

CHRISTMAS IN WILLOW FALLS



SIDEWALKS
AND
MISTLETOE

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

MICHELLE
PENNINGTON

Sidewalks and Mistletoe
By Michelle Pennington

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Chapter One

Ugh, not that one. Nope, not that one either.

Aubrey Seaton sighed as she clicked the ‘next’ button for the fortieth time. She had reports to run and a presentation to finish for her meeting that afternoon, but if she didn’t find a new job soon, she was going to go crazy.

“Incoming,” her friend Genna called from across the aisle in a voice that held both amusement and warning.

Aubrey raised her aching eyes from her computer to peer over the half-wall of her cubicle. The blur over her head slowly resolved itself into the familiar face of her sister, Heather.

“Merry Christmas. I brought you something,” Heather said.

Even exhausted from coming into work at seven that morning, Aubrey’s reactions were still quick enough to close her laptop before Heather saw what was on the screen. “What is that?” All she could see was a green blob with white balls and a big red bow. She blinked—three times— but it didn’t

help, so she rubbed her eyes as she scooted back in her desk chair. Finally, her eyes focused enough to see it was a big swag of mistletoe.

“No way! Take it away, Heather. It already looks like a Christmas store exploded around here, and the last thing I need is that hanging over my desk.”

“I don’t get it. What’s your problem with Christmas this year?” Heather frowned and stepped around the partition into Aubrey’s space. “You know we’re trying to get the whole office to participate in our cubicle decoration contest. How do you think it makes me look when my own sister won’t cooperate?”

“The extra clutter makes me stressed out.” It was a half-lie, but she wasn’t ready to tell Heather the truth: that she hoped to quit working there soon and her attitude had been permanently switched to “don’t care” when it came to anything office related. Heather worked in Human Resources and had been instrumental in Aubrey getting a job at P&L Marketing. She would flip out when Aubrey resigned. Which was why she wasn’t telling her until the last possible moment.

“Okay, but look. It’s just a little greenery. And it’s the most romantic Christmas decoration there is. Hey! You could

wear a swig of it in your hair for the Candy Cane ball and get a kiss out of it.”

Aubrey sighed, not caring if Heather heard her. Ever since Heather had married Wonder Boy Craig Martin six months ago, she'd been determined to fix Aubrey's love life. And that was one area of her life she didn't want Heather messing with. Since she'd graduated from high school, her mom and sister had directed her down the path they wanted her to follow. She hadn't minded really, since she'd had no idea what she wanted to do with her future. But a degree in marketing, a job in the same firm where Heather worked, and an apartment in a prestigious apartment complex that had been one of her mother's pet projects before she'd been elected mayor of Willow Falls last year was quite enough. When it came to romance, she was determined to pick her own man. And with her new plans to start a new life far away from Willow Falls, Arkansas, romance was going to have to wait awhile.

“I'll find my own date to the ball, thank you very much. If I even go.”

Heather gasped. “You *have* to go! It's one of the biggest public relations events Mom has, and you know she counts on us to be there.”

“I know. I know.” But their mom was going to have to learn to make do with having just one daughter at her beck and call instead of two. “I’ll be there. And I’ll get my own date. Now find your tree a new home before I do.”

Genna must have been listening in from her cubicle, because she stifled a giggle and said, “Tell her, girl.”

Aubrey pressed her lips together to keep from laughing. Genna knew exactly how much her sister irritated her. In fact, it had been her support and encouragement that had helped Aubrey find the courage to start looking for a new job and a new life. One without the stifling interference of her successful family.

Heather turned to Genna. “A good friend would want her to find someone to make her happy.”

Genna shrugged. “Aubrey knows I’m there for her.”

And she did. The difference between Genna’s help and Heather’s was that Heather never cared about what would actually make Aubrey happy.

It was situations just like this that made Aubrey so desperate to *get away*. At the moment, the best she could do was escape the office. Her empty stomach was a convenient

excuse. “Well, I haven’t had anything to eat all day, so I’m going to go get something. Anybody want something?” As she spoke, she pulled out the mirror she kept in her desk so she could touch up her lip gloss and brush her hair.

“Hmmm. From that primping, you must be going to see Lane,” Genna said teasingly.

Aubrey cast a warning glance at her and motioned with her eyes to Heather. “I haven’t decided where I’m going yet.”

Okay, she had. And it wasn’t for the reason Genna was insinuating. She loved everything Lane served from his food truck. *That* was why she went by every morning. The fact that Lane himself was a yummy diversion was just a bonus.

“Sure you haven’t. I’ll take some coffee,” Genna said. “From *wherever* you decide to go.”

That last bit was said with such a teasing glint in her eyes that Aubrey wanted to throw something at her. “Of course.” Aubrey turned to her sister. “Anything for you, Heather? A cinnamon roll maybe?”

“That’s what I thought,” Genna said in satisfaction.

Aubrey sighed, but Heather wasn’t paying any attention to Genna. “You know I’m on a diet.”

She did know it, which was the only reason she'd asked.

After putting on her red coat and flannel scarf, she simply replied, "Just thought I'd offer."

But Heather wasn't ready to give up. As Aubrey left, Heather followed behind with her bundle of mistletoe. "Look, I know that wasn't the smoothest way to bring it up, but I have a really nice guy I want you to meet. He's a lawyer, and he works at the firm just across the square. He's good looking, smart, and a great dresser. Seriously, he's got these dreamy blue eyes that will make you melt. I kind of wish Craig had blue eyes."

While she listed all the merits of this supposed dream guy, Aubrey kept walking through the maze of cubicles toward the elevator. "I'm sure he's amazing, Heather, but I'm not interested. Talk to you later."

Heather huffed and turned off down another aisle toward the Human Resources office. Aubrey hurried into the elevator and let out a sigh of relief. She'd escaped for now. Heather wouldn't give up, but there was no way Aubrey would consider marrying a lawyer. Her brother-in-law was all the reason she needed to avoid the whole profession romantically. Not only was he arrogant and bossy, she suspected he hoped to

start a political career through his mother-in-law's connections. They were always having dinner parties and attending charity events with a crowd of brown-nosing, name-dropping, artificial social climbers.

No, she wanted nothing to do with anyone from Heather's circle.

Out on the sidewalk, Aubrey paused to button her coat against the brisk chill in the air. Willow Falls was experiencing an unusual cold snap. Usually, they were lucky to even need light jackets at Christmas time, with the only snow in sight being the artificial kind, but this year the forecast showed snow chances nearly every day with an actual snowstorm predicted on Christmas Eve—only six days away. Aubrey was actually pretty excited about that. Getting snowed in at home and missing out on Christmas with her family sounded... *amazing*. Too bad the forecast was probably just an exaggeration by bored meteorologists.

As she walked around the square to the lot where all the food trucks parked, she reveled in the sound of Christmas carols playing over the giant speakers the city had put out as part of its "Lights on the Square" display. She checked out the festive displays in each shop window along the way, pausing

for a closer look at the scrumptious display at Sugar Lips Cookie and Chocolate company. Who needed decorations in a cubicle when this kind of Christmas magic was right outside? She didn't even mind walking in the cold with her legs exposed to the icy wind, since she wore a knee-length pencil skirt and her favorite black heels—especially since every step took her closer to coffee and warm, freshly baked cinnamon rolls from Son of a Biscuit Eater.

And Lane, who was yummier than the food he served from his big, blue food truck.

Son of a Biscuit Eater sat in the center of the half-circle of five food trucks in what had once been an abandoned lot. The food-truck park had only been up and running since early summer, but it had quickly become a popular spot. Some of the trucks had customers coming from all over the city. Lane was one of them, so Aubrey wasn't surprised to see that she'd have to wait in line. It wasn't too bad though, with Lane leaning out of his service window to help customers. Yep. She could easily watch that all day.

Lane passed a cup of coffee to the man at the front of the line and said, "Here you go. Tell me what you think of that

jalapeño cheddar biscuit. If people like them, I'm going to add them to my regular menu.”

As he turned to the next customer in line, Aubrey gulped in deep breath of air. Just the sight of his red-and-black plaid shirt rolled up to reveal his muscular, tanned forearms made it hard to breathe. Not to mention the way his black hair flopped forward over his forehead and his wide smile glinted at the short older lady whose head barely reached the window.

Since he was so tall—tall enough that he barely fit into his food truck—he had to bend nearly in half just to hear her. He wouldn't care though. One of the reasons Aubrey liked coming to see him every day was that he was always so cheerful. She needed more of that in her life.

Just as that thought went through her head, Lane looked up and saw her. “Aubrey! I thought you must have cheated on me with another food truck this morning.”

Everyone in line looked back at her, laughing. She felt herself blushing, but she was used to Lane's teasing. “I tried. But I just can't go a day without your food.”

“Who can?” His smile flashed, the kind that made her feel like a toasted marshmallow inside. “Hey, come up here. I want you to try something.”

Aubrey bit her lip, feeling bad about cutting in line, but she couldn't resist the invitation.

"Hey, no favoritism," the man in front of her said.

Aubrey paused, appalled, until she realized he was joking.

"Sorry," Lane told the man. "I can't resist a beautiful woman who likes my biscuits."

Wondering if there was some way to strangle a man who was twice your size through a little window, Aubrey stepped up to the side of the window while the others laughed. "Lane, if you're going to embarrass me, I'm going to head over to the waffle guy."

His eyebrow rose. "You'd be disappointed. Nobody can measure up to me."

"You're impossible."

"To resist. Hold on." He turned back inside and came back a moment later with the other lady's order. "Here you go, Mrs. Bennett."

"Thank you, my dear. And don't annoy this sweet thing too much, okay? She looks nice."

He smiled at her. "She is. But how else am I supposed to get her attention? Now, be sure to come see me again

tomorrow.”

She sighed. “Why are the charming ones always so much trouble?”

Aubrey burst out laughing as the lady walked away. “Hah! That serves you right.”

Lane looked after her, his expression perplexed. “Why didn’t that sound like a compliment?”

“Because it wasn’t. Now, what did you want me for?”

“Oh. Just a sec.” He turned back inside and came back with a paper plate that held one of his famous cinnamon biscuits. It was basically a cinnamon roll but made with biscuit dough instead of yeast bread. The result was tender, flaky perfection. He knew it was her favorite...so why did she need to try it?

“Uh, thanks, but what’s new?”

He wiggled his eyebrows. “Try it.”

Aubrey broke off a piece and popped it in her mouth. She closed her eyes in pleasure as the mix of savory biscuit and buttery cinnamon sugar practically melted in her mouth. But there was something slightly different—another note of flavor. “Mmmm. That’s amazing. What is it?”

“It’s a secret. Something special for Christmas.”

Aubrey rolled her eyes. “You and your secrets.” But since she had a whole cinnamon roll to munch on, she wasn’t going to complain too much.

She broke off another piece and popped it into her mouth while Lane helped the next person in line. As she chewed, she looked out at the rest of the lot, idly watching the other people milling around...and saw something that made her freeze in panic. Heather was walking toward the food truck lot with some guy in a suit. It had to be the lawyer she’d mentioned, and no doubt she was looking for Aubrey.

