyes, stinging from the cold air and his tears. He couldn't bear to share any more details with Ava. He'd already failed her in the worst possible way.

"You're not to blame, Nate." She shifted on the bench so that their knees touched. She rested a hand over his, stilling his clenching fist. "It wasn't your fault."

"He didn't listen to me. I was screaming at him to stay where he was, but he got out of the truck." Emotion clogged his throat as images of that awful morning played like a movie reel in his mind. A never-ending loop of death. "You weren't there. I could've saved him. I should've told him not to come with me. I could've done more." He'd ruined so many lives. Andrew's. Ava's. Their parent's. His own.

"You couldn't have known he was going to die." Her hand moved to his shoulder, where she rubbed soothing circles to comfort him.

"But it's my fault he did," Nate spat.

"Nate."

"No." He angled his body away from her. Away from her touch. He didn't deserve her comfort. Not when he'd taken so much from her. "I destroyed everything that day. Your family. Andrew's future. You. I couldn't come home and face the reality of everything I ruined."

"And so, what, you gave up?" Ava's tone turned accusatory.

"Yes. I wanted to die."

“But you didn’t.”

No, he hadn’t. He could have so easily put an end to his misery, but he couldn’t bring himself to do it. In some warped idea of penance, he’d *wanted* to suffer for what he’d done. He didn’t want to take the coward’s way out. For allowing his best friend to die, he deserved to suffer. But then, his life had changed. He blew out a shaky breath. “I’m glad I didn’t, because Emma and Dylan introduced me to Jesus.”

“I’m so glad you didn’t either, Nate. Your life has purpose.”

Ava’s words were a soothing balm to his wounded soul, and not what he expected. He hadn’t expected her gentleness. She’d never been an angry person, but he would understand if she’d been hostile toward him about her brother. He would understand her rejection.

“I’m so sorry, Ava,” he rasped, ignoring the warm tears trickling down his cheek. “Will you forgive me?”

“I forgive you for not reaching out sooner,” she said, placing her cup on the seat beside her and tucking her hands between her knees. “As for Andrew’s death, that was out of your control. There’s nothing to forgive there, because you didn’t cause it. There’s always a risk with serving our country, and you both knew that when you signed up. Not a day goes by that I don’t miss him, but I’m grateful I will see him again. But...”

His heart sank as he braced for her to say that she never wanted to see him again. It was fair. And he could understand her reasoning. It would hurt. But time would move on, and he’d get over the hurt of her rejection. He’d survived this long without seeing her. *But will you survive any longer without her in your life?*

“But I’m mad at you for throwing away all those years of your life. That makes me so sad, Nate. And mad. Gosh, if you’d only reached out...”

If he’d only reached out, then he wouldn’t have spent the past decade on the streets. If he’d only reached out, then he

would've seen Ava and Andrew's parents before they passed away.

"I couldn't, Ava. And I'm so sorry." No amount of apologizing or regret would change things. He couldn't get those years back, but he'd been trying so hard to make the most of his life since becoming sober. God had given him a new lease on life, and he was trying his best to live a life of gratitude. It wasn't easy, and every day was a challenge. But he was moving forward. His handyman business in small-town Oakview Falls may not be much by worldly standards, but for him, it was everything.

An arm wrapped around his shoulders, and woolen fingers wiped over his wet cheeks. Nate's body tensed before relaxing into Ava's embrace. It had been years since he'd been this close to her, and it felt good to be hugged. He'd missed her physical touch. He'd missed *her*. He lowered his head, resting it on hers. Her woolen cap tickled his cheek, and her delicious fragrance wafted around him, taking him back to a time when life was without all its complications and heartache.

"I'm glad I found you again," she murmured.

"I'm glad you did, too."

Despite the years of darkness and self-loathing, one person had always remained in the recesses of his mind. Ava. With her emerald eyes, and her smile that reminded him of flowers blooming in springtime, he'd never forgotten the one person who meant the world to him.

AVA



After drying their eyes and tossing their empty cups into the trashcan, Ava and Nate strolled around town with the ease of a lifetime of friendship. The years between their last rendezvous flitted away, and Nate's walls crumbled with his revelation of what happened to Andrew.

Ava's heart ached for the man walking beside her. For the wasted years of his life. For his loneliness. For the man who'd felt so helpless. But with God, nothing was wasted. And He'd taken Nate's brokenness to work a miraculous healing from the inside out. And she felt privileged to witness the result of his transformation.

As much as she missed her brother, she knew without a doubt she would see him again. His confession of faith long before she'd acknowledged Christ as her own savior assured her of that. If Andrew's death had somehow been a catalyst to Nate's salvation, then it truly was an example of one man laying his life down for another.

God worked all things for His glory. Every person was an intricate fragment in God's masterpiece—each with a purpose and perfect fit in His intricate design. She would see Andrew again. And her heart soared, knowing that Nate would, too.

Her emotions had endured a roller-coaster of ups and downs as Nate shared more about his time serving alongside her brother. She laughed at some antics the brothers-in-arms had gotten up to. And she'd sobered when he spoke of the atrocities he'd seen.

The spark she felt as an eighteen-year-old flared to life somewhere between the town green and the church parking lot as they strolled back to their vehicles. But she couldn't allow it to flourish. Not when her own burden was weighing heavily on her mind. Nate had been vulnerable with her, so why couldn't she do the same? Why couldn't she apologize to him?

"Would you like to do something tomorrow?" Nate turned to her when they reached her Jeep.

Ava fumbled in her purse for her keys. "Don't you have to work?"

A slow grin graced his features as he shook his head. "I cleared my schedule."

"When?"

"Now."

"That's quite presumptuous." She looked at him in amusement.

"The perks of being my own boss."

"That must be nice." She opened the door and tossed her purse onto the passenger seat. What would it be like if she were her own boss? It had been her dream once, but it was snuffed out when she'd signed her divorce papers. What would it be like not having Felix breathing down her neck all the time? Just the thought of returning to her office put a bitter taste in her mouth. Tension gripped her neck and shoulders at the thought of all the meetings and emails and deadlines that awaited her. She sighed. Just because everything about Oakview Falls was enchanting and wonderful, didn't mean she had to get caught up in silly daydreams or fantasies. Reality awaited her back in Connecticut.

"I only have one job, anyway. It won't take long."

"Okay." Ava nodded. She ran the toe of her boot across the ground, refusing to pay attention to the tender stirrings in her chest. "So, Mr. Boss Man, what did you have in mind?"

"It's a surprise."

“Which means you don’t know.” She laughed, sliding into the car.

“I’ll pick you up tomorrow at four.”

Fixing her seatbelt into place, Ava glanced up at Nate as he leaned against the door. “Thanks for sharing your story with me earlier, Nate. It means a lot.”

A smile ghosted his lips, and he mumbled something under his breath before closing her door.

As Ava drove home, she tried to tamp down the excitement billowing in her chest. She couldn’t get too carried away. She’d come here for two things. One down. One to go. And there was no room for her heart to get involved.

NATE



*I*t's not a date. *It's not a date.* Nate eyed his reflection in the mirror. His jeans, sweater, and coat were his standard attire. And his black woolen cap was a permanent fixture on his head. Should he wear a scarf or not? He didn't want to look like a schmuck. He'd worn them when living on the streets, raiding the charity bins for someone's cast-offs, to keep the icy fingers of winter from slithering down his neck. Now he only wore one if there was a blizzard. Besides, they made his neck sweat, and he didn't want to gross Ava out. *It's not a date*, he reminded himself, yet again.

The sky was deep purple by the time Nate pulled his pickup into the driveway of Ava's cabin. Twinkle lights glistened from the front windows, and he couldn't help but smile at how cozy and inviting it was.

His stomach flipped about as he strode up the path. A wreath, complete with holly and red bows, adorned the front door. He knocked, and just as quickly, tucked his hands into his pockets, trying to steady his rapid-fire heartbeat. Footsteps approached, and the door swung open.

He opened his mouth to speak, but the words lodged in his throat at the sight of Ava standing before him. Her casual jeans and boots matched his. She wore a crimson coat and matching cap. Like silk, her chestnut hair fell in waves over her shoulders. But it was the sheer happiness on her face that rendered him speechless. Her green eyes, flecked with gold, emanated such joy and kindness that burrowed beneath his layers of self-protectiveness. Her pink lips tipped into a heart-

stopping smile that could melt the coldest of hearts. Beautiful, beautiful Ava.

Finding his voice, he cleared his throat. "Shall we?"

"Sure." She locked the door, pulling it closed.

