



Smitten in Lake Mistletoe

A HOLLY, JOLLY AND STEAMY CHRISTMAS TALE

*Who needs a Happy Ever After
when you can have a Happy Right Now?*

AMBER KELLY

Smitten
in Lake
Mistletoe



A M B E R K E L L Y

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To Amanda, the best friend a girl could ask for. I look forward to a lifetime of celebrating the holidays with you and your family. Thank you for always including us.



Prologue

Hannah

Four Years Ago

As I stand in front of the antique pedestal mirror in my suite, a tear escapes my eye as I take in the sight of me in my gown.

“Oh, stop it. You’re gonna cause us both to ruin our makeup!” my mother scolds as she fastens the string of pearls around my neck.

Then, she wraps her arms around my shoulders from behind and lays her head on my shoulder.

Our eyes meet in the mirror.

“You’re stunning, Hannah.”

I smile at her as her lips quiver.

“Don’t you start too,” I cry.

The door opens, and Maria, my wedding planner, steps into the room, followed by my four bridesmaids.

They are a vision of beauty in their wine-hued dresses.

“Wow, you look stunning! Are you ready to head to the chapel?” Maria asks.

I turn around and nod. “Ready!”

She leads us out of the room, down the elevator, and across the lobby of the hotel. Everyone milling around stops what they are doing and watches us as we make our way to the revolving door. Shouts of congratulations and the sound of whistling fill the air.

The limousine is waiting for us when we make it outside, and the driver is standing on the curb. He outstretches his hand and helps the girls, one by one, into the car, then Mom and me.

Once inside, my maid of honor, April, pops the cork on the bottle of champagne that was chilling in a bucket of ice. Mom holds the flutes as she pours us each a glass and carefully hands them out.

“To my beautiful best friend on her big day. I hope it is as magical as you imagined,” April says as she raises her flute in the air.

We all lean in and clink our glasses before sitting back and relishing our pre-wedding cocktail.

The driver takes his time in getting us to the chapel just before the doors are closed to the sanctuary. The girls file out and get into line while Maria’s assistant hands out their bouquets.

Mom takes the arm of one of the groomsmen to be lead to her seat while I’m ushered into a small office off the side of the doors to wait for my father to come and escort me down the aisle.

“Okay, here is your bouquet and a handkerchief to tuck around the handle, just in case,” Maria says before closing the door and leaving me to myself.

I take deep breaths and enjoy my last few moments as Hannah Whitmar. Tonight, when I lay my head down on my pillow, I will be Mrs. Bryan Cope.

A thrill shoots through me as I look at my finger where he will be placing my wedding band in a few short moments.

I watch the clock sitting on the bookcase behind the pastor's desk. Ten minutes past five. The ceremony was supposed to start at five, so there must have been some late guests straggling in. I begin to pace nervously when the door swings open, and my father, Gordon Whitmar, stands on the threshold, looking especially dapper in his custom Ralph Lauren tuxedo.

"Oh, Hannah," he gasps. His voice a mixture of pride and ... grief?

"Hi. Daddy. Are you ready to give me away?" I ask as he takes me in.

His eyes fill with tears, and I walk to him and wrap my arms around his neck.

"It's okay. I'm not really going anywhere," I whisper.

He holds me tightly for a few beats, and then he takes a step back.

"Bryan's not here, baby," he says, and his face begins to turn red with anger.

I'm annoyed for a split second, and then I'm hit with worry.

"He's not? He must have gotten stuck in traffic, or he has a flat tire or something. I'll call him," I say as I start to look around the room. "Oh no, my phone is back at the hotel. Do you have yours?" I ask him frantically.

He brings his eyes to mine. "No, sweetheart, you don't understand. I've already spoken with him. He's not coming."

It takes a few seconds for me to process the words.

"What do you mean, he's not coming?"

He drops his head and clutches the back of his neck. “He said he’s sorry, but he just can’t get married. Not today.”

“Not today?” I repeat.

He looks up, and I can see the pain in his eyes.

“Not ever.”