“Shoot.”

“What?” Lane asked, looking up in concern as he gave change to the teenagers he was serving.

“I’ve gotta hide.”

“From who?”

“I’ll explain later, but for now, you’ll have to forgive me. I’m desperate.”

“Huh?”

She didn’t wait to answer. Heather might see her at any second, so she ran around to the side of Lane’s food truck and

dodged inside. Once there, she had to smother her laughter at Lane's shocked expression, but this was serious. She ducked down next to the oven under the counter and put her finger over her lips. "Shhhhh!"

Chapter Two

As Aubrey squatted down, she took the chance to check out the inside of the food truck. It was impressive really. Clean. Organized. Efficient. It was especially remarkable because Lane seemed the kind of guy to be roughing it in a cabin in the woods—or posing as a model for a paper towel commercial. But since he was such a big guy, he probably had to keep it this way or he wouldn't be able to function. Clutter wouldn't leave much room to move around.

Lane came over to fill up a cup of coffee and glanced down at her. Something in him had shifted. His shoulders and jaw looked tense, and she got the sense he was forcing himself to remain calm. “Aubrey?”

“Yes.”

“If you don't tell me what's going on right now, I might freak out. Is there someone out there I need to go beat up?”

A brawl between Lane and Heather would be an event worth buying tickets for. “No. I wish. It's my sister, Heather—the tall blond woman out there in the long black coat and red

scarf who looks like me but older.” That last bit gave her a childish surge of satisfaction.

His eyes swept over Aubrey for a second before going back over to the window. As he gave the coffee to the customer waiting for it, his eyes swept the crowd. “Okay, I see her. She’s with some hotshot in a suit.”

“Exactly. That’s the problem. She’s trying to set me up with a lawyer.”

His hands paused over the register. “And you don’t want her to?”

“Heck no.”

“Is this an aversion to her playing matchmaker, this particular man, or dating in general?”

“All of the above.”

“I see.” He counted out change and went back to the window. “She looks like she means business. How long are you going to hide from her?”

Aubrey sighed. “I don’t know. I’m going to hold out as long as I can, but my legs are already starting to cramp.”

Lane chuckled and shook his head. “Then stand up. She won’t see you if you stay back in the corner.”

She did, because it was either that or fall over. “It’s just that I have this red coat on so I’ll be easy to see if she peeks through the window. And she knows I like your food.”

“That must be why she’s headed in this direction.”

“Oh no!”

Lane crossed the trailer to her in three long strides. Only inches away from her now, he blocked out the lights overhead—and pretty much everything else. Aubrey’s heart reacted in a very idiotic way, beating hard and fast as he reached for her, his fingers closing around the lapels of her coat.

“What are you doing?” she asked, surprised but not concerned.

“If you’re worried about her seeing your coat, you should take it off.” As he spoke, he pushed it off her shoulders.

Aubrey twisted, shrugging to help maneuver it off in the tight space, holding her breath when he reached around her to gather it up as it slid off. His arm brushed hers, and he pulled away quickly, his eyes catching and holding her surprised gaze.

Lane cleared his throat and turned around, gently folding her coat and tucking it under the counter on top of a box of

insulated coffee cups. Then he reached over and poured Aubrey a cup of coffee. “I think you need this. Now...just relax.”

She took it gratefully. Maybe it would help settle down the crazy fluttering inside her.

Lured by the bins of sugar and creamer, Aubrey dared to take a few steps closer to the window to doctor the coffee. After dumping in sugar and creamer, she swirled it together with a stir stick and blew on the surface. Then she heard Heather’s voice through the window and froze, afraid any sound or movement she made would catch her sister’s attention.

“Excuse me, but have you seen Aubrey? She’s a regular customer of yours. You know, shoulder-length blond hair, skinny nose, red coat?”

Aubrey reached up and felt her nose. It might be a bit... narrow...but it wasn’t *skinny*.

“She didn’t come this morning at her usual time.”

“Yeah, I know. She just left the office, saying she was going to get cinnamon rolls.”

“Ah. I sell cinnamon biscuits not rolls. You might try the waffle truck.”

“Isn’t that the same thing?” Heather sounded annoyed now.

“Clearly you’ve never had one of my cinnamon biscuits. Can I get you one?”

“No. I don’t eat carbs.”

“That’s no way to live a life,” Lane answered. His tone was completely serious—concerned even—but Aubrey could hear the amusement in it.

“It is if you don’t want to get diabetes,” Heather said. Aubrey rolled her eyes. Heather lectured her all the time about her bad eating habits. Diabetes was a frequent topic in those lectures.

Lane cleared his throat. “You have a point there. but don’t talk too loudly. I don’t want my customers to realize that.” A timer went off on the stove. “Excuse me, I need to grab my biscuits before they burn.”

“If you see her, tell her Heather is looking for her,” Heather called after him.

He waved in acknowledgment and moved toward the oven.

Aubrey smiled at him in admiration. “I don’t know whether to be impressed or terrified with how well you deceived her without actually lying.”

“It’s a gift. It came in handy in my last job.”

“What did you do?”

“I worked in insurance.”

“Okay, I’m terrified.”

He smiled at her as he grabbed a hot pad and pulled a pan of tall, golden biscuits out of the oven. As he sat them down on the metal work counter, he said. “I find baking a better use of my time. Now, I think I was supposed to give you a message if I saw you. What was it?” He pretended to think about it as he turned off the timer. “Oh yeah. Heather is looking for you.”

“Thanks.”

“You’ve got it.”

“What are those?”

“My newest flavor. Jalapeño Cheddar. Wait a second. I’m going to hook you up.”

“Don’t you have customers?”

“They can wait a minute.”

And because his food was so good, they would. But she felt bad. “Thanks. I’m supposed to take something back for a couple of my friends too.”

He nodded but didn’t turn away from his work. He drizzled melted butter on his small grill top, pulled a pitcher of beaten eggs out of the fridge, poured three small puddles of egg and then dropped a couple of sausage patties near them. They were already cooked and waiting in the refrigerated prep station, so they just needed to be warmed up. In no time at all, Lane had assembled three sausage, egg, and cheese biscuits.

While he wrapped them in paper, he glanced at Aubrey as she sipped her coffee. “Don’t go anywhere, okay?”

“Wasn’t planning on it.”

He leaned out the window and took the next customer’s order. Aubrey had to turn away to keep from admiring the view of his backside.

She had spreadsheets and reports to get back to, as well as a presentation due at three o'clock. What was she doing still hanging out here now that Heather had given up and gone away?

Lane packaged up two cinnamon biscuits and poured two more cups of coffee, then handed them out the window. "I need to brew more coffee," he said, putting the half-empty pot down on the warming plate.

Even though she wasn't sure if he was talking to her or himself, she asked, "Can I help?"

He hesitated as he swiped a credit card at the register. "Uh, sure. Everything you need should be to the left there."

It took her longer than it probably would have taken him, but she managed to get the coffee brewing by the time he finished with the next two customers.

"Thanks," he said, smiling at her as he flicked open a paper bag for the biscuits he'd made her.

"No problem." Aubrey took a deep breath, her heart once again hammering away with a mind of its own. "I promise not to get in your way anymore. Thanks for helping me out."

He picked up a metal spatula and scooped another cinnamon biscuit from the warming case on the counter and nestled it into a little takeout box. He grabbed a squeeze bottle of icing and drizzled some over the biscuit before closing the box and adding it to her bag. “I liked having you in my way. You should come bother me again sometime.”

“Oh yeah?”

His eyes held hers, and for the first time she could see that they weren't brown, like she'd thought, but more of an olive green with dark gold around his irises.

“Maybe tomorrow?” he asked.

Aubrey pressed her lips together to keep from grinning like an idiot. “I'm not sure I'll be hiding from Heather tomorrow.”

“Well, that doesn't have to be the only reason you come hang out here on your breaks.”

She melted like the icing on a hot cinnamon biscuit. She couldn't imagine a better reason to escape from slaving away over numbers in her cubicle all day. How awesome would it be to spend a day in his food truck with hot coffee and the smell of buttery biscuits and cinnamon all around her? And maybe

the occasional nibble? And Lane looking at her with so much interest in his eyes?

Hold the train.

This was not a good idea. The short old lady was right. Lane was a charmer, and she could end up being too interested way too fast if she wasn't careful. She was leaving town the first chance she got, right? Taking off to distant horizons in search of a fresh start.

Time to back out of this situation before she did something stupid...like develop a legitimate crush on the food truck guy.

"Thanks, but I'm going to be really busy for a while." Needing to get out of his magnetic force, she reached for her coat and started digging for the cash she'd put in one of the pockets. "How...how much do I owe you?"

"It's on me."

But Aubrey kept digging and finally pulled out a twenty-dollar bill. "I couldn't. Especially not after you helped me out. Thanks again."

"Aubrey—"

"Have a nice day, Lane."

She turned and rushed out the door, not bothering to put her coat on as she practically ran back to the office. Not that she needed it. She was so flushed and overheated from embarrassment and confusion that she didn't even feel the cold.

Had she led him on? Made him think she was interested?

Amid the sound of cars passing, Christmas music playing, and her heels clicking against the pavement, she reached the horrible conclusion that she had both flirted with him and then been horribly rude to him by freaking out and running away.

She groaned. There was no way she could ever go back to his food truck again.

Chapter Three

“I still say it couldn’t possibly have been as bad as you think,” Genna said as she and Aubrey sat down at a table in their favorite Italian restaurant after work. Her husband was out of town on a business trip, so she had talked Aubrey into going out for some girl talk after Aubrey had told her about the incident at Lane’s truck.

“Believe me. It was every bit that bad. Maybe even worse.”

“But girl, you forget I’ve seen the guy. No single woman could help but flirt with him if he gave her even the slightest encouragement. And from what I hear, he was giving you quite a bit.”

A little curl of pleasure warmed Aubrey’s insides. “Yeah. He was definitely flirting with me.” She opened the menu, even though she always ordered the same thing. “But it’s probably just his personality. I doubt he’s really that interested in me. I just barged into his trailer, so he figured, why not?” She could feel Genna’s eyes on her but didn’t look up. She kept scanning the menu—ah, there it was. Lasagna.

“Can you give me one good reason why you shouldn’t see where things go with Lane?”

“Because I’m leaving, remember? As soon as I can.”

Genna wrinkled her nose. “Yeah, but you don’t know when. You haven’t even started applying for new jobs yet. I’m not saying marry the guy. Just go on a few dates and have some fun.”

Aubrey thought about it for a minute, but remembering how easily Lane had affected her, she knew it was too dangerous. Talk about playing with fire. “I can’t take the chance I’d develop feelings for him or anyone else right now. I’m trying to be wise and logical here, Genna. Don’t encourage me to do something stupid.”

“Aubrey, I hate to break it to you, but I suspect you might already have feelings for him.”

She started to deny it, but Genna knew her too well. “Okay. Baby feelings. Unimportant, temporary-crush kind of feelings. And only because he’s funny and good-looking and surprisingly sweet and helpful.”

Genna looked up at the ceiling and rolled her eyes. “I can’t help you if you’re going to be in denial over it all.”