"You look nice," Nate said gruffly, chiding himself for sounding like a terrified teenager on his first date. *Nice? That's so vanilla. This is Ava. Beautiful. Stunning. Gorgeous. But it's not a date. Remember?*

"Thanks. As do you." She climbed into his truck, leaving her signature scent in her wake, and it was all Nate could do not to bury his nose in her hair and inhale.

With a silent pep talk, he rounded the truck and climbed into the cab.

"Where are we going?" Ava turned his way as he backed out the driveway.

"Somewhere in town."

"There are a lot of places in town." She laughed, the sound a pleasing melody to his ears. Who needed the stereo when Ava's laugh would suffice? "I've discovered that Oakview Falls is quite the surprise. Who knew small towns had so much to offer? Not to mention all the interesting people I've met."

"Oh, yes." Nate chuckled, sliding a glance her way as he hit the open road toward town. "There are plenty of interesting people." His thoughts turned to Mrs. Spinks. Would Ava be here long enough to meet the widow?

And that's when he came crashing back to earth. Ava would leave all too soon. She'd come to find out about her brother, and now that she knew what happened to Andrew, there was no reason for her to stay. Why was he even thinking she would? Why was he entertaining thoughts of impossible dreams?

"We're here." Nate pulled his pickup to a stop after what felt like an eternity in his claustrophobic truck.

"Already?" Ava peered through her window toward a thicket of trees.

“Small town, remember?” He jumped from the truck and rounded the hood to open her door.

They were partway across the parking lot when Ava stopped and gasped. “Pinch me,” she said, tucking her hand into the crook of his arm. “Am I dreaming? Or am I really in a magical winter wonderland?”

Nate chuckled. He’d deliberately parked facing in the opposite direction so she wouldn’t see where they were. Once past the parking bays, hundreds of lights twinkled against the fading light. A few people gathered around an outdoor fire pit next to a frozen pond.

“It’s real.” Fireworks exploded in his chest at the wonder in her wide-eyed gaze as she took in the scene before them.

“I haven’t been ice skating in years.”

“Nor have I.” Not since he was deployed. In fact, the last time had been with Ava and Andrew. Tonight, he hoped to dispel those tainted memories and make new ones. “Should we hire one of those skating seal things for little kids so we don’t fall over?”

“Or you can catch me if I fall.” Her grin all but melted him. But he would catch her. Over and over again.

After paying, they donned their skates and made their way onto the ice. Ava clung to the wall while a few other people whizzed around them.

“It’s like riding a bicycle,” Nate called as he skated a short distance away.

“Maybe I should get the seal,” she said as her feet skittered in all directions.

“Nah. You’ll be fine.” He extended his hand and led her away from the wall, skating backward to guide her. “Don’t look down.” He regretted those words in an instant as her eyes flicked up and locked with his. The myriad emotions swirling within their emerald depths transfixed him as she strained to concentrate on what her feet were doing. Laughter from other people swirled around them, and for a few moments, Nate was

lost in a bubble of bliss as he led Ava around the pond. For a moment, his thoughts drifted. *What if?*

“I think I’ve got it.” Ava slipped her hands out of his and skated past him.

He reached out, grasping the air before skidding to a stop. His chest heaved as he watched her glide over the ice, her long strands of hair floating behind.

“It’s not a date,” he growled under his breath, before pushing off the ice to catch up with her.

By the time they finished, damp strands of hair clung to his neck, and Nate was glad he hadn’t worn his scarf. Their breaths misted on the air as they removed their skates, swapping them for their walking boots. Ava’s cheeks were aflame, and still, that spark of joy remained in her eyes.

“Thanks for this, Nate. I probably won’t be able to move a muscle tomorrow, but I haven’t had such fun in a long time.”

“You’re welcome.” Was all he could manage. He hadn’t had such fun in forever, either. And he wanted to capture each glorious moment of the evening and tuck it away to remember for when Ava had long returned home, and darkness threatened to encroach on his thoughts.

He didn’t want the evening to end, but he still had some work to complete before an early start in the morning. Any more time in her presence would be a cruel reminder of all he would lose once she was gone.

“I LIKE what you’ve done with the lights,” Nate said as he pulled up in front of the cabin. “Very festive.” He couldn’t take his eyes off Ava’s profile as she peered out the windshield. The elegant slant of her nose. The determined angle to her chin. Her slender neck disappearing beneath her scarf.

“I needed to brighten the place up. Bring a little cheer to the cabin.” She leaned against the seat, brushing a hand over

her coat. “It’s too easy to allow the jagged edges of failure and sadness to overwhelm me at this time of year.”

Nate clenched his hand over the steering wheel. Of course. What a fool. It didn’t matter what direction the conversation was going, it always came back to Andrew. It always would and nothing he could say or do would ever erase those moments of grief and loss from her life.

“Anyway,” Ava grabbed her purse, drew a deep breath and flashed a grin his way. “I don’t mean to put a damper on a wonderful evening. Thanks, Nate. I really enjoyed myself.” She was out of the pickup and walking across the yard before he had a chance to respond.

“Ava,” he called, when his brain finally caught up and coordinated his feet to move.

Delicate snowflakes drifted down as he stepped down from the truck. He swiped them off his cheek as Ava turned on the porch. “Thanks for keeping me company.” Leaning one arm on the open door, he scuffed his shoe across the ground. “It’s been a long time since I’ve felt...” Seen. Noticed. Valued. Wanted. “Since I’ve had fun, too. I’ll see you around.” With a nod, he retreated to the security of the pickup, where he wouldn’t be affected by the sincerity shining in her eyes, or be tempted to chase after her and pull her into his arms.

The sooner he put some distance between himself and Ava, the sooner he would understand and appreciate the evening for what it was—an enjoyable time between two friends. That was all.

AVA



With less than a week left of her vacation, Ava vowed to make the most of her time in Oakview Falls. The hiking trails provided a wonderful form of exercise, and the time in nature gave her time to clear her thoughts and commune with God with no distractions, especially of the Nate Hollister kind.

She'd fallen into a routine of visiting The Chilly Bean café for a coffee each morning after her walk, browsing through the stores, and pausing in the town green to listen to the buskers.

She hadn't seen or heard from Nate since their ice skating expedition. She hadn't even seen his truck around town—not that she was stalking him. It shouldn't bother her as much as it did. But the disappointment was undeniable. Their time together reminded her of old times.

There was still a distance between them, and perhaps that would always be there, given that so much had happened in both their lives. But she enjoyed the laughs they'd shared, and she appreciated Nate's vulnerability. And she was beyond proud of him for how far he'd come.

She didn't know what she'd been hoping for when he dropped her home. *I'll see you around* could mean many things. *See you soon. Let's catch up again. See you when you next visit Oakview Falls. See you in another fifteen years.* There was no point reading into something that was an off-handed comment.

Her initial plan of finding Nate, mending their broken past, and returning home had somehow taken an unexpected turn. In the past two weeks, she'd somehow fallen in love with the town. Morning coffees. Chatting with the locals. Shopping in the quaint stores.

But she refused to sit around and pine over Nate when she wasn't exactly sure what she was pining over. The loss of a friendship? The loss of potential? The loss of the in-between years when he'd kept his distance? There was no point wasting her days away. There were still things to do. Places to discover and people to meet. Something she hadn't even considered before arriving. But the town was magical and had somehow ensnared her in its grasp. And the thought of returning home didn't excite her in the slightest.

Determined not to let Nate's silence play on her mind, she stepped out onto the porch and shut the door. She half expected to see a figurine on the railing, and felt a twinge of disappointment when there wasn't one.

Don't get your hopes up. He doesn't owe you anything. You're the one who owes him, remember?

She brushed aside her guilt, and needing to remain distracted, headed to Oakview Falls Community Church. Pulling off her gloves, she tucked them into her purse and glanced around. Why was she even here? It wasn't like her to act on impulse, especially in a town she was only visiting.

"Ava! Hi!" Emma called out from the far end of the hall. She sat a table surrounded by an assortment of wreaths and ribbons.

"Hi, Emma. I hope you don't mind being here."

"Not at all. Is there something I can help with?"

She smoothed over her coat before crossing the room. This was so far out of her comfort zone. She was never one to turn up anywhere uninvited. "This might, um, seem silly. But I'm wondering if there's anything you need help with. I don't really want to be stuck at the cabin, and I figured I could make myself useful while I'm still here."

Emma set a pair of scissors on the table and gestured to a vacant chair. “Do you know what? I was praying for some extra help. And here you are.”

“Really?” Ava chuckled in disbelief. Was she just saying that to make her feel less awkward?