That’s when I lose control of my legs, and he has to rush forward to catch me as my mother, friends, and Maria come rushing in behind him.

In that moment, I feel so many emotions—confusion, anger, humiliation, and deep, soul-crushing heartbreak.

Mom runs over and takes me from my father’s arms and into hers. “It’s okay, Hannah. Everything is going to be okay,” she assures me.

“Get me out of here,” I howl into her hair.

At my cry, Maria immediately moves into action and starts clearing a path, using her body to shield me from everyone’s faces. She leads us out to the limousine. As soon as I see the bewildered look on the driver’s face when he exits the car to greet us, I melt into a puddle again.

“This way. We’ll take the car,” Maria’s assistant says as she waves us toward the parking lot.

The four of us hurry to her small silver Toyota Camry, and Mom and I duck into the backseat.

How did this happen? This went from the best day of my life to the worst day of my life in a matter of twenty minutes.

Twenty minutes.

I turn and look at the chapel as we back out of the space.

My happily ever after is in there.

The doors swing open, and a confused wave of my friends and family begins to file out. Mortification swallows me as my father commands their attention while we screech out into traffic and race out of sight.

Thank God for Maria and her assistant.

My guardian angels.



Chapter One

Hannah

Present

“Hannah, over here!”

My eyes scan the sea of faces at baggage claim to find Aunt Trixie and Uncle Bob.

She is standing with a sign in her hands that reads, *Welcome to Lake Mistletoe.*

I clutch the handle of my suitcase and make my way to them.

She greets me with a warm hug, and Uncle Bob kisses my cheek and takes the suitcase from my hand.

“How was your flight?” Aunt Trixie asks as the sliding glass doors open and a blast of icy air hits my face.

“It was good. I got a little work done, so I can put the laptop away and enjoy the next few weeks.”

“Wonderful.”

We cross the busy pickup lanes at Boise Airport to the parking deck and stop at a red Chevrolet Tahoe. Uncle Bob loads my bag into the cargo area, and I climb into the backseat and buckle up.

“The drive in takes about two and a half hours. Are you hungry? We could stop at the Black Bear Diner in Twin Falls for lunch. They have the best pot roast, aside from your aunt Trixie’s,” Uncle Bob asks.

“Two and a half hours? You guys made a five-hour round trip to pick me up from the airport? That’s crazy. I could have flown into Hailey.”

Uncle Bob snorts. “Those plane tickets are a fortune this time of year. Taking advantage of all the vacationers at Sun Valley. It’s highway robbery.”

“You should have at least let me rent a car and saved yourselves the trip.”

Aunt Trixie turns and looks at me over her shoulder. “Oh, we didn’t mind. We enjoy road-tripping together. Besides, Bob loves any excuse to stop at Black Bear for pot roast. Don’t let him fool you. He likes it better than mine,” she says before playfully swatting at his shoulder.

A deep, rumbling chuckle fills the cab, and I smile at the two of them. They are adorable and the only couple I know who have won at the game of love. My parents divorced when I was in middle school. My mother never remarried. My father did. Twice, and wife number three doesn’t look to be hanging around much longer.

Every rule has to have an exception, I guess.

Aunt Trixie turns the radio to a station playing Christmas music, and I settle in and enjoy the drive through the beautiful snow-covered roads that weave in and out of the mountains.

It’s such a welcome contrast to the Las Vegas desert.

We stop for lunch, and as promised, the pot roast is *melt in your mouth* delicious.

By the time we are pulling into the gates of Lake Mistletoe, the sun has set, and horizon is sprinkled with bright stars. It's another sight I rarely get to enjoy. The lights and sounds of the Strip usually drown out the beauty of the night sky, and I have to venture toward Red Rocks for stargazing, which, in all honesty, I don't make time to do nearly often enough.

Work. That's what I live for, and I'm very good at what I do. The company I work for has been voted the best event planning service in Las Vegas for four years running. I'm not saying that I'm the reason for the success, but I did start working for them four years ago.