The waiter came up to them then to take their order, and Genna, mercifully, paused the discussion. But when he'd gone, she jumped right back into it. "The big question is, who are you going to take to the ball if you won't take Heather's lawyer or Lane?"

"Nobody. I'm going to go stag."

"But since your mom is the mayor, you're going to end up in the society pages of The Willow Falls Courier all by yourself."

Aubrey shrugged, trying to pretend that she didn't care. "Better than being annoyed by my date all night."

"Or maybe falling in love with him if it was Lane?"

"Especially better than that. At least right now. So, please, let's talk about sales reports or the cost of gas or the weather or anything but men."

Genna raised an eyebrow but shrugged and took a sip of her drink. "If you say so. Think there's a chance of us actually getting some good snow at Christmas for once?"

Aubrey sighed in relief and dove into the conversation about the snow she wanted and probably wasn't going to get.

They enjoyed their food and lingered so long that they even split a plate of tiramisu with their coffee. They talked long after they paid their bills and kept it up as they walked to their cars, standing in the cold like idiots until Aubrey shivered. “Okay, this is fun, but I’ve got to go. It’s not like we can’t talk more tomorrow.”

Genna smiled and unlocked her car door. “Oh, I’ll make sure we’ll have plenty to talk about in the morning.”

What did that mean? But Genna was already driving away, so Aubrey shrugged and got into her car, blasting both the heater and the local radio station that played round-the-clock Christmas music.

The next morning, when Aubrey got to her desk, she had her answer. A paper sack waited on her desk. It looked suspiciously like the ones from Son of a Biscuit Eater. “Genna? Are you responsible for this?” It had to be her. She was the only other person crazy enough to come to work so early. It was six-thirty, for Pete’s sake.

“I thought you could use a pick-me-up this morning. Plus, I knew you probably wouldn’t go get it yourself.”

Awwww. Aubrey smiled at the sweet gesture. Pulling the bag toward her, she unfolded the rolled-down top and reached inside. But instead of a cinnamon biscuit, the first thing she pulled out was a business card. Lane's. With his number circled.

“Okay, I get it, Genna. You think I should call him.”

“Actually, that was all him.” Genna came closer, looking way too pleased with herself. “I just went to sort of...feel him out.”

“Really? Huh.” Aubrey turned the card over and saw that he'd written something. At Genna's expectant look, she read it aloud. “Hope I didn't scare you off. Please call me. —Lane.”

Genna gave a quiet shriek. “So sweet! That guy is down there sweating bullets that he's not going to see you again. I took the liberty of letting him know where you work—just in case you never got up the nerve to call him.”

Aubrey tossed the business card down as if it was the bait to a trap she might fall into. “This doesn't change the fact that it's not a good idea. But I appreciate it.” She reached into the bag and pulled out the cinnamon biscuit. It was still warm and fragrant. “And I'm totally going to enjoy this.”

As mornings go, it wasn't a terrible way to start the day. Unfortunately, everything changed at seven forty-five when Heather walked into the building, followed by a man Aubrey had never seen before. Heather zeroed in on her and headed straight to her desk. Short of hiding under her desk, there was nowhere to go this time.

“Good morning, Heather. You're in earlier than usual.” Aubrey flashed her the most pleasant smile she could muster.

Heather smiled back in a victorious way that set Aubrey's teeth on edge. “I wanted to be sure to catch you. Aubrey, this is Charles Haddox, the man I was telling you about. Charles, this is my little sister, Aubrey.”

There was nothing for it but to shake the hand he held out to her and be pleasant. Heather had over-exaggerated his height. He was only a few inches taller than her, making him about average. However, she had not exaggerated his good looks. He was definitely handsome, with strong, Nordic features, a hard, square line to his jaw, an aquiline nose, and ice-blue eyes. Odd how soft his hands were, though. Combined with the predatory glint in his eyes, she made the handshake as brief as she could and stepped back.

Glancing back down at her cinnamon biscuit, she said, “I’m afraid it’s a bad time for me. I have to get to an eight o’clock meeting.”

“I understand,” Charles said, smiling at her in an approving way. “I have meetings this morning as well. Would you be free to meet for lunch?”

Free? Yes. Interested? No. “I’m afraid not.”

Looking over Heather’s shoulder, Aubrey flashed a look at Genna, who was enjoying the scene way too much. But being a loyal friend, she jumped in to help. “I already asked her the same question.”

As Heather and Charles shifted around to look at Genna, Aubrey relaxed. Hopefully Heather would accept her defeat gracefully.

But Genna wasn’t done. “Know what she told me though? She already had plans.”

“With who?” Heather asked, right before Aubrey could ask the same question.

“With Lane, who apparently is the son of a biscuit eater.”

“The food truck guy?”

Aubrey raised an eyebrow at Genna, but she'd have to kill her later. For now, she'd roll with it. "Yes."

A corner of Heather's lip curled up in a sneer. "What are you going to do? Hang out in his truck while he waits on customers?"

It would be more fun than going out with Heather's Ken doll. And actually, hanging out in Lane's truck had been more fun than *anything* she'd done in a long time.

"I'd be good with that." Aubrey said, her voice unsteady with compressed laughter.

Heather stepped close to her and whispered, "Are you serious right now? You'd pick that hick over a man like Charles?"

Aubrey shrugged. "I like to have fun."

"You need to have less fun and more sense."

Aubrey just stared at her, not backing down. Heather had decided Aubrey's gym and dentist and gynecologist. Her influence ended today.

Stepping around Heather, she held her hand out to Charles again, bracing herself for another awkward handshake. "Thank you for the offer anyway, Charles. Maybe I'll see you around

some time. For now, you'll have to excuse me. I need to get to my meeting."

Aubrey glanced one more time at Heather as she walked away, catching her narrow-eyed glare. She'd gotten the upper hand there, but she knew her sister too well to think she'd give up. All she could do was hope Heather wouldn't check too closely into her made-up lunch date.

Chapter Four

When the lunch hour rolled around, Genna came over to Aubrey's cubicle and leaned her arm on the low partition wall. "So, how was your eight o'clock meeting?"

Aubrey smiled but didn't take her eyes off her screen as she scrolled past pages of numbers. "My cinnamon biscuit and I had a very lovely meeting in the conference room, thank you."

"Uh huh. Well, this is a warning that you'd better be on the move, because Heather is heading over here."

"What?" Aubrey stood up, but only poked her head up above the half wall. Sure enough, she could see Heather's perfectly coiled bun and gold sweater across the giant room, heading their direction.

Genna nodded to Aubrey's desk. "You might want to pick up Lane's card over there and send him a text. She's going to require proof."

"No thanks to you."

"It was a perfect solution. Just ask him to help you out. No big deal."

Aubrey narrowed her eyes. “What are you up to?”

“Me?”

“Look, it’s fine. I’ll just sneak out of here and go have lunch by myself.”

“Too late for that.”

“Hey, ladies,” Heather said, coming up beside Genna. She looked down at Aubrey with a glint in her eye. “Isn’t it about time you headed off for your date?”

“Um, yes. Well, actually, Lane’s schedule is tricky with the truck, you know. We won’t be going until the usual lunch rush is over.”

“That makes sense. Well, let me know when you’re going. I think I’ll walk down there with you so I can meet him. I mean, I talked to him briefly the other day, but not in the context of someone dating my sister.”

Aubrey gave in to the inevitable. She was going to have to call Lane and ask him for a favor. “We aren’t dating. It’s just a date.”

“But I wouldn’t be surprised if it turned into more,” Genna added, earning a frustrated glance from Aubrey.

“I still want to meet him,” Heather assured them defiantly. “I mean, unless there’s some reason why you don’t want me to talk to him?”

“Of course not,” Aubrey answered, attempting to sound relaxed. “I’d be happy to introduce you.”

“Great. I’ll be ready when you are.”

It took some effort to keep a composed smile on her face as Heather walked away. As soon as she was gone, Aubrey rounded on her friend. “I really don’t need this, Genna,”

She shrugged. “Blame Heather, not me.”

Aubrey picked up Lane’s card and studied the all-caps, masculine writing on the card, running her finger over the glossy cardstock. “I blame both of you.” There was no point in putting it off any longer. Ignoring the flutter of nerves in her stomach, she dialed the number and held the phone to her ear. It rang three times before Lane answered.

“Hello?”

“Lane? This is Aubrey, the crazy lady who hid out in your food truck yesterday.”

“I haven’t forgotten.” The amused rasp in his voice made her nerves flutter even more, but in a completely different way.

“I guess I lost my bet with your friend Genna.”

“What bet?”

“I was sure you’d toss my card in the trash after the way you bolted out of my truck yesterday.”

“Before you go any further, I’m calling because I need another favor.” She took a deep breath. This was more awkward than she’d realized. “My sister is still trying to hook me up with that guy—”

“The one in the suit?”

“That’s the one. Genna told Heather that you and I are having lunch today. She was trying to help, and I went along with it because I thought my sister would leave me alone. But now I need to prove it to Heather.”

“Do I get bonus points for guessing where this is going?”

Aubrey let out a short, surprised chuckle. She should have known she wouldn’t get through this without him teasing her.

“Lane, would you be my fake lunch date?”

There was a short pause, as if this was a tricky decision.

“Would it involve actually eating lunch together?”

“I don’t want to take too much of your time.”

“I have the same twenty-four hours as anyone else.” There was a brief pause before he added, “The line at my window is already thinning out for the day. How about if I close up and meet you at your office in about twenty minutes?”

“Really? Are you sure. I don’t mind walking over to meet you—especially since I’m dumping this on you.”

“It’ll look more like a date if I pick you up.”

“True. Plus, it will be easier to get rid of Heather. I work in the P&L Marketing office on the square. Know where that is?”

“Sure do.”

“Just send me a text when you get here, and I’ll come down. And just as a warning, Heather will probably be with me.”

“I can handle it. See you in a few minutes.”

Aubrey hung up and stared at her phone screen for a minute. The day had certainly taken an unexpected turn—one that required a trip to the bathroom for a makeup and hair check. She closed her laptop as she stood up and grabbed her purse. But she winced when she realized she’d have to walk right past Heather.

Sure enough, when she passed the HR office, her sister rushed out to meet her. “Are you leaving now?”

“I guess he’s almost ready. I’m going to the bathroom first.”

“I’m coming too. I need to close my laptop. Hold on.”

But Aubrey pressed her lips together and kept moving. She’d only been in the bathroom a few seconds before she heard the click of Heather’s heels as she came in and took the stall next to her.

“So, how did you and Lane get together?” Heather asked.

Talking about this would have been awkward at any time, but while they were both peeing was just ridiculous. Even as sisters. “I don’t know. It just kind of happened.”

“I just don’t understand how you could be interested in a guy like that over someone like Charles.”

Since Heather couldn’t see her, Aubrey made a face at the dividing wall. “Guys like what?”

“You know, hot, but totally lacking any real ambition or future.”

“Do you have any idea how big of a snob you are?”

“I am not. I just want you to be with a man who can give you a good life.”

Finished, Aubrey grabbed her purse off the door hook and headed out to wash her hands. “I can give myself a good life.”