“Yes. I literally just prayed that God would send someone along to help. I’m in my first trimester and exhausted.” Emma rubbed a hand over her stomach, and Ava curbed the envy that sometimes goaded her around pregnant women. The stab of sorrow that she’d missed her chance, while her ex was now a father. Instead, a thrill of excitement filled her at her new friend’s news. “I’ve got a ton of stuff that needs doing before we serve our meals tomorrow. I’d really appreciate the help if you’re free.”

“Of course.” Ava eyed the piles of decorative supplies on the table. Wire. Ribbons. Evergreen clippings. Holly. Berries. Pinecones. “Did you make these?” She picked up a wreath adorned with gorgeous red velvet bows.

“Goodness, no! I’m just the embellisher. Nate made all the wreaths.”

Nate? Ava’s eyes widened. Was there anything he couldn’t do? It seemed there always something new to be discovered about Nate. She was starting to think she didn’t really know him at all. Had she ever really known him? Or were her memories tainted by teenage infatuation?

“He’s quite talented,” Emma remarked, trimming a length of silver ribbon.

“I’m discovering that.” She wondered what other talents Nate possessed. Would she ever find out?

Emma explained the process of decorating the wreaths, and as the women worked, Ava learned that Emma and her husband, Dylan, moved from New Jersey to be near Dylan’s ageing parents. Besides owning the garden center, they were both heavily involved in the church, with Dylan being a youth pastor and counselor.

“How do you know Nate? You both mentioned that you’re old friends,” Emma said as she squirted some hot glue onto a pine cone before pressing it onto a wreath.

“We’ve known each other for a long time. He was best friends with my brother.” And instead of feeling sadness at the mention of Andrew, she finally felt peace. Although the circumstances of his death were awful, she was so glad he could share his faith with Nate.

“They served together?”

Ava nodded. “A dream since school.” She still had photos of the two of them, standing proudly in their uniforms, arms around each other.

“He’s a different man than when we first met him.” Emma glanced up with a soft smile.

“Mmm,” Ava murmured. He was different to the man Ava knew as well. It was hard to think they were both talking about the same person. Emma had seen him desperate and homeless. The last Ava had seen him, before Oakview Falls, had been as a young man filled with excitement. Now, his edges were hard—war and death and hopelessness would do that to a person—but she was also discovering the warm-hearted man beyond his reserve. A gentleness and humility that she never knew he possessed.

As she tied a ribbon, sadness bled into her thoughts that she hadn’t known about Nate’s personal hell. That she was oblivious to the hardship he’d faced since returning from duty. The despair and loneliness he endured broke her heart.

“God is a miracle worker,” Emma said, selecting a wreath made of twigs.

“He is,” Ava agreed. If only He would work one so she didn’t have to confront Nate about her other reason for being here. Surely, she could leave without bringing up the past. She wanted to treasure the moments they’d shared, not have them tainted by her truth. But every time she thought about returning home without discussing what God had placed on her heart, conviction settled deep in her spirit. For whatever

reason, God still wanted her to confess her transgressions to Nate.

While not the same thing, she wondered if that was how Jonah felt when God told him to do one thing, and he did another. She didn't want to end up in the belly of a whale, or the modern-day equivalent, whatever that might be. She wanted to be obedient. But the sense of shame and embarrassment and vulnerability were real. Couldn't she just move on from what happened? Leave the past where it belonged.

Perhaps she was overthinking it all. She'd always valued honesty and integrity, traits which Rhett had failed to exhibit, and she needed to remember that God had led her on this journey. He would equip her with the right words to say at the right moment. She needed to trust Him. But time was running out.

With most of the wreaths finished, Ava started hanging some around the room under Emma's instruction. Before long, wreaths and garlands, and bright glittery baubles adorned the hall.

"Leave the rest, Ava," Emma said, sweeping loose cuts of ribbon and tinsel into a pile on the table. "Dylan will need something else to do when he comes in tomorrow to set up the hall."

"Are you sure?" Ava stepped down off the small ladder and brushed loose pine needles and specks of glitter from her jeans.

"Positive. I appreciate all your help today."

"It's been fun." Ava helped sweep the remnants of foliage into a pile before dumping them in the trash.

"Make sure you come along to the meal before you leave." Emma gave her a hug.

"I plan on it," Ava said, pulling on her coat.

She couldn't help but smile as she waved goodbye to Emma. Everything about her vacation so far had been fun and unexpected. New experiences. New scenery. New friends. But

all too soon, she would return home, and her time here would be but a distant memory to draw upon in moments of quiet reflection.

NATE



“*W*hat’s eating at you?” Earl ambled over to Nate’s pickup, draping his arm over the side of the tray.

“Nothing,” Nate grunted.

“Right. And Dolly Parton is my aunt.”

“If you say so.” Nate slid some lumber into the tray, keeping up the appearance of being busy so Earl would leave him alone. He wasn’t about to get into a heart-to-heart with his older friend.

“Hmm,” Earl growled, throwing Nate a stern look before turning on his heels.

Jumping into the pickup, Nate started the engine and roared out of the parking lot. The last few days had kept him busy, but he was restless. Doubt and self-pity and regret were slowly creeping back into his soul. He needed to remember that the Lord’s mercies were new every day, and he could now live in the freedom of forgiveness. It was still hard to comprehend that the God who created the universe, saw beyond his past, his mistakes, his pathetic excuse for a life, and loved him regardless. With no clauses. No fine print. No caveats. But just as he was. He’d never experienced such love before, and he was so undeserving.

But that wasn’t what was eating at him. That wasn’t what put him in a funk. Ava would leave soon, and now that they’d reconnected, he didn’t want her to go.

Shifting gears, he lowered his foot on the gas and watched the needle climb as he drove out of town. The open road and

silent cab were the perfect place to sort through his tumultuous thoughts.

He'd become quite greedy over the past few weeks, wanting to spend more time with Ava. A moment here or there wasn't enough. He wanted to spend every day with her, which wasn't possible. He had a living to make. Commitments to keep. And he needed space to sort out his thoughts. Which was why he'd kept his distance since their ice skating date, that wasn't a date.

Shaking his head to clear his muddled thoughts, he pulled up in front of the familiar crumbling house on the outskirts of town. As eccentric as she was, he'd developed a soft spot for Mrs. Spinks, more so after their previous conversation.

Her words about living with no regrets echoed relentlessly through his mind. How could he live with no regrets when they constantly plagued him? He couldn't change the past, and he regretted so many things—the death of his best friend, hitting rock bottom, shutting out Ava and her family. But he also knew he wouldn't be where he was without experiencing those dark days.

Grabbing his utility belt and toolbox, Nate took the stairs in two strides. Setting the box on the rickety porch, he rapped his knuckles against the door. His gaze swept across the porch. A weather-worn rocking chair sat at one end, providing a front-row seat to the distant mountains. A bird feeder swung from a scraggly tree in the front yard, and patches of snow covered the barren ground. Come spring, and colorful blooms would appear. He could already imagine the green shoots bursting through the sodden ground. Mrs. Spinks loved her garden. He made a mental note to turn the soil when the snow melted, and see if she needed any help with planting for the spring.

With a frown, Nate knocked again. "Mrs. Spinks," he called. She was usually quick to answer the door, always waiting for him in the living room.

It was only then that he noticed the curtains were drawn. That was odd. He couldn't recall seeing the curtains closed

when he visited. Had she gone into town and forgotten he was coming? Had something happened? Ditching his utility belt next to the toolbox, he jogged down the stairs and around the side of the house.

“Mrs. Spinks! Marjorie!” He jiggled the windows at ground level before trying the back door. Everything was locked up tight. Moving the trash can aside, he peered in the kitchen window. The house remained still and in darkness.

Worry niggled at Nate as he returned to the porch. Pulling out his phone, he dialed her number. No answer. He tried again, knocking loudly on the window. Nate cocked his head and pressed his ear to the cold glass. Was that... Yes. Faint ringing from somewhere in the house.

Frantically, he dove into his kit for a screwdriver, praying he wouldn't have to kick the door down. After a few attempts at jiggling the lock, a click sounded, ensuring his success.

“Mrs. Spinks,” he called, shoving the door open and stepping inside the darkened house. A shadow moved in the corner of his eye. Estée. She sauntered over and rubbed against his leg. He tried not to shudder. Now was not the time to give thought to his intense dislike of the cat.

“Where's your mama?” he asked, scanning the living room. A floral teacup sat on the sidetable by the armchair. He flung open the curtains to flood the room with light.