I began as an assistant coordinator and worked my way up to one of the most requested wedding planners in the city, and boy, does Las Vegas host an insane amount of weddings each year. It's the number one destination wedding location in the United States with an average of one hundred twenty thousand ceremonies per year. That's more than twenty-three hundred weddings per week.

I'm a pro at managing grumpy grooms, high emotions, meddling family members, day-of-ceremony chaos, and any unforeseen problems that might occur for the frazzled bride-to-be, and I have been working my tail off, trying to climb my way to the top.

Needless to say, your girl is exhausted.

So, for the first time since I started this gig, I'm taking a much-needed break. December is the slowest month for nuptials, and after what was a record-breaking year for spring and summer weddings, I cleared my calendar, much to my boss's dismay, and packed my bags to spend the holidays with my family. I haven't done this in years.

My cousin Norah and her husband, Sammy's, November wedding was my last one of the year. She wanted a true Vegas experience, complete with an Elvis impersonator serenading the couple as they embarked on their first dance. So, I booked

a beautiful, rustic ceremony for them at The Glass Garden. It's gorgeous and, most importantly, a climate-controlled outdoor venue right on the Las Vegas Strip with a glass ceiling, so the night sky can twinkle down on the couple and their guests.

It wasn't my usual luxe, over-the-top event, but it was romantic and intimate, and the reception was so much fun.

The entire family flew in for the wedding and then spent a week celebrating in Vegas. I hooked them all up with the best tickets in town and showed them the highlights of Sin City. In return, my cousin Keller's girlfriend, Willa, offered me a complimentary four-week stay at the inn she owns in Lake Mistletoe as a thank-you.

Aunt Trixie has worked at the Gingerbread Inn—once owned by her best friend, Wilhemina, before her granddaughter, Willa, inherited it last year—since we were children. She used to send my mother and me pictures and postcards, and I always wanted to visit, but we never did.

So, I'm taking Willa up on her offer, and here I am, finally ready to get my holly and jolly on in Lake Mistletoe.



“Thank you for letting me stay through the holidays,” I tell Willa as she hands me the keys.

“We're happy to have you. Besides, I was so impressed with the job you did on Norah's wedding that I intend to pick your brain for ideas for the Gingerbread Inn's new event venue while you're here, so it was kind of a selfish offer.”

I wrap my fingers around the brass key ring and smile. “New event venue? How exciting.”

“Yeah, I have this grand vision of hosting weddings, holiday balls, corporate galas, and even sweet-sixteen parties and proms in Grammy's garden. After seeing the chapel where Norah and Sammy said *I do*, I was inspired to create the same type of space here,” she gushes.

“Well, I’m at your disposal. Pick away.”

She smiles. “I promise it won’t be like work. I want you to rest and rejuvenate, but I’d welcome your professional opinion on a few details.”

I need this vacation. The wedding season completely depleted me this year. I’m ready to relax and soak up some downtime with family and newfound friends, but the thought of talking shop doesn’t bother me in the least.

“You’re in room 205. It’s on the second floor to the left. Dinner is served at six, and I think I caught a whiff of our chef, Alice’s, famous apple dumplings baking earlier, so you are in for a treat. They’re Keller’s favorite,” Willa informs.

My mouth waters. Dinners usually consist of takeout for one from one of the restaurants in the Mandalay Bay Resort and Casino that houses the office of Perfect Princess Event and Concierge Services.

“I can’t wait. Uncle Bob raves about Alice’s and Trixie’s home cooking. Where is Keller anyway? Aunt Trixie said he would be here.”

“He is. He and his friend are outside somewhere. I conned them into doing some maintenance work for me today.”

“Conned, huh?”

She grins. “More like I very politely asked Keller, and he conned Bran.”

Uncle Bob comes bounding down the hall with my suitcase, and Willa asks him to take it to my room.

A petite woman rounds the corner from the office.

“Wait,” she calls.

“Hannah, this is Annette. She works here at the inn,” Willa introduces her.

“Hi,” I greet.

“It’s nice to meet you. Trixie told me you were coming, but I had you marked for arriving on Saturday.”