Heather came out and lathered up her hands as well. “What about getting married someday?”

Aubrey frowned and dug her favorite lip gloss out of her purse. After smoothing some over her lips, she said, “I was speaking generally.” But then her inner devil prompted her to annoy her sister more. “Still, I can think of worse fates than ending up in Lane’s brawny arms, so we’ll see what happens.”

“Aubrey. You’re not going to get serious with a *food-truck* guy, are you? Not really.”

Aubrey pulled out her brush and smoothed the tangles out of her shoulder-length brown hair. “The amazing thing is, Heather, I can do exactly that if I want to. This might come as a complete surprise to you, but you don’t own me or my life.”

Before Heather could answer, Aubrey’s phone chimed with a notification. It was a text from Lane, saying he was in the lobby downstairs.

“Is he here?” Heather asked.

“Yes. If you’re coming, please don’t embarrass me.”

“As if I would!”

When they got down to the lobby, Lane looked extremely out of place in the white, minimalist lobby. As she walked over to him, his smile held both welcome and definite amusement.

“Hey,” he said, his voice deep with an undertone of gentle mockery.

“Hey.” Sometimes it was best to keep conversation to a minimum. Aubrey gestured to Heather with her thumb. “You met my sister Heather yesterday, right?”

“I did, but I didn’t catch her name then.” His attention shifted to Heather as he focused a portion of his devastating charm on her. “It was a pleasure.”

Heather watched him with a bemused expression on her face. “Yes.” But she didn’t sound like she meant it. “I’ve been trying to figure out the series of events between lunch yesterday and when you two decided to go out today. You didn’t seem to know her very well then.”

He grinned. “Well, I have it on good authority that I’m a talented liar.” He leaned closer to Heather like he was

confiding something top secret to her. “She was hiding out in my food truck at the time, trying to avoid you, so I did my best to throw you off.”

Heather’s mouth fell open. She turned and shot Aubrey a glare.

Aubrey glared at Lane.

Lane smiled at both of them like he hadn’t just started a major sister fight.

“Aubrey?” Heather asked, her tone demanding an explanation.

But Lane answered for her. “She didn’t want to meet the lawyer dude. It’s kind of awkward, you know, since we’re sort of together. And it wasn’t like I wanted her to meet him either.”

Aubrey narrowed her eyes, trying to follow Lane’s lies. He really was talented. But since they were working for her, she didn’t contradict him.

“But Aubrey just said you weren’t in a relationship.” Heather asked, looking between them.

Lane reached out and took Aubrey’s hand, threading his fingers through hers as naturally as if he’d done it a hundred

times. The feeling of his warm, slightly calloused hand sent skitters of something dangerous through her, but Aubrey played along by stepping closer to him. Lane smiled down at her with a convincing expression of affection. “Maybe I’m just being hopeful.”

Heather pressed her lips together. It was clear she believed him and was not happy. “I see. Well, enjoy your lunch.” She shot Aubrey a firm look. “And I’ll talk to you later.” Then, without another word, she turned and headed back for the elevator.

What was Heather’s deal? Why did she care who Aubrey was with?

“So, she’s interesting,” Lane said, watching her leave.

“Very. The joys of family.” Then Aubrey looked back up at him. “But at least she’s gone. Come on. Let’s make a break for it.”

Chapter Five

As they walked out into the cold but sunny afternoon, Lane released Aubrey's hand slowly, almost reluctantly. Away from the warmth of his skin, her hand felt cold, so she shoved it deep in her coat pocket. She never would have imagined that she would be going to lunch with Lane, but now that she was, she couldn't deny feeling elated at the prospect of spending more time with him. However, she couldn't let herself chase that feeling.

"Where should we go?" Lane asked, drifting to a stop and turning to face her.

Afraid he would see the attraction she was still trying to subdue in her eyes, she focused on his collar, which was open, revealing a crisp white undershirt and the golden column of his neck. How could a neck be attractive? But his was.

When she didn't answer right away, he said, "I'm usually too busy to go anywhere for lunch, and I eat way too many leftover biscuits, so anything will be good for me."

"Well, since you don't get the chance often, why don't you pick?"

“My mother taught me to never argue with a hungry woman—especially one involved in shenanigans.”

She bit her lip until the corners of her mouth ached from trying not to grin at him. “It’s not a shenanigan.”

“Oh, yes, it is. Don’t try to argue with me. But okay, I know the best lunch joint in town. Mind if I drive?”

The jump in topic muddled her brain for a moment. “The food truck?”

He laughed then, so loudly that it startled a lady walking in front of them. She turned and glared as if humor was a crime.

“Sorry to disappoint you,” he finally said when he stopped laughing. “I know it’s every girl’s dream to be taken out in a big blue food truck, but I actually drive a regular truck too, the kind without a kitchen in back.”

“I have to admit, now that I think about it, the food truck sounds fun.”

Lane’s hand brushed against her back, directing her to turn the corner. “Well, if you ever need another fake date, we’ll make it happen.”

When they got to his truck, Aubrey looked it over in surprise. Why she was surprised, she didn't know. Since he looked like a lumberjack, she should have expected him to drive something like this big, black Ford Tundra with mud splattered up the sides. As they approached it from the back, she caught sight of his bumper sticker. It said, "Don't make fun of Rednecks. You'll need us when the zombies come."

Lane was as opposite from Charles as it was possible for a person to be.

But there he was, opening the door for her with a simple courtesy and a gentle smile that felt warm and natural. When he also offered his hand to help her climb inside, she couldn't help but smile as well. She kind of wished he would stop scoring points on her "good man" checklist, because it was already proving hard enough to keep her heart in control. Not to mention her hormones.

As he turned on the rumbly, powerful engine and buckled up, Aubrey asked, "So, where are we going?"

"My mom has a little restaurant on the outskirts of town. It's a home-cooking buffet."

"Are you serious? That sounds amazing. Let's go."

Lane nodded, his perfect smile glinting again. “Yes, ma’am.”

Aubrey had never ridden in a truck before, just cars and minivans and an occasional SUV. This, she decided, was a completely different experience. Lane drove quickly and with complete control and courtesy, but still, the truck seemed powerful and impatient, like it was built for something other than city driving. When Lane made a right turn onto the main road leading out of Willow Falls, the road was clear ahead, and he accelerated with what Aubrey felt was reckless enthusiasm, the engine roaring as he gunned it. She hung on and held her breath, feeling at once frightened and excited.

Lane glanced at her and laughed. “Scared?”

“No.”

“The way you’re clinging to that grip handle there proves otherwise.”

Aubrey made herself let go. “Your truck is loud. And... big.”

“And you look terrified. Don’t worry. I’ve never killed a lunch date yet.” He braked slowly...even gently, as they came to another turn. He kept his driving restrained from then on

until he pulled into a big gravel parking lot. The courtesy was sweet of him, but she was also disappointed. Odd. She should have felt grateful he'd slowed down. So why did she want him to go back to driving the way he had before?

As Lane came around to help her out, she looked at the restaurant, confused for a moment because it looked like a house. But there were a ton of other cars in the parking lot and a sign over the door that said, "Mama Kathy's Home Cooking".

"Now you'll see where I got all my biscuit-making talent. I kinda stole my mom's recipe."

Aubrey laughed and followed him inside. She looked around, wondering if they were going to have to wait, because even though the whole place was crammed full of mismatched tables and chairs, all of them were full. From the looks of things, every construction worker, fireman, plumber, and roofer in town was here, stuffing their faces. There were a few elderly women seated at a table in front of the window, daintily eating their food and gossiping, but otherwise, she was the only woman in sight. And half the male eyes in the room had shifted to her, as if wondering what she was doing there.

Feeling very out of place, she focused on the Christmas tree glinting in the far corner, with homemade ornaments, a popcorn garland, and a beautiful glass star on top. There were cute, old fashioned Christmas decorations on every table and strings of lights flashing on top of the two steamer tables of the buffet. Around it all hovered the most amazing scents. She had no doubt she was going to enjoy the food.

Before she could take in anything else, an older woman with sharp cheekbones and salt-and-pepper hair scraped back into a severe bun bustled toward them, in such a hurry that she barely glanced at them as she gathered up napkin-wrapped silverware. “Table for two?”

“What does it look like, Rusty?”

“Mercy, Lane. Does your mother know you’re here?”

“*You* didn’t even know I was here till just now. But we’re here to eat, so take us to that table.”

At that, a distressed expression came over Rusty’s face. “I only have that two-top in the back room next to the bathroom.”

“That’s fine. We’re here for the food, not a view.”

Rusty sighed and shook her head like she wasn't taking any responsibility for the situation and led them through two big rooms, then to the left into a smaller room that had probably once been a laundry room. She put their silverware down. "Well, you know where the buffet is. I'll go find Kathy. She's going to drop a litter of kittens when she finds out you brought a girlfriend in."

Lane, who had been helping Aubrey take her coat off, reached out a hand, saying, "No, Rusty—" but the woman was already off like a comet hurtling through the jam-packed dining area. He looked at Aubrey, an apologetic smile lifting one corner of his mouth. "Don't worry. I'll clear up the confusion in a minute."

But Aubrey discovered that she didn't mind being considered Lane's girlfriend—even if she couldn't let it happen for real.

She settled her coat over the back of her chair and nodded toward the front. "Don't worry about it. Can we go get some food?"

"Absolutely," he said, leading her forward with a gentle hand on her lower back. "Mom only serves one main dish every day, and it rotates through the week. Monday is

meatloaf, Tuesday is fried chicken, Wednesday is pot roast, and Friday is fried catfish. But since today is Thursday, you get to try my favorite: chicken and dumplings.”

“Awesome. I’ve never had that before.”

Lane paused, his hand stretched out to get a bowl from the stack near the first buffet table. “I’m starting to think you were raised under a rock.”

She shrugged and smiled. “Me too. Now, show me what to get.”

Soon, she held a bowl full of chicken and dumplings and a plate brimming over with rolls, fried okra, green beans, and candied sweet potatoes. Since Lane looked like he was going to heap more on it, she held her hand over it protectively. “Lane, I don’t think any more will fit.”

He laughed. “Fine. We can come back for more later.”

“Maybe *you* can. There’s no way I’ll finish this.”

“Well, you have to have dessert. I can smell the peach cobbler from here.”

Aubrey shook her head. “If this is how you always eat, it’s no wonder you’re so overgrown.”

Lane's eyes gleamed, and she was sure he had a comeback ready, but then a tall, plump woman came out of the swinging silver doors that led to the kitchen area. She wiped her hands on her apron and called out, "Lane, Rusty says you brought a girl."

He grinned. "Nice to see you too, Mom." Because his hands were full of dishes heaped even higher than Aubrey's, he could only nod his head. "This is my friend, Aubrey."

"Friend? Hah," his mom said, looking Aubrey over. "You know that's not what I want to hear."

"Mom," Lane said, his tone a gentle warning.

"He's been promising me grandchildren for years now, but you see how well that's going. When I heard he brought in a pretty girl, I got my hopes up."