Nate rounded the corner and stopped. “Mrs. Spinks.” Ignoring Estée's loud meows, he dashed over to the bottom of the staircase where Marjorie was lying face down with her right leg twisted at an awkward angle. Kneeling beside her, he pressed two fingers to her neck, relieved to feel the slow thumping of her pulse. He swept her wispy white hair aside to discover a gash and purple bruising over a nasty looking bump on her forehead. “Marjorie. It's me, Nate.”

A weak moan sounded from her cracked lips. How long had she been lying there? He knew he shouldn't move her. By the way her body was sprawled, it was highly likely she'd broken a hip. The cat wove in and out of his legs, rubbing up against her owner, nestling her nose into Marjorie's neck.

“You don’t make a good guard dog, Estée,” Nate said. “Let me call for help, and we’ll have your mama better in no time.”

He didn’t have time to think about how silly he sounded talking to his enemy, as he called emergency services. Confident they were on their way, he found a blanket and covered Marjorie. He then wet a washcloth and dabbed at the wound on her forehead.

Oh, Lord. Please be with Marjorie.

Before long, flashing red and blue lights swept through the window, heralding the arrival of the ambulance. As the team lugged their equipment inside, Nate gave them as much information as he could. Which wasn’t a great deal. He didn’t even know Mrs. Spinks’s age.

He stepped aside, allowing the medics to work and stabilize the older woman. Somewhere between the ambulance arriving and Mrs. Spinks being transferred to the stretcher, he had unknowingly picked up Estée and was stroking the cat between her ears.

“She likes you,” Marjorie rasped from beneath the oxygen mask covering her face.

Nate flinched and almost dropped the cat when he realized what he’d been doing. “The feeling’s not mutual.”

“Oh, don’t be like that. You’ll have to become friends while I’m in the hospital.”

A protest perched on the tip of his tongue. But he couldn’t deny her wishes. Nor could he imagine letting the cat starve. He might not like Estée, but he wasn’t cruel.

He followed the stretcher out to the ambulance.

“Can you please call my son, Nate?” Marjorie rasped.

“Sure thing,” he said just before the doors closed.

With the taillights of the ambulance disappearing from view, he returned inside and set Estée down. The cat immediately slinked off to the living room while Nate hunted around in the kitchen for any details of Marjorie’s son.

There was no sign of any contact information in the pile of papers on top of the table in the corner. He opened and closed drawers, rummaging through utensils and placemats and dishcloths. Finally, inside a drawer filled with instruction manuals, folded paper napkins, rolls of sticky tape and old keys, he found a small black indexed book full of squiggly handwriting.

He ran a finger over each page until... *Travis Spinks*. It had to be her son. There weren't any other Spinks's listed. He didn't know the time difference between Oakview Falls and London, but Marjorie had asked him to call.

"We're five hours ahead," Travis Spinks's deep voice sounded over the phone once Nate introduced himself.

"I'm glad I didn't get you out of bed, then." Nate chuckled, pacing in the kitchen with its cracked linoleum and chipped cabinetry. A watermark on the wall caught his eye, and he followed it up to the ceiling. Another repair job he'd need to look into. It was a shame Marjorie's son wasn't here to help.

"Your mother had a fall this morning," Nate said, filling Travis in with all he knew.

There was a pause before Travis spoke again. His voice was steady and quiet. "Thank you, Nate. I really appreciate you calling. It's been a long time since I've seen my mother. And..." He sighed, and Nate recognized the sound of regret. "It's probably time I change that."

Nate nodded, not that Travis could see. But he understood his remorse. "Anyway, she just wanted me to call and let you know."

"Thanks. If you see her soon, can you please let her know that I'll call her? And tell her I love her."

"Will do," Nate said. "Merry Christmas, Travis."

"You too, Nate."

AFTER TUCKING the address book back into the drawer, Nate poured some dry cat food into a bowl and went searching for Estée. It didn't take long to locate her. A pool of sunshine bathed the armchair where Estée sat, tall and proud, as though it were her throne, and she was the queen of the house.

"You're so spoiled." He narrowed his gaze as Estée tilted her nose into the air and turned toward the front windows. "And arrogant. Your food's in the kitchen if you're hungry."

Why was he talking to a cat? Shaking his head, he left Estée to fend for herself as he locked the front door. Gathering his discarded tools, he tossed them into his pickup and climbed up behind the steering wheel.

With all the excitement of the morning, he was running late for his next appointment and he'd missed out helping with the church meal. His mind raced with all that needed doing. He hadn't even touched the jobs Mrs. Spinks asked him to do, but they could wait for now. He'd swing by the hospital later to visit her. And then return to check on the darn cat.

AVA



“Can you please take another tray of carrots to the serving area and top up the gravy?” Dorothy asked as she breezed into the kitchen at the back of the hall.

The first Christmas lunch was well under way, and it surprised Ava how many people were making the most of the free food, as well as how many of the townsfolk were helping. Dorothy’s niece was running The Chilly Bean café so Dorothy could help at the church. Valerie, from the grocery store, was handing out grocery hampers to those in need. Earl was elbow deep in soapsuds at the sink. While Emma and Dylan chatted with people as they ate their meal.

Gold candles surrounded by green foliage featured as the centerpieces on tables covered in red and green cloth. Twinkle lights glistened around the room and festive music played quietly. The setting was spectacular.

Donning some oven mitts, Ava grabbed the tray of carrots and carried it to the counter before returning for a new dish of gravy.

Emma informed her that the meal attracted a variety of people from all over town. Some didn’t have family nearby, so they came along for the company. Others, like herself, were passing through. The community spirit was well and truly alive amid the music and flow of conversation.

As Ava wandered through the tables, collecting used or discarded plates, she wondered where Nate was. Ever since Emma mentioned he would be there, she couldn’t help but eye

the door every time someone walked in. But he hadn't arrived. Where was he? Was he avoiding her? No, that was a silly thought. If it were true, then he was petty, and not the kind-hearted man she'd come to know all over again.

With only a few days before the end of her vacation, she didn't want to leave without saying goodbye, or without saying what she'd come to say. But as each minute passed, she wondered if she'd ever get the chance.

As the flow of people reduced to a trickle, Ava gathered the leftovers and boxed them up for Valerie to take to the respite home.

"I thought Nate was supposed to come today," Ava remarked to Emma, hoping to sound as casual as she could.

"He was, but he's up at the hospital."

"Oh. Has something happened to him? Is he okay?" Ava's heart thudded as her thoughts ran away with her, imagining all kinds of tragic scenarios. Perhaps his pickup had veered off the road and he was injured. Maybe he'd slipped on some ice.

"He's fine. He's just visiting Mrs. Spinks. She's a lonely widow, and Nate found her after she'd fallen down the stairs. He's paying her a visit."

"Oh." It seemed to be the only word in her vocabulary. If she wasn't convinced of Nate's kindness before, that he was visiting an old woman in the hospital sealed the deal. "That's so sweet."

"He is a sweet guy," Emma said, pressing a lid onto a plastic box.

Yes, he was indeed.

"Would it be okay if I took some of these up to the hospital?" Ava grabbed two boxes each of the meat and vegetables, and dessert. She hadn't even met Mrs. Spinks, and didn't know if Nate would still be there. But it was worth a shot. This might be her last chance to see Nate before returning home. "I think it's sad that they missed out on a great day." That was her excuse, anyway.

“Of course,” Emma said, a knowing look in her eye. “Here, take these as well.” She handed Ava a bag of bread rolls before waving her out of the kitchen.

AVA PULLED into the parking lot in front of the hospital. She scooped up the carry bag loaded with bread rolls, the containers of food and a couple of cinnamon rolls from Dorothy, and made her way to the main entrance.

A white-haired woman behind the front counter gave her directions, and a few moments later, Ava stood outside the room. Taking a deep breath, she knocked.

“Come in,” a frail voice called.

“Er... hello.” Ava stepped into the room, her gaze landing on the small woman in the bed. A cloud of white hair circled her head. Bruising marred the left side of her face. A machine whirred, pumping air into some sleeves around her legs. “I’m Ava. You must be Mrs. Spinks?”

“Yes, dear. Come in.”

Ava set the bag of food on the table before shrugging her purse off her shoulder and placing it on a chair by the window. “I don’t want to intrude, but I brought some food from the church meal.”

“You’re not intruding, dear. And thank you. I’m grateful for your thoughtfulness. It smells delicious.” Mrs. Spinks closed her eyes and inhaled, a soft smile forming on her lips. “If I fall asleep, I’m not being rude. It’s just the pain medication working its magic.”