“Yeah, my Friday afternoon wedding canceled because the groom ran off with one of the bridesmaids, so I flew in a day early. I hope that’s okay?”

She gasps. “That’s awful.”

I nod. “It happens more often than you’d think.”

“Well, we’re happy to have you here an extra day. I’ll just move some things around.” She starts typing on the keyboard.

“I’m sorry to cause trouble.”

She waves me off. “No trouble at all. I’ll put you in room 310 since the Jenkins just vacated 205, and it still needs a good cleaning. I’ll move the Georges to that room for their stay.”

“Thank goodness I have you to keep me straight, Annette,” Willa says.

She takes the key I have and switches it for the new key. “You’ll love it. It has a much better view of the lake, and it’s so quiet on the third floor. Plus, all the bathrooms up there have already been upgraded.”

“An upgrade? Lucky me.”

“The tree and ornaments for your room will be delivered tomorrow,” Annette states.

“Tree?”

“Yes. We have a big tree down here by the fireplace, and we all trim it together, but each guest room gets its own miniature tree, and we supply a wooden trunk of ornaments, so you can decorate it yourself. We also deliver fresh-baked gingerbread cookies every night at turndown service. If you want milk or cocoa though, you have to come down to the living room and mingle with everyone,” she adds.

Willa leans in and whispers, “That one is Trixie’s rule. She wants everyone to feel like a part of the family.”

“That’s quite festive. Thank you both,” I say.

“You’re welcome. You’re going to have the best time here,” Willa assures me.

I make my way up the staircase behind Uncle Bob. The inn is so quaint. With its warm tones and comfy decor, it is the opposite of the opulence of the resort hotel where I spend most of my days off in a bikini, sipping cocktails in a cabana by the pool.

I'm not complaining. There are worse ways to spend time than lounging at a luxury resort. I have a great life, but lately, I've been stuck in a rut. Every day is the same. Booze, gambling, glitz, and glamour. Dapper men throwing spa days and shopping sprees at their young paramours, so they can spend their days and nights in a dark room, full of sunglasses-wearing, cigar-smoking high rollers. That, and the frat boys losing their money either at the slot machines or the strip club and expelling the rot-gut liquor, which they consumed during a seventy-two-hour drink-a-thon, into the potted plants by the pool as I try to relax.

Hopefully, this time off will be just the reset I need.

He plops the suitcase on the big king-size four-poster bed. "There you go. I'll let you get settled in."

"Thank you, Uncle Bob."

I shut the door behind him and turn to take a good look at my home away from home. The bed looks cozy. There is a little sitting area to the left with a chaise lounge and a side table placed in front of an Amish electric fireplace. A small desk is tucked in the far corner with Gingerbread Inn letterhead and a variety of colored pens. The nightstand to the right of the bed holds a rustic, tall bronze lamp with a holly-print lampshade. Two bottles of water and an ice bucket sit beside the television that is perched upon a beautifully carved live-edge stand.

That must be Keller's handiwork.

My cousin is the owner of Keller Harris Design Studio. He makes custom hand-carved furniture, and he is a master craftsman.

I unpack my suitcase and hang my clothes in the mini walk-in closet.

I carry my toiletries into the attached bathroom. It has a small glassed shower and a large claw-foot bathtub. A basket wrapped in cellophane rests on a stool next to the tub.

The notecard reads, *Hello from our staff. We hope you have a holly, jolly, and relaxing stay. Please enjoy this gift and our sincere gratitude for choosing to spend your holidays with us.*

I remove the twist tie, and a whiff of mint and spices escapes. The content of the basket includes a soy gingerbread candle, a mistletoe bath bomb, peppermint lip balm, a lavender body lotion, a bath pillow, a robe, and a pair of memory foam slippers.

How thoughtful. I should totally make these for the bridal suites at the hotel.

Deciding that a long, hot soak is exactly what I need after a day of travel, I turn the water on and let the tub fill while I undress and pull my hair into a topknot.

I place the terry-cloth robe on the bed, grab my phone, and pull up my meditation app. Then, I return to drop the bath bomb into the water and watch as it fizzes and fills the room with a peaceful aroma of cinnamon. I use the provided matches to light the candle and place it on the stool along with one of the bottles of water.