Aubrey didn't know what to say. "It's nice to meet you." Realizing that a short man with a scraggly beard was glaring at her because she was blocking his way to the turnip greens, she moved hastily and nearly collided with Lane, who had to hold his bowl up over her head to make room for her.

"We're going to get out of the way and eat our food," he told his mom.

“Yes, I’ll come with you.”

Aubrey led the way, biting her lip to keep from laughing at the frustrated expression on Lane’s face.

As they sat down, his mom talked to some of the men at a nearby table, asking them how their food was and if their wives were doing okay. Then she moved an empty chair from their table and sat down next to Aubrey and Lane.

“Now,” she said, “you can tell me all about how you two got to know each other.”

Since she’d already taken a bite of the soft, pillowy dumplings swimming in savory chicken gravy, Aubrey had no intention of being the one to answer. She was going to eat. She regretted that a moment later when Lane answered.

“She comes to my food truck every day. I can’t shake her, so I decided to take her to lunch.”

Aubrey gulped her last bite down. “That isn’t it. I mean, I do come to your truck almost every day, but it’s because I like your biscuits.”

Lane’s eyes glinted with amusement as he took the chance to start eating.

“Oh, there’s more to my boy than his baking skills,” Kathy said. “He graduated summa cum laude from the UofA and immediately got a job with some big company in Chicago. He was making the big bucks, too.”

While Lane choked and coughed, Aubrey prompted her to go on. “Really? He didn’t tell me that. How did he get back here?”

“Well, he hated the corporate world, you know, so when his company was bought out, he took the severance package they offered, instead of a transfer, and came home. Before I could talk some sense into him, he bought his food truck, and here we are. I’d hoped the change meant he was ready to settle down, but it’s been the opposite. I keep telling him it’s no good being married to a diesel-guzzling truck. It won’t warm up his bed at night—”

“Okay, that’s enough,” Lane said, his tone much firmer than Aubrey had ever heard it as he dropped his hand on Aubrey’s shoulder. “Mom, if you want me to ever bring her back, you might want to head back to the kitchen.”

“I was just—”

“I know what you were doing. But let me handle my love life, okay? Love you though. And the food tastes amazing as

always.”

His mom stood and reached out to rumple his hair like he was six years old. “I wish I could be mad at you.” She looked at Aubrey. “Hope to see you again, Aubrey—with or without this son of mine.”

Aubrey completely melted inside. “Absolutely. I need to come back so I can try the rest of your menu.”

As Lane’s mom walked away, she focused on her plate and told herself, firmly, that it was the good food that had her feeling so warm and cozy inside. Not the completely adorable side she’d just glimpsed of Lane with his mom. And definitely not the glow of knowing his mom wanted them to be together.

“Aubrey?”

She looked up. “What?”

“Did those yams offend you?”

Darn him for being so observant. “No, my empty bowl did. Are you sure I need to save room for desert? I think I might want more dumplings.”

Lane stood up. “I’ll go get you some cobbler so you can taste it and decide. You have to give it a fair chance before you make up your mind.”

Chapter Six

The next morning, Aubrey went to work in a more cheerful mood than she had for a very long time. Maybe all she needed was more socializing. Not necessarily with Lane, because of the whole avoiding romance thing she had determined on, but an occasional lunch date or an adventure here and there would break the monotony of her daily work schedule.

She was even ready to admit that adding a little Christmas sparkle to her cubicle would be fun, which was why she was carrying a giant poinsettia in a gold foil pot as she walked from the parking garage to the office. She'd picked it up at the grocery store the night before. Which had felt odd in and of itself. She kept a few things in her fridge, like yogurt and bottled water, but she ate out so often that she didn't bother buying groceries that would just go to waste. But she'd felt compelled, and now she had everything she needed to make lasagna with her Grandma's recipe.

"Good morning," Aubrey said as she passed Genna's desk and saw her hard at work already.

“Oh, hey...um...” Genna jumped up out of her chair so fast it kept spinning behind her.

Aubrey stopped, wondering what had her friend so worried, then saw her cubicle. Since she’d last been there, someone had covered the gray fabric wall with striped Christmas wrapping paper and taped a big cutout of the Grinch over top with a sign that said, “I hate Christmas.”

“Oh.” For a moment, she felt annoyed. But then the humor of it overcame her, and she laughed. “Did Heather do this?”

Genna pointed up at the ceiling. “I think so.”

Aubrey let her purse slide off her shoulder onto her desk and looked up as she set the poinsettia down. Heather had also hung her mistletoe from the other day over the desk. “She is relentless. She must think I desperately need to be kissed.”

“Maybe she’s planning to bring that lawyer guy over to see you again.”

Aubrey’s eyes widened at the horrible thought. “Ugh. She’d better not. Why can’t she just leave me alone?”

Genna sighed. “I think she just wants you to be happy. I know I do.”

Aubrey smiled at her sweet friend and took her coat off, hanging it on the hook in the back of her cubicle. As she sat down and turned on her computer, she said, “Well, you’ll be happy to know that I’m in a better mood today.”

“Hold that thought,” Genna said, running back over to her cubicle. She picked up her mug of coffee and pushed her chair over to Aubrey’s cubicle. “Okay, spill. I was so mad I had meetings all day yesterday and couldn’t hear how your date went. But clearly it went well. I’d even say your grinchy heart grew a size or two judging by that blush on your cheeks.”

“Stop teasing me or I won’t say another word.”

Genna silently crossed her heart and sipped her coffee without taking her eyes off Aubrey.

Aubrey paused, taking a deep breath as she tried to decide what to say. “Okay, first, I want you to know that I’m happy because I’ve made a discovery about myself, not because of anything romantic.”

Her friend’s eyebrow arched in disbelief. “Okay. What’d you figure out?”

“You’re right. I need to have more fun. I’m only miserable at work because that’s *all* I do except the few times you and I

hang out.”

“So, lunch with Lane was fun?”

Aubrey pressed her lips together tightly, fighting off a smile. “Yes. It was fun. He was fun. He drives his big truck like a maniac, but he holds doors open for me and he’s super enthusiastic about food. He makes me laugh all the time, and his relationship with his mom is darling, and—”

“Wait—he took you to meet his mom?”

“Not like that. He just took me to eat at her restaurant. It was so good. I have to take you.”

“What did his mom think of you?”

Aubrey laughed as she remembered the crazy conversation. “She got it into her head that Lane and I were dating or something, and she got really excited. You should have seen Lane blush when she started talking about finally getting grandbabies.”

Genna laughed, which made Aubrey laugh harder. “Girl, this is priceless,” Genna said. “Please tell me you’re going to go out with him again.”

Her question cut straight through Aubrey’s amusement. She took a deep breath, almost a gasp. “I don’t know. It’s

probably not smart—”

“This is not the time to ruin things with being smart.”

Aubrey’s got a notification on her phone before she could answer. She’d gotten an email—one she’d given up hope of receiving. “Oh my gosh. I can’t believe it. A marketing firm in Chicago wants to set up an interview with me on Monday.”

Genna gasped. “Really? That’s awesome!”

Feeling nervous, Aubrey took a deep breath. “Chicago. Wow. But...do you think I can get the day off? I’d have to get a plane ticket, like, now.”

“Details,” Genna said. “I’ll help you get it all arranged. Oh my gosh, girl! This is the chance you’ve been waiting for.”

“Yeah,” Aubrey said, trying to feel enthusiastic. She would have been completely jazzed about this just a few days ago, but now, she felt hesitant. Her phone buzzed again. This time it was a text. “It’s Lane.”

Genna’s brows went up again. “Oh yeah? What does he want?”

Licking her lips nervously, Aubrey read his text again. “He wants to know if I’m coming to get breakfast. That it’s on him.”

Jumping up, Genna put her coffee down on Aubrey's desk and grabbed Aubrey's coat off the hook. She held it out, saying, "Well, what are you waiting for?"

"Genna, I can't. He might think I'm interested in him."

Genna sat back down and looked Aubrey directly in the eyes. "Would he be wrong?"

"Maybe not. That's what worries me." She waved her phone at Genna. "I have an interview. In *Chicago*."

At that moment, Heather's head appeared over the top of the cubicle. "Look at you, Aubrey. I've gotta say, I'm not sure about the "I hate Christmas" sign, but otherwise, I'm glad to see you're finally making things festive over here in your little corner."

Aubrey froze, wondering if Heather had heard what they'd been talking about. But surely not or she would have been freaking out. "Like you didn't do this. Need something?"

"Yes, Mom sent me to find out about your date to the Candy Cane Ball."

With a surge of frustration rushing through her, Aubrey's voice came out sharper than she meant. "I'm not sure yet."

"You mean, Lane's not taking you?"

Pausing to collect her thoughts, Aubrey shrugged. “He’s really busy this time of year with the food truck. It’s the night before Christmas Eve, so there will be a ton of people coming out to look at the lights. He’d lose a lot of business.”

Heather’s expression looked way too pleased for Aubrey’s liking. “Oh, that’s too bad. I guess that’s the downside of dating someone in the food-service industry. But I’m sure Charles would be happy to fill in for him if you need him too.”

Aubrey wanted to throw something at her tenacious sister. “That’s really nice, but actually, I was just going to run down and get some breakfast from Lane, so I’ll ask him if he’s figured it out yet. I’ll let Mom know, okay?”

Heather shrugged. “Okay.” As she walked away, she threw back over her shoulder, “Let me know if you want me to get you Charles’s number.”

“Not going to happen,” Aubrey muttered under her breath.

“Ooooh, this is getting good.” Genna held Aubrey’s coat out for her again.

Aubrey stood and put her arms into her sleeves, then grabbed some cash out of her wallet. “I’ll be back soon. Let’s

just hope Lane's willing to keep up this shenanigan, as he called it."

"Sure you don't want to take that with you?" Genna asked, pointing up at the mistletoe.

Aubrey ignored her, and Genna snickered.

When she got down to Lane's food truck, there were six people in line. She sighed and looked at the time on her phone. She had a meeting in an hour, and she hadn't even finished her presentation for it, and now she had to try to get a vacation day for Monday approved plus buy plane tickets and get a hotel. There was no way she could wait in line just to talk to him. Hopefully, they were good enough friends that he wouldn't mind her popping into his truck again.

She walked around to the side and knocked lightly before cracking the door open. When she looked in, Lane had frozen in place, bent over to take a pan of biscuits out of the oven. "Aubrey." He straightened and dropped the pan on the stainless-steel counter hard enough that a few of the biscuits bounced.

"I don't want to bother you. Please, keep working. But I needed to talk to you about something."

His eyes shifted over her as he turned off the timer on his little oven and picked up one of the biscuits, splitting it open in a Styrofoam container. “I’m prepared for the worst. What?”

Aubrey watched as he ladled sausage gravy over the biscuit from a vat on his steamer table. “Will you be my fake boyfriend for a little longer and be my date to the Candy Cane Ball?”

After throwing a glance her way, he leaned out the window and finished the transaction with the customer waiting there. “Wait. When did I get promoted to fake boyfriend?”

She frowned. “This morning. When Heather tried to get me to take that Charles guy as my date. But only if you’re okay with it. If not, I’ll find another way to deal with Heather.” She sighed. “Maybe I’ll just have to go on a date with him just to get her off my back.”