“I won’t stay,” Ava said, glancing around the room, empty, apart from a single vase with a bouquet of pink and red roses. “Shall I ask someone to reheat your meal, or would you prefer to keep it for later?”

“I’ll have it later, if that’s okay.”

“I’ll take it for you.”

Ava turned at the sound of the familiar deep voice. Her pulse tripped and something ignited in her chest at the sight of

Nate leaning so casually against the doorframe. His hair was spiked in all directions as though he'd just removed his cap.

“Ah, Nate.” The older woman’s eyes crinkled, regarding Nate as if he were some kind of saint. “You’re back.”

He loped into the room and patted Mrs. Spinks’s dainty hands. The simple gesture melting Ava’s heart. “I told you I wouldn’t be long.”

“This dear girl brought us dinner.” Mrs. Spinks reached out and clasped Ava’s wrist.

Her cheeks warmed as Nate’s gazed landed on her. No one had called her a girl in decades.

“So I heard.”

“I might have a rest, if that’s okay.” The woman released Ava’s hand. “Thank you again, dear.”

“You’re very welcome. I hope you recover soon.” She grabbed her purse and nodded at Nate as she stepped outside the room.

“Ava, wait.” Footsteps squeaked on the linoleum as Nate called her name.

She turned, stepping out of the path of a gurney being wheeled along the corridor.

“That was thoughtful of you to bring those meals in.” His blue-gray eyes bore into her as she leaned against the wall.

“Well, when Emma told me what happened, I couldn’t let you both miss out.”

“You were helping?” His eyes widened.

“Of course. What else was I going to do? Sit in my cabin and have a pity-party because I was all alone?” That would have been the easy thing to do. But she vowed no more feeling sorry for herself. No more allowing life to pass her by. No more regrets.

“I guess not.”

Ava pushed off the wall and shrugged the purse straps over her shoulder. “Anyway, I’ll leave you to it. I’ve got some packing to do, and you’ll probably want to be there when Mrs. Spinks wakes up.” She jerked her head down the corridor. “She seems quite taken by you.” Who could blame her? He seemed to have that effect on everyone. Even after all this time, Ava was still taken by him. Again, she reined in her thoughts lest she swoon at his feet.

“She’s lonely.” Nate glanced along the corridor. “She and her son aren’t terribly close, so she probably sees me as a stand-in.”

“That’s so sad.”

“Yeah.”

They stood in silence as the noise of the hospital buzzed around them. Ava ran the toe of her shoe along a small crack in the linoleum. It was as though they were both waiting for someone, each other - to speak. Her heart thundered against her ribs, trying to break free. Now was not the time or place, but what other option did she have when she was leaving so soon?

“Nate...”

“Ava...”

They shared a laugh, and Ava was grateful for the reprieve amid the awkward silence.

“You go first.” Nate nodded.

What had he been about to say? Now she’d have to wait.

“There’s something I’ve been wanting to talk with you about. It’s a big part of the reason I came to Oakview Falls.”

One dark eyebrow arched. Ava glanced around, hoping there was somewhere private they could talk. The hospital corridor wasn’t the venue of choice for what she wanted to say. Especially as Nate seemed to know everyone in town and who knew who would be eavesdropping.

“Shall we get a coffee?” he asked, sensing her discomfort.

“Yes, I’d like that.”

Nate led the way to the cafeteria, and after placing their orders, they carried their drinks to a table overlooking a small indoor garden.

“It’s not the best coffee,” he said. “But it will do.”

“I’m sure it will be fine.” Anything to give her something to do while she ripped off the bandaid.

“So, you wanted to talk.”

Ava clasped her hands around the paper cup, stirring at the swirls of milky brown liquid. This was so much harder than she expected. She’d rehearsed the words in her mind so many times. But the reality was always so much different.

Again, she cycled on the loop of wondering if it really mattered. With all the stuff Nate had been through, he’d probably forgotten, or wouldn’t care. No. There was that restlessness in her spirit again. The still, small voice telling her to make amends.

She didn’t understand why God was asking her to do such a thing when so much time had passed. Nothing would change between them. She’d return home. Christmas would come and go. And they’d both go on with their lives. And yet... she needed to be obedient. God never promised to give all the answers or His reasons why. He just wanted her to follow Him, and that meant being obedient to what He asked, even if it made no sense to her finite mind.

“Nate.” Her voice squeaked as though she’d hit the wrong pitch on a violin. Oh, why did she have to fall apart now? She drew a deep breath and exhaled slowly. “Besides finding out what happened to Andrew, the other reason for coming to Oakview Falls was to apologize for the last night we saw each other. The night before you went away.”

She closed her eyes as her heart lurched into her throat. Her nerves buzzed as memories flooded back. She’d been so young and naïve, and so, so silly. Love. Lust. It was a blurred line that she hadn’t been able to separate until years later, when God and maturity were on her side.

Nate remained silent and slowly drew circles on the tabletop with his fingers. Ava couldn't bring herself to meet his eyes. Was he remembering, too?

She blew out a breath and willed herself to continue. Surely, she could withstand the humiliation for a few more minutes. She eyed the quickest escape route for when she finished speaking.

"I was in love with you. Or as much as an eighteen-year-old could be with her older brother's best friend." He wasn't laughing at her, so that was a good sign. She pressed on. "It was probably more infatuation than anything. But I worshiped the ground you walked on, because you made me feel special."

Nate shifted in his seat and lifted his coffee cup to his lips. Seconds dragged by as Ava willed him to fill in the blanks. But he remained mute.

God, surely a phone call or an email would've sufficed. Why do I have to do this?

With her gaze fixed on the sugar shaker, she traced over the ridges in the glass. "For some reason, I thought I had a chance with you. And so, I drank too much and threw myself at you. You didn't force me to do anything I didn't want to do. But over time, I've realized my motives weren't pure. I thought you would stay if I gave myself to you."

She barked out a laugh of nervous shame as her cheeks flamed. Sure, it had been long ago, but the memories of that night clanged like a gong, reminding her of her innocence and her selfishness.

"I'm sorry for my behavior that night, Nate. I just wanted you to know." And with those words, Ava pushed back her chair, grabbed her purse and whispered a hurried goodbye. She'd done it. She'd done what had been weighing heavily on her heart. And yet, instead of the relief she'd expected, she felt an all-encompassing sadness.

"Ava."

Ignoring his voice, she continued walking. Only when she was in the confines of her car did she glance in the rearview

mirror to see Nate standing in front of the hospital. Defeated. His arms hanging by his sides with a look on his face matching her confusing emotions.

Tears blurred Ava's vision as she drove through town. She didn't know why God wanted her to apologize to Nate after all these years. They'd both been young. She'd made a mistake. End of story. It wasn't like she'd slept around and needed to repent from a lifetime of sexual immorality. It was one night with Nate.

But that night was embedded in her mind and in her soul. Even throughout her marriage, when she wasn't a believer. Now, as a Christ-follower, she could understand the reason for purity, and protecting something so sacred. And she now understood why the sacred union between a man and a woman was designed to exist only in marriage. But to apologize years later? That was beyond her understanding.

After confessing to Nate, she thought the weight of her transgression would be released and all would be well. But she was even more confused. Sad. Empty. His silence was worse than the weight of regret she'd been carrying around. But what had she expected? That he'd accept her apology and life would miraculously be all sunshine and rainbows?

Well, she'd done what God had asked. She'd leave in the morning. There was no point staying any longer. She'd completed her mission in Oakview Falls. Although falling in love wasn't meant to be a part of it.

Yes. She loved Nate. Always had. She realized that with a clarity as crisp as the white landscape around her. After all she'd been through with Rhett, she wasn't supposed to trust a man again. And yet, here she was, and there was nothing she could do about it.

AVA



*P*lucking another tissue from the box, Ava wondered how much longer she could continue crying. Where were all the tears coming from? Ever since she'd arrived back at the cabin, the waterworks had flowed continuously. Her appetite was gone, and she couldn't even concentrate on reading her book in front of the roaring fire.

Dusk had fallen, and she'd turned on the reading lamp and twinkle lights, creating a cozy cocoon to block out the wintry world outside. One more night, and then she'd be gone. If only she didn't die of dehydration from crying so much.

A knock at the door startled her, sending the box of tissues to the floor. She stood and wiped her eyes as she walked to the door, hoping she didn't resemble a panda.

"Wh—what are you doing here?" She shivered as the wind blew a small flurry of snowflakes inside.

Nate stood on the porch, his hair sticking up at all angles. "I needed to see you. You ran off before I could talk."