Once the tub is full, I turn off the faucets, pop my earbuds in, and hit play on my iPhone. The sound of a babbling brook fills my ears as I sink into the warm depths.

I close my eyes and let the tranquil water ease my achy, travel-fatigued muscles.

Bliss.

This is definitely what I needed.



Chapter Two

Bran

I climb down the ladder and dismount. Looking up, I inspect the work.

All the windows are pristine and decorated per Willa's wishes.

The old place is truly a sight to behold. It's like the house from *Hansel and Gretel* come to life.

"I've finished this side. I'm going to knock out the front," I shout.

My friend and business partner, Keller Harris, and I have been working at his girlfriend, Willa Arrington's, inn for the past two days, power-washing the walkways, cleaning gutters, washing windows, and hanging some additional holiday decorations.

Keller comes around the corner of the inn, toting a string of lights.

“It’s going to be dark soon. Maybe we should call it a night,” he says.

I look up at the sky. Twilight is setting in, and the temperature is beginning to drop.

“The forecast is calling for high winds and more snowfall tomorrow. We don’t have much left to do, and the streetlights are going to come on in about twenty minutes, giving us plenty of light. I say we take advantage of this small window of clear weather and finish it up now.”

He nods his agreement. “Yeah, you might be right.”

At that moment, Willa appears from the terrace, carrying two insulated tumblers.

“I thought you guys could use a little warm hydration,” she says as she hands one to each of us.

I take the mug, close my eyes, and inhale.

Warm apple cider.

“My favorite,” I declare.

“I know,” she replies.

“The woman is crafty. She knows how to get men to do her bidding,” Keller says.

Willa feigns offense. “Are you accusing me of bribery, Mr. Harris? I’m just being hospitable.”

“Uh-huh,” he mutters.

“Actually, Alice sent me out to check on your progress. Dinner is almost ready.”

“We’ve finished the back and side windows. They’re all freshly cleaned, and they have the new wreaths secured. All that’s left is the front and hanging these last few strands of lights on the covered porch. Shouldn’t take longer than another hour,” Keller guesses.

“Perfect timing. You guys can eat when the guests do.”

She stands up on her tiptoes and places a kiss on Keller's lips before turning to walk back inside the inn.

"What? No kiss for me? I'm the one doing most of the work over here," I call after her.

She stops and looks over her shoulder, winks, and blows me a kiss.

I take my hand and catch it midair.

"All right. Let's get this done, so we can eat," Keller quips.

He sets the lights to the side and comes over to grab one end of the ladder. He helps me carry it, and we set it up inside the line of bushes just left of the front porch. Once it's stable, we bring over the second ladder and secure it beside the first one.

Keller goes to fetch more wreaths off the bed of the truck while I start prepping for cleaning.

I refill my utility vest with vinegar spray and clean cloths, and I strap a squeegee to my belt, then carefully make my way up to start at the third floor and work my way down.

Climbing ladders is nothing new for me. I'm an artist by trade. I've sculpted many towering statues, painted murals on the sides of buildings and on ceilings, and even created a few handmade custom billboards for clients throughout the years.

I grew up in Lake Mistletoe, but I followed a girl to Seattle after college and operated a home studio, doing mostly freelance work until recently, when my childhood friend, Keller, opened his own furniture gallery. His small backyard business exploded in the span of six months, and he called me with a proposition to lure me back home.

I decided to take a chance and packed my few belongings up, drained my savings account, and headed home, sans the girl. I purchased a plot of land on the mountainside at the edge of town and had a small bachelor pad built.

Now, Keller and I are partners, working together to create custom, handcrafted furniture and commissioned art pieces to

a broad range of customers all over the country, and we're also, apparently, the unofficial handymen for Willa's inn.

I get to the top rung, and I spray the glass with the vinegar solution and let it sit for a few seconds. I use the cloth to clean the edges and the ledge. Once the liquid has time to do its magic, breaking down the dust and leftover sludge from the snowfall, I take the squeegee from my belt.