Lane watched her for a second and then turned back to the next customer in line, who asked for a coffee and a cinnamon biscuit. As he went to fill the order, he said, “No need to do that. I’m all yours.”

His words sent a sharp thrill through her. She clenched her teeth to get control of the dangerous reaction and shoved her

hands in her pockets. “You’ll have to wear a tux. I can rent one for you.”

“No worries. I can manage.”

“Um...my family will be there too.” What was she doing?
Trying to talk him out of it?

“I can handle that.”

She took a deep breath. It was now or never. “My mom is the mayor.”

That finally made him pause. In fact, he stopped and stared at her. “So, this is the awkward part about never actually introducing ourselves. Your last name is—?”

“Seaton, yeah. Daughter of Janice Seaton, single mother of two grown-up daughters in her second term as mayor of Willow Falls. Which means we’ll have to deal with some public relations junk, including lots and lots of photos.” There. If that didn’t scare him off, nothing would.

“Should be fun.” He turned back to his work, but there was a tense quality in his voice that matched the tight set of his shoulders.

“Look, it’s okay. I know it’s a lot to ask. Don’t worry about it.”

Lane sighed and put down the bag he'd just opened for an order. He closed the short distance between them and put his hands on her shoulders, staring down at her with a wry smile tugging at his lips. "Relax. I'm not going to turn tail on you. Whatever you need, okay? I'm there."

Aubrey licked her lips as her breathing quickened. "Thanks, Lane. I know it's asking a lot."

He nodded. "Yes, but I can handle it. Now, unless you plan to take your coat off and help me..."

She laughed. "That actually sounds like fun, but I'd better go. Maybe some other time?"

His eyes swept over her face. "If you're serious, could you come help me tonight?"

"Tonight?"

"Yeah, I'm taking the truck to Founders' Park for the caroling festival. I think your mom is supposed to be there."

Aubrey shrugged. "I don't really keep up with everything she does. Could you really use my help?"

Lane looked out the window at his next customer and headed for the coffee as if he knew what they'd order. "There will be hundreds of people there, so yeah. I've got to warn

you, though, it will be a tight fit, because my part-time helper will be there too. What do you think?”

She couldn't resist the chance to check out this whole food truck thing for real. “I'll be there.”

“Great. Wear comfortable shoes and put your hair back.”

Aubrey looked down at her heels. “You think these aren't comfortable?”

Sweeping his eyes down her legs to her feet, he grinned. “Sexy? Yes. Comfortable? Let's just say that, however they feel for you, I don't really want you to step on my feet with those things. And we're going to be all over each other tonight.” His eyes popped open and his cheeks flushed. “Not like that. I just mean...”

She couldn't help but laugh. “I didn't misunderstand you, don't worry.” She wasn't about to tell him about the thrill it gave her to think about the image he'd just given her. “I'll see you tonight then.”

As she spun around and climbed down out of the truck, she felt her cheeks heating at the thought of being close to Lane all night, even just as his helper. But that wasn't why she was doing this. It would be an adventure.

And she owed him.

Chapter Seven

As Aubrey walked up to Lane's truck in its new spot among the other food vendors at Founder's Park that evening, she wondered what in the world she'd been thinking. She almost turned around but noticed that Lane had outlined his whole food truck with Christmas lights. She paused to admire it and lost her chance to chicken out.

"It's about time, slowpoke," Lane called out the window as he served the only customer in line. It hadn't even gotten dark yet, so people were just starting to arrive for the evening's festivities.

"I thought I was early."

"There's no such thing as too early in the food-truck business. I'm starting to wonder if I ever go to bed or if I just dream I do."

When Aubrey laughed and moved towards him, she noticed his eyes sweep over her, lingering on her jeans, tennis shoes, and the tight bun on top of her head. Something about his expression made her blush, which was ridiculous, because he saw her almost every day looking much nicer than she did

tonight. In fact, she'd had to take a firm grip on her pride to show up without her hair looking nice. She'd made up for it by adding a little extra mascara.

As she got to the door, Lane was already there, holding it open for her. "Welcome to the crew."

Aubrey passed by him, catching the scent of his clean flannel shirt mixed with buttery biscuits and cinnamon. Someone needed to create a cologne with that combination of smells. It was dangerously yummy.

Trying not to get too distracted, she looked around. "What crew? I thought you had someone else coming."

"Yeah, but he called in sick a few hours ago. I'm lucky to have you," he said, handing her an apron. But there was a funny hitch in his words that made her look up as she took it from him. He stared down at her, his eyes searching hers, but for what she didn't know. Then he took a deep breath and stepped back. "As soon as you've washed up, I'll give you a little training while the crowd is light. Sound good?"

"Great, though I probably need more than just a little training."

"It's not hard, just busy. Don't worry."

As she put her apron on, she watched as he turned and tugged at the collar of his shirt as he moved back to the window in two long steps.

Was she imagining things, or did she really affect him that much?

No. She couldn't think about that, or she might have to examine her own feelings as well.

Feelings she was desperately trying to ignore.

After scrubbing and drying her hands, she walked toward him. The truck was small enough that it only took her a few steps to reach his side. "Okay, boss. Tell me what to do."

He was right, it didn't take long for him to show her everything since he intended to manage the actual transactions all night. He just needed her to help dish up orders and dispense coffee. For the first hour, it was easy enough, but then the crowd arrived. In no time, twilight fell, the sound of choirs singing in the distance filled the air, and the line outside the truck grew. And grew. Every time Aubrey looked out the window, it seemed longer, as was the case at the other food trucks too. But everyone seemed to have figured out that they had coffee, so their line moved quickly.

“Aubrey, can you get some more coffee brewing?” Lane asked, his usual, carefree personality sharpened to what was obviously his “business mode.”

“On it,” she said, sliding behind him. Without thinking, she put her hand on his hip to steady herself as she squeezed past. Only once her hand made contact with his taut, sinewy strength did it sink in that she’d touched him. As she worked on the coffee, she glanced sideways at him, wondering if he’d been as affected by it as she had. A muscle worked in his jaw as he counted out change at the register. She closed her eyes and breathed in deeply, feeling stupid.

At that moment, the timer went off on the oven, signaling that another batch of biscuits was done. “I’ll get them,” she said, leaving the coffee to brew. As she closed the oven door and set the pan down on the countertop, Lane eased up next to her to grab one of them. Stepping quickly to the side to give him more room, she managed to slip on some coffee that had splattered on the floor. Aubrey threw her hands out, trying to catch her balance, and grabbed hold of Lane’s flannel sleeve. It happened so quickly that a second later, she found herself staring up at him from the metal floor with a sore rear and his sleeve still clutched in one hand. She’d managed to almost pull

his shirt off as she fell. He stood over her, nearly bent in half, with his shirt all askew.

“So that just happened,” she said.

Lane’s face lit with amusement. “I was getting too hot in this shirt anyway. Let me help you up.”

His hand clasped hers in a strong but gentle grip and tugged. She practically flew into a standing position again, which made her feel dizzy. Reaching out, she braced herself with a hand against his chest. The contact made her incredibly aware of how close they were, of how warm and solid his chest was, and how quickly his heart was beating. Her fingers curled slightly, of their own accord, in a caressing motion. She gasped in a breath and forced herself to pull her hand away, but in the process, ended up trailing her fingers down his chest to his abs, which flexed beneath her touch.

She looked up and found his eyes burning with an intensity that shook her to the core. Almost on the point of panic, not at all sure what to do with all the potent energy flowing between them, Aubrey whispered, “The customers.”

Lane gave a sharp nod and stepped back, shrugging out of his flannel shirt and turning to hang it on a hook near the door.

Trying to collect herself, Aubrey focused on the biscuits she'd just taken out of the oven, moving them into the warming case. Lane crossed behind her, heading back to help the next customer. As he did so, his big hand wrapped around her side, his fingers gently clenching her waist. There was no dismissing it as anything but a caress.

He'd been right. They were all up in each other's business.

Aubrey was foolish enough to hope that there was more to come.

Her common sense had completely abandoned her, and she didn't even care.

As the night had gone on, they'd worked side by side, eventually moving in perfect sync with each other, but somehow, still finding reasons to touch each other. And while Aubrey had tried to stay focused on the task at hand, her eyes had become increasingly hungry for Lane. She quietly admired the strength of his arms, the muscles and tendons fascinating her. His warm, deep voice kept her hooked on every word and nuance of tone. The way he interacted with each customer, making them feel both welcome and at ease was every bit as

attractive as the half-smiles he kept flashing her every time their eyes met.

When at last the crowds wound down—just in time too, since there were no more pre-cut biscuits in the freezer to bake or cups to serve coffee in—Lane went around to the front of the food truck and locked down the panel that closed over the window. While he worked outside, Aubrey did her best to wipe up spills and crumbs on the counter inside.

Then Lane came back inside and saw what she was doing. “Don’t worry about that. I need to take the truck over to the commissary and give it a thorough clean before I replenish my supplies for tomorrow.”

Aubrey stared at him. Her feet ached, her shoulders were tense, and if it weren’t for the fact that Lane was here, she’d be heading for her bed right now. “You’re going to work more tonight?”

His smile glinted ruefully. “Have to. It’s part of the gig. You can clock out and go home though.”

Aubrey rolled her eyes. “I don’t remember clocking in. But I do need to go home.”

Lane came toward her, his hands deep in his pockets. With the window shut, the whole space felt smaller, and he seemed to take up every bit of available room. Aubrey didn't mind, though. She settled back against the countertop and gazed up at him, begging him with her eyes to not make her say goodnight yet.

Then he pulled his hands out of his pockets and rested them on her hips, pulling her closer with a gentle, irresistible tug. "Well, you've spent more time with your fake boyfriend than necessary—especially since your sister isn't around to see. Mind if I ask why?"

Something was pulling them together. She could feel it in her posture, as if her whole body was straining to get closer. He was too, with his shoulders curving towards her and his head bent close. Her pulse hammered as she realized that he wanted to kiss her but was waiting. Waiting for a sign from her.

And in that moment, there was nothing she wanted more.

Lifting her hands to his chest, she rose up on her toes and tipped her chin up. "I'm here because I want to be."

He didn't hesitate a moment longer. He gathered her closer still and pressed his lips to hers, gently at first, then with

an urgency that stole the last of Aubrey's common sense. Her brain simply ceased to function as she became a creature of emotion and sensation. The slight rasp of his five-o'clock whiskers, the fan of his warm breath on her overheated cheeks, the texture of cotton beneath her fingers—then the warm, taut skin of his neck as she ran her hands up to thread her fingers through his thick, silky hair.

Lane pulled away, just for a second, as if to figure out what was going on. For the space of those few heartbeats, Aubrey felt the end of the kiss coming...as inevitably it would. But she didn't know what lay on the other side of this kiss. Too many questions and doubts, probably. And the falseness of their relationship and how lost she was in her own life.

She couldn't face either right now. Not when Lane's arms were heaven and his kisses the sweetest, headiest experience of her life. So, before he could question it further, she practically attacked his lips again, her kiss a clear demand for more. Lane answered by tilting his head and deepening the kiss, clenching her against him until she lost track of the boundaries between her body and his.