What was there to say? His silence had been deafening, which had told her everything she needed to know. "Come in." She held the door open. "It's freezing out there."

Nate moved toward the fireplace, holding his hands out to the warmth of the flames, while Ava retreated to the kitchen. "Coffee? Hot chocolate?" She needed to do something while he stood there, his large body too much for the small space and for her sensibility.

"Hot chocolate, please."

She bustled about, preparing the drinks, while Nate looked around the living room. Not that there was much to see. Still, the few decorations she'd set out were more than she had back home.

His gaze lingered on his carvings displayed on the mantel. The memory of finding them on the porch caused Ava's eyes to sting. She blinked, pouring the boiling water into the mugs on the counter. She dropped in some marshmallows and carried the hot chocolates into the living room.

Passing a mug to Nate, she settled into one end of the sofa and tucked her feet up beside her. Nate sank into the armchair, and for that she was grateful. She didn't need his proximity to distract her.

"You're leaving soon." It was a statement, not a question.

"In the morning." She swirled her mug around and watched the marshmallows bob in the sea of milky chocolate. Her house would be cold and undecorated and boring, but that was okay. All too soon, the demands of her job and the hectic pace of city living would swallow her up and she'd forget all about Oakview Falls and the man seated across from her.

"Stay."

Ava's head flicked up at Nate's soft request. "There's nothing to stay for." *Liar. He's sitting right there.* But she was scared.

His gaze met hers. Two inky pools of sorrow stared back, piercing her heart. "So, the whole time you spent with me was out of pity? Because you felt sorry for me? Because you were on a mission, and now it's over, you can forget about me? Or is it because I'm not good enough for you?"

Ava jolted at his accusations. "Why would I even think that? I care about you, Nate."

"Because I know what people are like," he continued, as though she hadn't spoken a word. "I've seen how everyone treats people like me."

What? "People like you?" She shook her head, not understanding his insinuations. All she saw was a kind-hearted

man. A resilient man who'd picked himself up from the pit of despair to start over. A passionate man who'd found God. She saw a man with a generous spirit and an enormous heart for his community. A man who'd been given a second chance and had made the most of it. His accusatory words hurt.

"Nate," she said slowly, silently praying for wisdom and the right words to say. She didn't want this chasm between them to get any deeper. She set her mug on the side table and tugged the throw rug over her legs.

"If you think there is something wrong with you, then you're so very mistaken. You are not what happened to you. Sure, you've been through some awful things, things I can't even imagine, but that's not who you are in here." She pressed a hand to her chest. If she'd been sitting closer, she would've placed it over his heart. "You might think you're a nobody, but to God, and me, you're incredible. You have worth and you have a purpose."

Leaning forward, Nate clasped his hands together. "I'm learning that, but it's so hard. You turning up here brought everything to the surface. I thought I was making progress, and then bam, everything I'd worked hard to forget came flooding back. All the walls I had in place, started crumbling."

"I'm so sorry," she whispered, wanting more than anything to embrace him. To ease his heartache. How incredibly selfish of her to look for answers without considering what he had been through. Her focus had been on her needs, with no regard to Nate's.

"Enough with the apologizing, okay?" He straightened, rubbing a hand over his face, his stubble rasping in the silence. His eyes were red-rimmed and his chest heaved with the weight of his emotion. "That night... That night was my fault. I took advantage. I knew you'd been drinking, even though you were underage, and I should've known better. I knew you liked me, and it inflated my ego. Your dad had to pull Andrew off me when he found out."

Wait. Andrew knew? Her father knew? As if this couldn't be any more humiliating.

“Don’t worry.” Nate barked out a laugh. “Your dad didn’t know. He thought we were fighting over a girl. We were, just not for the reasons he was thinking.”

Ava smoothed her hand over the arm of the sofa. What a mess. She’d uncovered a hornet’s nest of mistakes and tangled emotions. Was there any way to move past this? They’d aired their dirty laundry. Surely it was time to move on. For both of them.

“I can’t offer you anything, Ava.” Nate splayed his hands on his thighs, his palms facing toward the ceiling.

“I’m not asking for anything.” The past couple of weeks had been wonderful, as they’d reconnected. Laughed. Created fresh memories. But the wonder had to end somewhere, didn’t it? The bubble of her vacation had to burst. She was returning to Connecticut, and Nate would continue to build his life in Oakview Falls and thrive.

Nate’s watery eyes held so much sorrow that Ava averted her gaze so her heart wouldn’t break in two. He set his half-finished mug on the coffee table and stood. Walking to the door, he paused. “I’m so sorry, Ava,” he whispered before stepping out into the night.

Tears spilled down Ava’s cheeks as the click of the door closing resounded like a gunshot. Was this what God intended for her all along? For them to understand what happened that night so they could move on with their lives? Forgiveness and closure. Perhaps peace would eventually come, but for now, there was a gaping hole in her heart where Nate belonged.

NATE



Once the cabin was out of sight, Nate pulled onto the side of the road and slammed his fists against the steering wheel, roaring like a madman. For the first time in a decade, he was content with his life. Until Ava appeared in town. She was a paradox—reminding him of all he'd lost, and all he hoped for. But she was also way out of his league. He had nothing to offer her. Nothing to convince her to stay.

He wasn't the man she knew back in Hartford. He had no qualifications. No career aspirations. His house, although perfect for him, needed repairs. He thought his life was finally coming together, but the voice in his head kept reminding him he was a nobody.

For the next half hour, he drove around town, blind to the direction he was taking, until he found himself in front of Dylan and Emma's house. Lights beamed through the front window, showing someone was still awake. Without another thought, he marched up to the porch and knocked on the front door.

Moments later, the door swung open. "Nate. Is everything okay?" Dylan asked, glancing toward his pickup in the driveway. "Come in."

"Sorry for disturbing your evening." Nate stomped his boots on the welcome mat before entering the house that he'd called home for a few months before he found his own place to live.

“You’re not disturbing us. Emma’s reading in bed, and I was just watching television. Can I get you a coffee or something else?”

Nate shook his head. Hadn’t Ava asked him the same thing only a short time ago? Ugh. He needed to get her out of his head.

“I assume something’s bothering you.” Dylan gestured to the sofa in the living room where orange flames danced in the fireplace, filling the room with warmth and light. A Christmas tree stood tall in the corner, and framed photographs of Dylan and Emma’s adventures filled the mantel. Dylan poured glasses of water and handed one to Nate.

“You could say that.”

“This can be a difficult time of year for many people,” Dylan said, settling into the armchair.

Boy, did he know that. His past Christmases had been memorable for all the wrong reasons. Until last year, when he’d been saved - in more ways than one.

“You know, things were looking up. I’ve got a job. A house. Friends. Church. God.”

“Your life has turned around.” Dylan agreed, smiling warmly. “It’s been a privilege to walk beside you and see how far you’ve come.”

“All thanks to you.”

“It’s all God, Nate. I’m just His vessel.”

And God, who began a good work in me, will continue. He knew that scripture like that back of his hand. Dylan had encouraged him to memorize Bible verses, and he had. Sure, he didn’t always remember them. But he knew God was always with him. And God would continue refining him. Was that what all this was? A period of refining?

Dylan set his glass on the coffee table. “I sensed something changed a couple of weeks ago. As if a wall went up.”

Nate nodded glumly. Right when Ava arrived in town. That good old wall of self-preservation had been erected the

moment he laid eyes on her.

“Do you want to talk about it, or shall I keep guessing?” Dylan tilted his head to the side, drumming his fingers on the arm of the chair.

What was there to say? He couldn't pinpoint exactly what led him to his friend's house tonight. He scrubbed his hands over his face, trying to assemble his thoughts.

“Okay. Here's what I think.” Dylan tapped a finger against his lips. “Pride and grace.”

Nate scrunched up his face. “What?”

“Don't be too proud to accept grace.”

“Man, I know it's getting late, and we're both tired, but I have no idea what you're talking about. I didn't go to college, so I'm not the smartest man. Give it to me straight.”

Dylan put his glass on the table after taking a long sip. His gaze fixed on Nate, as though peering deep into his soul. “Ava's an old friend?”

Nate nodded. Despite his convoluted emotions, the mention of her name ignited warmth in his chest.

“Seeing her again has triggered some old, perhaps uncomfortable, memories for you.”

Nate glanced up, surprised at Dylan's assessment. “Yeah.” He clenched his hands together.

“Look, Nate. I don't know what your relationship was like in the past, but I'm guessing she still cares for you. Deep down you think you aren't good enough or you don't deserve a friendship with her. Your pride doesn't want to let her in because you're afraid she'll see you as you see yourself.”