As with all fires, there came a point when Aubrey knew they had to either continue stoking it to a hotter blaze or allow

it to cool and temper. Lane seemed to realize it too. His lips gentled, lingered, and—with one last, regretful tug on her bottom lip—reluctantly stilled.

With his chest heaving for breath, he raised his head and stared down at her, his eyes half-closed. “Are you sure you have to go home now?”

Aubrey wished more than anything that she didn’t. “I’m flying to Chicago early tomorrow.”

“Chicago?”

She nodded. “I have a job interview.”

Lane’s eyes shifted to the floor as his brows drew together. “So if you get it, you’ll be moving soon?”

“After the holidays.”

“I see. I didn’t know.” He cleared his throat, but when he spoke again, his voice still had a raspy edge to it. “I forgot for a moment that this wasn’t real. I’m sorry.”

As bright and shimmery as she’d felt before, she now felt equally ashamed and hollow. She hadn’t meant to lead him on. “No, don’t. I think we both felt something real. It...surprised me how much.”

“Not me. I’ve liked you for a while now. I only went along with this because it gave me a chance to...get you to notice me. As more than the biscuit guy.”

His confession took Aubrey off guard. Wow. He liked her? “Lane, I—”

“I know it’s too soon to expect anything, but after that kiss, I was hoping maybe you might feel something for me too.”

Aubrey let out a sharp breath. She couldn’t exactly deny it, could she? “I do. I guess I was playing with fire, because I wasn’t oblivious to the fact that I’m attracted to you. But...I can’t stay here in Willow Falls. Not if I ever want to build a life of my own without my mom and sister influencing me. I’ve been planning to break away. I just had no idea that this would happen.”

He folded his arms across his chest and studied her for a moment. “There’s no way you’d consider sticking around for a while to see if things between us might be real?”

She wanted to. Oh, how she wanted to. But this was exactly why she hadn’t wanted to get involved in a relationship right now. “I’m afraid if I don’t leave now, I never will.”

“And that would be a bad thing?”

Aubrey bit her lip to keep from frowning. Her throat felt too tight to speak, so she nodded.

Lane sighed and nodded. “I get it. And I hope you find everything you’re looking for. But I can’t do this anymore.” He waved his finger between them, and she knew what he meant. “Not when there’s no chance of making it real.”

She didn’t blame him at all, but she was surprised at how much it hurt. “I understand. And for what it’s worth, I’m sorry, Lane.” She fumbled with the apron strings a moment before pulling it off and handing it to him.

This time he didn’t speak. He just took the apron and dropped it on the counter before pulling her coat down from the hook on the wall. As he held it out for her and she slipped her arms into it, he said, “Good luck with your interview.”

She spun around, swamped by a desperation to say something to fix the broken hurt in his eyes. But she couldn’t. “Good night.”

“Good night. Though maybe it should be goodbye.”

Aubrey sniffed and tried to swallow back the threat of tears. “I hope not.”

Then she hurried down the steps, frantic to get away before she lost control of all the emotions that clawed at her insides. What was this and when had it happened?

Before she turned a corner that would block her view, she looked back over her shoulder and saw him standing in the doorway, silhouetted by the light shining behind him. Seeing the disconsolate hunch to his shoulders as he watched her go, it took all her strength to keep going.

Chapter Eight

As Aubrey drove home from the airport Monday afternoon, she kept thinking about the moment earlier that day when she'd looked across a gleaming desk at the man offering her a job and a chance for a new life. It had been an amazing feeling to have someone offer that to her.

But after a weekend agonizing over what she'd done to Lane and missing him more than should have been possible, her choice had been crystal clear. Even though she'd asked for time to consider the company's offer, she already knew what her answer was going to be.

She wouldn't be leaving Willow Falls.

After all, she'd only let her family push her around because she'd never had a reason to stand her ground. Now she did. At least, she would if she could convince Lane to give her another chance.

When she got home, she dropped her suitcase on her couch and ran for the shower. She only had a few more hours to get ready. As much as she was going to hate it, she couldn't

flake out on going to the Candy Cane Ball, date or no date. And then first thing tomorrow morning, she'd go find Lane and hope he didn't shut her down before she got out the words she was desperate to say. Miracles happened at Christmas, right?

On her way to the bathroom, however, she remembered the typed-out letter of resignation she had left in her top drawer. She knew Heather was off for the afternoon, to get ready for the evening, which made it the perfect time to turn it in. There was no way she'd be able to do it without a fierce argument from her sister if she waited, and with or without a job, with or without Lane, it was time for her to move on.

In moments, she had Genna on the phone.

“So?” Genna asked immediately. “Did you get it?”

Aubrey smiled. “I did.” But while Genna squealed, she added, “And I’m going to turn it down.”

“What? Why? Was it their compensation package or—”

“No. Genna, it’s Lane.”

“Lane?”

“We kissed Friday night.”

Genna squealed again.

“And then I told him I was planning to move away. I didn’t even know it was possible to get dumped by a fake boyfriend, but I was.”

“Oh.”

“So I have a lot to fix. I’m starting with the easiest thing. There’s a white envelope in my desk drawer with my resignation. I need you to turn it into HR for me while my sister isn’t there.”

“You’re resigning now? Without another job?”

“Shhh! Genna, keep your voice down. Yes.”

“You’re just a big chicken. Get in here and do it yourself.”

“You know she’d never let me do it in person without a huge argument. And right now I have to get ready for the Candy Cane Ball.”

“You’re still going? Alone?”

Aubrey sighed. Man, how she wished she wasn’t. But not because she cared about going stag. She just wanted to see Lane. “I have to. In the meantime, see if you can come up with any brilliant ideas for how I can fix things with Lane.”

“Sure, Aubrey. I’m on it. Go make yourself look beautiful.”

“Thanks. I’ll try.”

Confident that Genna would come through for her, she felt a spark of *rightness* for the first time in a long time. She had no idea what the future held, but quitting her job was a thrilling first step.

Aubrey took a long shower, taking her time over shampooing and conditioning her hair, shaving her legs, and letting the hot water ease away all the aches and grime of traveling for three days. She emerged in a cloud of steam, wrapped up in a big fluffy towel, and focused on making herself look as good as possible.

An hour and a half later, she stood in front of the mirror in a long red gown with a close-fitting lace bodice, a wide neckline, and three-quarter sleeves in the same red lace but unlined. The lace dripped down in a flowing overlay past the waistline onto the wispy tulle layers of the full skirt. She’d curled her hair into loose waves and twisted back a section from both sides of the front, clipping them together in the back. The style looked great with her shoulder length-hair. Smoky eyeshadow with gold highlights completed the look. She always tried to look her best for public events like this

since she had to pose with her mother and sister and their dates for a million photos.

As she carefully applied some smudge-proof red lipstick, she thought about how she'd look standing alone in all those pictures. But at least Lane would be spared. He'd obviously not been looking forward to that part of their deal. Or meeting her mother. Which was one more reason to love him.

Wait. Had she just thought the l-word?

“Slow down, girl,” she told her reflection. “Focus on getting him to forgive you before you go there.”

When Aubrey got to the Bellmark Hotel, where the Candy Cane Ball was held every year, she drew an amazed, delighted breath. The whole place had been transformed into a world of crystal and ice glowing with soft white light and garlands of red berries. The dance floor in the middle of the tables was already packed with dancing couples as “Jingle Bell Rock” pulsed from the speakers around the room. For a minute, she paused, not sure where to go. Since she wasn't waiting for a date, her best choice was to go in search of her family. They wouldn't be hard to find.

But she didn't *want* to.

Since she hadn't heard from Heather, she was confident that her sister hadn't seen her letter of resignation yet. She certainly would have gotten a phone call about that. But even without that awkwardness, she wanted to put off being around Heather as long as possible. The next best option was the glorious looking buffet at the opposite end of the room. As she headed over to get in line, she took her phone out of her clutch and took a few pictures to send to Genna. But as she snapped a picture of the swath of lights and fabric forming an arch over the main doors, she stopped, shocked.

Standing there with his head slowly turning as if he was looking like someone, was a man that looked like...well, like Lane. But she had to look twice to make sure it was him. And that quick glance showed her that she was only one of dozens of women checking him out. How could they not?

In a flannel shirt and jeans with an apron tied around his waist and scruffy whiskers, Lane had been attractive. In a designer suit, freshly shaved, and with his hair combed in a more formal style, he was devastating. He might own a food truck and have muddy boots in the floorboards of his truck, but this man owned the room. What was he doing here?

And then he saw her.

As their eyes connected, her lungs seemed to freeze even as her heart beat in a wild panic.

He came toward her with the easy stride of an athlete. She clenched her fingers together tightly and tried to get control of herself. She didn't know why he'd come, but she wasn't about to waste the opportunity.

You can do this.

She put her phone back into her clutch, mentally rehearsing everything she needed to say to him. But her brain was sluggish. Hadn't she planned out her speech for the next time she saw him? She couldn't remember it, though. Something about telling him that she wasn't moving, that she wanted him—that she wanted to try for something real.

Lane came to a slow halt a few feet away from her, his eyes sweeping over every detail of her dress and hair and face. “You look even more beautiful than usual.”

His usual warm tone was back, but with a deeper, raspier quality that eased away the worst of her tension. Surely, with that tone in his voice and that look in his eyes, he hadn't completely given up on her. “You're here.”

He smiled. "I hope you don't mind. Genna seemed to think you wouldn't."

Ah. That made so much sense. She had asked Genna for help. She just hadn't expected her to call Lane. "I can't tell you how glad I am to see you."

The gleam that lit his eyes filled her with more hope than she deserved.

"Will you dance with me?" he asked, holding out his hand to her.

She took it, only then realizing that her fingers were trembling. If Lane noticed, he didn't say anything as he guided her to the dance floor and took her in his arms. As the first strains of "*Merry Christmas, Darling*" flooded the room, his hand gently gripped her waist, his fingers tenderly flexing. Aubrey rested her left hand on his shoulder and looked up at him, amazed at the expression in his eyes. And though they didn't speak, even with so much that needed to be said, every touch they shared was communication enough for the moment.

As the song went on, Aubrey began to relax. Her hand slipped up to curl around the back of his neck, and his hand moved to the small of her back, pulling her closer to him. The song changed to a slow, instrumental version of "Let it Snow,"

but he didn't let go of her. Instead, he bent his head closer and murmured, "I'm sorry, Aubrey. I shouldn't have gotten upset. You never suggested this was anything more than the fun we both knew it was. I shouldn't have bailed on you as your date. Especially since there was nothing I wanted more than to be here with you."

She blinked, not prepared for an apology—especially when she knew *she* was the one who owed *him* one.

Before she could decide how to respond, she heard Heather's voice. "Aubrey Marie Seaton!"

With a quick, involuntary gasp, Aubrey turned her head to see her sister marching toward her. They were on the edge of the dance floor, so Lane guided her out of the other dancers' way as Heather reached them. Aubrey braced herself. She had no doubt what was behind the fire in her sister's eyes.

"Why did I just get a call from work that you're quitting?"