Was Dylan a mind reader? Did he have some special priority call line to God? Because that's exactly what he was thinking. Dylan had put into words what he couldn't. “I'm not. And I don't.”

“That's a lie, Nate. Whenever you think you're not worthy, or not good enough, that's the enemy trying to take you down.

Trying to make you feel ashamed about your past mistakes. He loves to use shame and regret to keep us from our true potential. But there is no condemnation in Christ.”

Yet another verse he ought to remember.

“But it’s true. I have nothing to offer her.” Ava had told him there was nothing to stay for.

“When I met Emma, I was a struggling student,” Dylan said, a soft smile on his lips as he reminisced. “I had five dollars in my bank account. I was working as a janitor and living in my parents’ basement.”

“Sounds like you’re describing a horror movie.” Nate cracked a smile.

“Exactly. I had nothing to offer her, but she loved me. For me. She saw my potential and things in me I couldn’t even see myself.”

Was that true for Ava? Did she see him for more than his failures? More than the homeless guy he’d once been? More than just a handyman in small-town Oakview Falls? Had she really spent time with him because she wanted to, and not out of pity?

“But more than that,” Dylan continued. “God sees you, Nate. And that’s where the grace comes in. He sees every part of you and still loves you beyond measure. He doesn’t ask for anything more than obedience to follow Him.”

Dylan’s words sank into the barren soil of his heart and took root.

“Ava...” He blinked away the tears brimming in his eyes and blew out a breath. “We were close.” He wasn’t about to go into details about how close they’d been. That had been a mistake, and it was between him and Ava and God. He was thankful they’d cleared up some of the mess from that night.

“And you’re conflicted about how you feel toward her now because...”

“Because of my pride.” Nate nodded, understanding Dylan’s words from earlier. It was only by God’s grace that he

was sitting here in his friend's living room. And in the same way, Ava had shown him grace by accepting his past failures and flaws. He was just too stubborn to recognize or accept it.

“Yep. My advice, which is the same for everything, is to pray about it.”

“Thanks, man.”

“And perhaps talk to her. Tell her how you feel. I can tell she means a lot to you.”

The two men stood, and Dylan pulled Nate into a hug, slapping his back for good measure.

“Sorry to disturb your evening,” Nate said as he stood by the front door. “But I appreciate you listening and offering me advice.” More than anything, he appreciated Dylan's friendship and godly wisdom.

“Anytime.”

With a final wave goodbye, Nate backed out of the driveway and headed home.

Home. The one God had blessed him with after pulling him from the miry clay. He needed to remember that. He needed to remember that he was forgiven, and God's grace was his for the taking.

Now, if only God would drop a sign from heaven instructing him what to do about the woman he loved. Because despite all the messes between them, she owned his heart, and he needed to find the courage to tell her. Even if it meant losing her all over again.

AVA



The fir tree and ornaments Ava purchased in Oakview Falls sat on the coffee table, looking out of place in the undecorated living room. There were no twinkle lights in the windows. No garlands on the mantle. No wreath on the front door. And in place of a frozen lake and wooded walking trails, the dull orange glow of streetlights shone on the icy streets of suburbia. *Welcome home*, she thought.

Ava wiped her nose on a tissue and added it to the mountain of discarded tissues on the floor. A cup of lukewarm coffee sat on the side table with an unopened book beside it. The gas fireplace warmed the room, and a Christmas movie played on the television, but she had no interest in watching. She wouldn't be able to see through the blur of tears, anyway.

With a heaviness in her heart, she'd left Oakview Falls before the first rays of light breached the horizon. A lone wooden heart, tied up with a red ribbon, had greeted her on the porch as she'd stepped outside. That had started the onslaught of tears, and they hadn't stopped falling since.

She glanced at the collection of wooden carvings sitting next to the Christmas tree. And tears gathered once more as she picked up the heart and smoothed her fingers over the inscription in the wood—*Redemption*. One simple word, yet it held so much meaning, knowing Nate's story. His story from brokenness to healing. From regret to forgiveness.

Her heart hadn't stopped aching since he walked out of the cabin, saying he couldn't offer her anything. And she wondered how much pain one heart could endure. Why hadn't

she spoken up? Why had she opened her big mouth to say there was nothing to stay for? It was a flippant remark out of self-preservation and fear. Because the spark of rekindled friendship was smoldering into something more, and she needed time to process her thoughts and discern if what she was feeling was true, or purely the result of vacation endorphins.

Worldly possessions meant nothing, if that's what Nate was worried about. She'd had those. Had chased the wrong dream for so long and had a broken marriage to prove it. That life wasn't for her anymore. Why couldn't Nate see that? Why couldn't he see she didn't care about his past, or that she didn't blame him for Andrew's death?

Her phone buzzed and a spark of hope ignited before she glanced at the screen. Seriously? Her stomach sank as she answered. "It's Christmas Eve, Felix."

"I know. I just wanted to make sure you would be back in time for the new installment in the gallery after the holidays," her boss said.

Was he serious? That was the last thing on her mind right now. At one time, the thought of promoting a new installment would have thrilled her. She would've lived and breathed every moment. The buzz of creating campaigns and seeing everything come together was rewarding. But now, the thought of long hours, liaising with clients, endless meetings, with barely a chance to breathe, made her stomach churn.

She missed Oakview Falls and the slower pace of life. Although she'd only left that morning, she missed the contentment she experienced there. Sure, she was probably on a post-vacation high, but the thought of resuming her fast-paced life with nothing to show for it left her feeling hollow.

"Felix, what's your wife doing?" she asked, ignoring his remarks about the gallery's new installment.

Silence. A stutter. Then a defeated sigh emanated over the phone. "We're separated."

“I’m sorry to hear that.” Given his ridiculous work hours, it was no surprise. *Been there, done that.* But Felix had children, and that made things worse.

“I’ll see them tomorrow.”

Ava shook her head at his defeated tone. If only someone had warned her about the dangers of overworking. Of chasing after the wrong things in life. Perhaps things might’ve worked out for her and Rhett. Then again, she wouldn’t have gone to Oakview Falls, and she wouldn’t have reconnected with Nate. Still, divorce was never pleasant, and even though she was better off without Rhett, she didn’t want Felix to suffer the same way she had.

“Take a break, Felix,” she said, emboldened by the sudden urge to use her experience for good. “Working yourself so hard isn’t good for anyone. Trust me, I’ve been there. Forget about the gallery. It will still be there after the holidays. Spend time with your wife and children. They need you. Not some worn-out version of yourself?”

Felix hesitated. “Are you okay, Ava?”

“Yes.” Not in this moment, but she would be. She drew a deep breath, bracing herself for what she was about to do. “I’m sorry to do this to you on Christmas Eve, Felix. But I’m letting you know I plan to resign. I’ll help with the new installment, but two weeks from now will be my last day.”

Her breath whooshed out of her, along with the weight of worry she’d been carrying for too long. Wow. Had she really just done that? Had she given notice for the job that had held significance for her in so many ways? She didn’t know what would come next, but the relief of knowing she was no longer shackled to her job and all the pressures that came with it was the best Christmas gift to herself.

Ava’s fingers smoothed over the heart Nate left on the porch before Felix finally spoke. “I understand, Ava. I’ll be sad to lose you, but I understand why.”

For the first time all day, Ava smiled. “Merry Christmas, Felix.” She silently prayed that his eyes would be opened to

what was right in front of him. The love of his family.

“Merry Christmas, Ava.”

She snuggled under the blanket, weariness settling over her from her early morning travel and the relief at knowing she'd made the right decision about her job. She couldn't face another year working at such a hectic pace. Where to from here, she didn't know. But God did, and that filled her with peace. Perhaps she could finally establish her own business as she'd always dreamed of doing. But that was for another day.

With the snow falling outside the window, her eyelids grew heavy and her thoughts drifted to Oakview Falls. What would she be doing if she were still there? Would she be at church? Ice skating with Nate? Enjoying Christmas Eve with some of the townsfolk?

The small town had burrowed into her heart and was up there as one of her most favorite vacations. Whether it was the small-town charm, the people she'd met, the activities she'd experienced, or the time with Nate, it had been a wonderful few weeks, and her heart was full. And yet, it ached so much.

Her phone jangled with the tone of an incoming FaceTime call. Glancing at the screen, her heart leaped.

“Nate.” She sat up, juggling the phone, and almost dropping it into her lap.

“Hey, Ava. It's good to see you.” He swiped a hand through his hair, and her heart thudded double-time as his handsome face filled the screen.