"You got the job then," Lane said. His voice was... resigned. "Congratulations. That's amazing, and I'm not at all surprised."

"Didn't Genna tell you that part?" Feeling desperate to explain, she reached out and grasped the lapel of his suit coat.

His hand rested briefly on top of hers. “I guess she wanted to let you tell me. We can talk in a minute though. You need to talk to your sister first.” He flashed her a crooked smile.

And as he walked away, talking to Heather seemed like no big deal. The only thing she cared about was getting back to Lane and finally telling him how she felt.

Chapter Nine

“What are you *thinking?*” Heather asked, her voice shrill as Aubrey tugged her away from the crowd into a nearly empty corner.

“Heather, for as long as I can remember, you and Mom have decided everything for me. Lately, I’ve been miserable trapped in that cubicle, and you’ve been trying to match me up with someone eerily similar to your husband. It’s like you’re trying to make me into a clone of you.”

“A clone of me? No. But I want you to be as happy as I am.”

“So basically, you think the only way I can be happy is if I make all the same decisions you’ve made?”

Heather stared at her. “When you say it like that, it sounds stupid. But come on—I’ve helped you a lot. You have a great career and a nice lifestyle. If you’re happy dating someone like Lane, that’s fine, I guess. But why would you throw everything else away?”

“From the beginning, this has been about me realizing that I’ve never found what made *me* happy. I’m trying to find it

now. Can you support me in that?"

"Why don't you start by telling me what's going on?"

"I just got back from Chicago where I had an interview for an awesome company doing what I'm doing now with even better pay and benefits. They offered me a job, but I'm turning it down."

Heather looked like she'd been hit with a two-by-four. "Okay. There are a whole lot of things wrong with that. You went to Chicago and didn't even *tell* me?"

Aubrey shrugged. "You would have tried to talk me out of it."

"I would have, but that's not even the worst part. You were offered a job? But you turned it down? But you are still quitting at P&L?"

Feeling a spurt of rebellious pleasure, Aubrey smiled. "Yes."

Heather's voice grew shrill. "Are you crazy?"

"Maybe, but I realized the only reason I was moving was to get away from you."

"Ouch." Heather frowned. "I had no idea you felt that way."

“It’s my fault. I should have told you before now, but I was weak and stupid. But the amazing thing is, I’m ready to tell you to back off now, because I want to stay here and see where things go with Lane.”

To Aubrey’s surprise, Heather laughed, even though it was a shocked sort of laugh. “I think you’re an idiot for quitting your job without having another one, but I have to admit you’re right about Lane. That guy is crazy about you. There’s no way he won’t do everything he can to make you happy. If someone *can* be happy on a food truck income.”

Aubrey shrugged. “He’s apparently got a corporate background and changed to this to be happier. Right now, I can totally see why he did. And I’m going to join him if he’ll let me. Plus, I have a feeling he has more in mind than running one truck the rest of his life.”

Heather stared at her for a long moment and then said, “Okay, tell you what. We’re going to tear up your letter of resignation—”

“No, I—”

Heather held up her hand. “And you can write a new one once you’ve figured out how you’re at least going to pay your

bills. And I'll back off and support you in going after your version of happiness.”

Relieved that Heather wasn't mad, Aubrey hugged her quickly. “Deal. And I'm going to find him now, before he decides to completely give up on me.”

“Give up on you? Doesn't him being here prove he's fighting for you?”

Aubrey smiled, a wave of hope building inside her. “I guess so.”

“Of course it does. Now, go find him and drag him back here. Mom has been looking for you because the event photographer is wanting to take some pictures. Seeing how good Lane looks when he cleans up, you'll probably want him standing next to you.”

And she did. But not just for her mom's publicity photos. She wanted him there all the time.

After a thorough search of the ballroom, she walked down every hall and around the front lobby with no success. But then she saw a tall, broad-shouldered figure standing alone just outside the big glass doors. Knowing at once that it was Lane

by his stance and the shape of his head, Aubrey retrieved her coat and headed outside.

The shock of the cold after the heat of the ballroom surprised a gasp out of her. At the sound, Lane turned around. It was then that she saw the dusting of white on his shoulders. The promised snowstorm had actually come, and earlier than expected. With snow falling, Christmas lights outlining every tree and building, and the distant sound of Christmas music drifting over from the square, Aubrey hoped that Christmas magic was a real thing. She needed some right about now.

Lane watched her come closer but didn't move toward her. Instead, he stood as still as a statue, a troubled expression on his face. "Did you work things out with your sister?"

"Yes. We have reached a new understanding and established a truce."

He nodded. "I'm glad. No more need for shenanigans like fake boyfriends."

"Or moves to another city. I'm not going anywhere, Lane. I decided that back in Chicago."

His brows lifted in surprise. "You did?"

Aubrey smiled and tilted her chin up, not caring about the cold flecks of snow landing on her face. “You see, this crazy thing happened. I realized how badly I missed you. And I finally realized that I don’t have to move to start a new life.”

“I hope not *completely* new.”

“Well, you know, I can’t ditch the family. And if Heather keeps her promise to let me find my own way, I’m good with that.”

“What about your favorite food-truck guy and one-time shenanigan conspirator?”

Aubrey reached out and grabbed Lane’s hands. “Oh, he has to stay too. But I’m hoping he’ll accept a new position. I just don’t know what he thinks about me after I hurt him.”

Lane’s jaw tightened as he pulled her close. Looking down into her eyes, he asked, “Do we have to keep talking in third person?”

She laughed. “No.”

“Good. It will be easier to tell you how I feel if we don’t.”

“How do you feel?”

He reached up and cupped her cheek with his hand. She leaned into the warmth of his palm, nuzzling against it as she

studied the flecks of fire in his eyes. He tilted his head and smiled. “Prepare yourself. I’m crazy about you, Aubrey, and falling harder every day. And if you’d taken that job, well, Chicago would have gotten a new food truck.”

Aubrey couldn’t speak, she was so deliriously happy. And immensely relieved. “No way!”

He nodded. “I don’t want to miss my chance to be with you.”

“That is exactly how I feel. Want to hear a confession?”

“Absolutely. I can’t be the only one baring my soul here.”

“I really, really adore your cinnamon biscuits—”

He raised an eyebrow and laughed. “So I’ve noticed. But I was kind of hoping you were going to say you adore *me*.”

She ignored his interruption. “But really I was coming around to see *you* every day. I wouldn’t let myself admit it, because I had all these plans to move on, but I had a massive crush on you. And it got worse the more time I spent with you.”

Lane pulled her closer. “That’s more like it. Now, hold on, because I have been craving another kiss from you for days, and I was afraid I’d never get the chance.”

Since that was precisely how she felt too, Aubrey stood on her tiptoes and met his lips with hers. She sank into the kiss, marveling at how it combined all the wonder and magic of their first kiss with the deep satisfaction of coming home. She didn't know much of anything at the moment, but she did know that loving this man was going to be the greatest pleasure of her life.

They didn't break away from their kiss until Aubrey's nose and toes burned with cold and both of their heads were covered with slowly melting snowflakes. Lane tried brushing it off her hair, laughing. "We'd better get inside."

Aubrey happily tucked her hand into the crook of his arm. "Yes. You need to meet my mother. It's only fair, you know, since I've met yours. I just hope you blush as much as I did."

Lane laughed. "I'm probably safe since I doubt your mom will say anything as embarrassing as my mom did."

They walked back together, leaving their footprints behind on the snow-dusted sidewalk. The sounds of music from the party felt far away from the intimacy that had bloomed around them.

"Oh, by the way," Lane said, "She's been nagging me to invite you over for Christmas dinner"

“You won’t have to talk me into that. I can’t wait.”

“Great. Maybe she’ll leave me alone now.” He paused before he opened the door for her. “Before we go in, I have to confess something to you.”

“What?”

“I already know your mother.”

Aubrey stopped and stared at him. “You do?”

He shrugged. “Yeah. I work closely with her and the whole city council—and not always eye to eye. That’s why I got a little stressed out the other day when you told me you were the mayor’s daughter. What were my chances with three women determined to make sure you didn’t fall for me?”

“*Three?*”

“Yeah. Heather, your mom, and...you.”

Aubrey laughed. “Well, I, for one, have given up fighting it. And I’m all that matters. And hey, maybe dating me will get the mayor to look more favorably on your projects.”

“I’m not worried about that. We had a few tussles, but in the end, we figured it out. You see, I don’t just own a food truck. I own the whole food-truck lot. I’m the one that got the city to approve the project development, and I’m working with

them right now to rezone a few other properties I've acquired so that I can start more."

Aubrey flashed him a triumphant smile. "I told Heather that you probably had plans to do bigger things. And I think you and I would make a good team."

"Oh, I'm sure of it."

"I mean business-wise. I work in marketing, you know."

"True. I think you should just come and work in the truck with me, though. We could have all kinds of fun in the close quarters."

"Well, I did promise Genna to have more fun."

Lane nodded. "Perfect. And I'll help you find the life that will make you happiest."

Aubrey caught his face between her hands. "I think I already did. And I didn't even need Heather's mistletoe to make it happen." Then she kissed him again, pouring all her hope and gratitude into the caress, and he responded with a solemnity that felt like a promise.

Michelle's Cinnamon Biscuit Roll Recipe from the story is on
the last page! Keep going!

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And thank *you* for reading my books. Please consider leaving a review!

This is the best way to support an author, and I read all of mine!

For information about Michelle Pennington's other titles, sign up for her newsletter, go to:

<http://www.michelle-pennington.com>

Michelle Pennington's Cinnamon Biscuit Rolls

Biscuit Dough

4 cups all purpose flour
2 tablespoons baking powder
1 tsp salt
1 cup shortening
2 cups ice cold milk (May not need all of it)

Topping

½ cup softened butter
1 cup packed brown sugar
½ cup granulated sugar
1 tbsp ground cinnamon
½ tsp almond extract
(Also try adding chopped pecans or walnuts.)

Glaze (optional)

2 cups powdered sugar
1 tbsp milk (will vary depending on desired consistency)
1 tsp vanilla

Preheat Oven to 450° F

In a large bowl, combine all dry ingredients. With a large fork, cut in shortening until crumbs form and the shortening is well distributed. Slowly stir in just enough milk until a soft dough forms, moist but not sticky. Work the dough as little as possible to insure a delicate, crumbly texture.

Roll dough out into a long rectangle on a well-floured surface to about 3/8 of an inch in thickness.

Combine sugars, cinnamon, and almond extract in a small bowl. Gently spread butter over the rolled-out dough, all the way to the edges. Sprinkle cinnamon sugar over the butter. (Hint: If you smooth the sugar out with your hands, they will smell like heaven!) Roll up the dough from long side to long side. Slice into 1 ½ inch thick slices.

Bake biscuit rolls for 12-15 minutes until a light golden color and baked all the way through. Use stoneware for best results. Otherwise, bake on an ungreased cookie sheet.

While they are baking, mix powdered sugar, vanilla and milk together, adding milk slowly and stirring until glaze forms. You want it to be easy to drizzle, but not too thin. Drizzle over warm cinnamon biscuit rolls and enjoy.