“It's good to see you, too.” She ran a hand over her hair, smoothing down any strays, before glancing down at her top. Thank goodness there were no stains. She couldn't do much about her puffy eyes and red nose, though.

“Mrs. Spinks suggested I call you this way. I know it's not the same as having you here, but perhaps that's a good thing. Then you won't see how nervous I am.” His lips parted into a wry grin.

With a chuckle, Ava tugged the blanket over her lap and settled against the cushions. She understood his nerves. Hers

were buzzing like crazy.

“You arrived home safely?”

“Yes.” Home. She glanced around at the house she’d lived in for years. Hers and Rhett’s forever house. What once had been her pride and joy no longer felt like home. With its modern everything, it wasn’t the cozy rustic cabin on the outskirts of Oakview Falls. It was large and empty and lonely. “By the way, thank you for the carving you left on the porch. I’ve got quite a collection now.” She moved her phone to show Nate the figurines on the coffee table.

“You’re welcome.” His eyes crinkled in the corners. “I guess...” He sighed, rubbing a hand over his jaw as he settled into his seat, the leather creaking with his movement. “May as well put it all out there,” he mumbled, probably more for himself than Ava’s ears. “I didn’t get to say everything I wanted to before you left. And we kind of left things a little unfinished last night.”

They had. They had left things unspoken, and there were so many thoughts filling her head that she didn’t know where to start. He’d asked her to stay, but she’d said no, even though her heart had screamed yes.

“I’m all ears.” Her heart thundered against her ribs in anticipation of what he was going to say.

“Dylan told me all about pride and grace.”

Ava’s eyebrow arched. “Pride and grace?”

“That was my reaction, too.” Nate chuckled. “I had a big talk with him, and he made me realize I’ve been too proud to accept grace.”

Ava slowly nodded. It kind of made sense.

“Especially from you.” His eyes held hers, and even though they were miles apart, she felt the pull of emotion as though they were in the same room. “My pride got in the way of accepting your grace and forgiveness.”

As did hers. “I need grace, too, Nate. Confessing about that night we shared was all God’s doing. I didn’t want to

bring those memories out into the open.” She’d wanted to run as far away from them as she could.

“But it needed to be done. We needed to seek forgiveness from each other.”

“Yeah.” She realized that, now. Funny how God worked. His promises were always true; He worked everything together for good, even when it made no sense.

“Oh! I quit my job,” she blurted, wanting to tell someone her news.

“What?” Nate’s eyebrows disappeared beneath his dark hair flopping over his forehead. “When? What will you do?”

She glanced around her living room and saw the remnants of her life with Rhett. She’d get rid of the ornaments in the attic. Then sell some of the furniture. As for everything else, she didn’t have a plan. She shrugged, returning her focus to the screen. “Felix called me earlier, and I told him then. Something about Oakview Falls worked its way into my heart. There’s nothing really here for me anymore.”

“But there’s nothing in Oakview Falls for you, either. You said it yourself.”

Yes, and she regretted saying those words. She sighed, plucking some fluff off the blanket. “I may have stretched the truth, Nate. I was afraid. I needed to discern that my feelings were that of a thirty-three-year-old woman, and not an eighteen-year-old infatuated with her brother’s best friend. With my failed marriage, I needed to discern and pray through my thoughts and feelings. I didn’t want to rush something because of nostalgia.”

“And?” He leaned toward the camera. His eyes pooling with hope.

“And my feelings are that of a thirty-three-year-old woman.”

Nate’s brow crinkled. “Is that a good thing?”

“Yes! It means I know what legitimate feelings are. It means that Nate Hollister has always owned a piece of my

heart. And now with age and experience on my side, I can say with certainty that what I feel is the real thing.” There. Her heart was out there. No point walking on eggshells. Vulnerability was hard, but so was hiding from the truth. She couldn’t be any more open with him. He held her heart, and she only hoped he wouldn’t destroy it.

Suddenly, the call dropped out. *Well, that’s just great timing.* Just when she’d confessed her feelings. She stared at the blank screen, waiting for him to call back. Her pulse thrummed in her veins as seconds ticked by. Should she call him? Maybe she shouldn’t have said so much. Had she scared him off?

Her finger hovered over the screen. *Will he think I’m desperate if I call him? What if he doesn’t feel the same way?* A knock at the door sounded. She wasn’t in the mood for carolers. Not when she’d just put her heart on the line.

Knock-knock-knock.

“Good grief,” Ava mumbled, tossing the blanket aside. What carolers harassed the home owner? She marched over to the door and flung it open. “I’m not...” Her words stuck in her throat. “Nate?”

“Surprise.” He held his hands out. Wearing his familiar black woolen cap, jeans and a black coat, his gorgeous heart-stopping grin lit up his face.

Ava clenched her hand to her chest. “Wh-what are you doing here? Weren’t you just in Oakview Falls?” She glanced from her phone back to him.

“I’ve been sitting in your drive. I was going to come up earlier, but I wasn’t sure if you’d let me in.”

Ava’s head spun. He drove here? He was calling her from his truck in her drive? She had so many questions.

A deep laugh rumbled in his chest. “I didn’t teleport here.”

“Of course not.”

With hands in his pockets, Nate shuffled his feet on the porch. “Can I come in? It’s freezing out here.”

“Yes, yes, of course.” Ava stepped aside, reaching out to grab his shoulder as he walked past. Yes, he was real.

“So...” He reached for her hand and led her in front of the fireplace. “You were saying?”

Her cheeks flamed. That’s right. She’d poured out her heart before he ended their call. “I’m pretty sure you heard everything.”

He lifted his hand and ran his fingers down her cheek. She briefly closed her eyes as her skin ignited beneath his touch. “If you say you have nothing to offer me, Nate, then you can walk back out that door and go home.”

A slow grin broke on his face. “I wasn’t going to say that. While it might be true in the material sense, I think I can move past that. I can offer my heart, and hope that’s enough for now.”

Ava lifted her gaze to meet his. Gray-blue eyes swirled with emotion, mimicking the joy and admiration in hers. Her heart soared and tears pricked her eyes—this time with happiness. “It sure is. I’m not asking you for the world. Just some grace and love.”

“It’s yours, Ava. All yours.”

And with that, Nate closed the distance between them and lowered his mouth to hers. He cupped the back of her head, and her body buzzed with electricity as their lips met. Her fingers drifted to the silky strands at his nape.

His gentle touch, his tender kiss, made her feel treasured and adored. And all her fragmented thoughts rearranged with clarity that this was so right. Right here, in this moment, was where she was meant to be.

A journey of obedience had led her to this very moment where grace and hope collided in an outpouring of love for this man before her. Her heart had known it all those years ago, and it had never forgotten.

“Merry Christmas, Ava,” Nate murmured, his breath warm on her cheek as he pulled her tight against his chest.

“Merry Christmas, Nate.” She grinned against the soft fabric of his shirt beneath his winter coat. *Merry Christmas, indeed.*

* * *

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT? For a **bonus epilogue** of Nate and Ava’s story, [click here!](#)

* * *

DEAR READER,

Thank you so much for reading **Season of Grace**. I always enjoy Christmas stories, because they are a wonderful reminder of God’s incredible love for us in sending His son, Jesus, to become our savior. It is through God’s grace that we find forgiveness and eternal hope in Him.

If you enjoyed **Season of Grace**, I would appreciate it if you could leave a review to let others know your thoughts. Your words are as important to an author as an author’s words are to you! You can leave a review at [Amazon](#) and/or [Goodreads](#) (and it can be as short as you like!)

To be notified of all my new releases, and to be alerted to some great book deals, why not [join my reader’s list](#)? You’ll also receive - *Lines of Promise* - as a free gift.

Blessings to you and yours this Christmastime as you remember the true reason for the season.

Kristen.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Faith. Hope. Heart.

Kristen M. Fraser is a Christian fiction author, residing in beautiful Queensland, Australia with her husband and four children. She drinks way too much coffee, has a far too messy house, and probably doesn't get enough sleep. When she's not being the family Uber driver, or making a gazillion school lunches, Kristen loves running, climbing mountains, spending time at the beach, and given a moment of solitude (ha!), curling up with a good book.

Although her books are works of fiction, Kristen believes everyone has a story to tell. As such, she takes inspiration for her writing from people's everyday lives - their struggles and successes. She writes *hopeful, faith-filled* stories to encourage others and to lead them to the Father's *heart*.

It is her prayer that you will be encouraged and inspired by her words.

Kristen loves hearing from her readers, and will always endeavour to reply. You can connect with Kristen here:

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