I get the glass sparkling clean, and I notice the hook to secure the wreath ribbon is broken. It must have happened when they removed them last year.

"Keller, you're going to need a hook for this one," I call down.

He nods and walks over to the toolbox sitting on the walkway and pulls a new one.

I descend the ladder to the second floor. I repeat the process-spray, clean, squeegee-until I hit the last window on the ground floor, where Keller meets me with the hook and wreath. I hop off, and he goes up.

I move over and ascend the next ladder to the third floor.

We've worked out our own assembly line. I go first and wash the windows, and then he comes behind me and mounts the new wreaths in place.

On the third row from the left of the house, just as I start to squeegee the glass, I notice the frame of the window is cracked and the wood has separated. I tug at a splintered shard, and the whole of the ledge pulls away.

"We have a problem over here, man," I say.

Keller's eyes come to me. "What is it?"

"The wood is dry-rotted, and this ledge is crumbling in my hand. The window will start leaking, if it hasn't already."

"Drop it. I'll go see if I have some wood and stain on the truck that will work until I can get back out here and replace it," he says.

I take the handle of the squeegee and start banging the wood, which turns to dust as I pound it loose.

I bend to drop the fragments at the base of the ladder, and when I look back up, I hear an ear-piercing scream.

My eyes meet a pair of deep brown orbs just before the glass shatters around me, and I release a string of curse words.

One minute, I'm scrambling to grab hold of anything to stabilize myself while shards fly at my face, and the next moment, the side of my head feels like it's been hit by a bullet, and pain radiates down my cheek.

Then, it's lights out.



Chapter Three

Hannah

I finish my bath and get out of the tub, feeling incredibly relaxed. I quickly dry off with the festive towel hanging beside the tub, then wrap my long brown hair with it and twist it on top of my head. I smooth on a dollop of the lip balm and then use the provided lotion on my legs and arms.

I walk out into the room in search of my bag to fetch my hair dryer and stop to grab the robe on the bed when I hear pounding on the window.

I turn abruptly and see a man staring back at me. He has a weapon of some sort in his hand, and he raises it.

Oh my God, he's trying to break in.

In a moment of sheer panic, I grab the closest thing to me and hurl it toward the window as I scream for help. Then, I

watch in slow motion as the brass lamp crashes through the window.

The sound of glass shattering mingles with my scream when I see the man looking me in the eye before falling backward.

I sprint to the windowsill. Shards of glass embed in the soft pads of my feet, and I look down at the stranger lying motionless in the snow.

My heart is trying to pound its way out of my chest as I watch another man rush to him.

Keller?

Before I can call down to him, Willa and Aunt Trixie come barreling through the door of my room.

They take me in, standing naked, breathless, and pointing toward the shattered window.

“Are you all right?” Aunt Trixie asks as she hurries to my side.

I shake my head. “Someone’s out there. They were attempting to break the window,” I manage to stutter.

“Oh no,” Willa gasps.

She runs over and looks through the large hole in the window.

“Bran,” she yells, and then she turns and sprints out of the room.

The panic in her voice snaps me out of mine.

“What’s a bran?” I ask Aunt Trixie as she wraps me in the robe.

“It’s Keller’s friend. They were hanging wreaths outside.”

No.

I close the tie to the robe as I race out of the room and down the stairs behind Willa.

The front door to the inn is wide open, and I skid to a halt as I make it to the covered porch.

Off to the side, I get a better look at the man lying on his back, eyes closed. Blood is coming from his mouth, and Keller is beside him with his hands on his face, trying to rouse him. Willa has a phone to her ear.

“Come on, buddy. Wake up,” Keller urges.

“Did I kill him?” I screech.

“Nah, my brain’s just rattled a bit,” a husky voice answers my question as the stranger opens his left eye and brings his hand to his jaw.

“Don’t move. You hit your head pretty hard,” Keller commands.

“I’m fine,” he croaks as he sits up. “What hit me?” he asks.

“A lamp,” I inform him.

He brings his one open eye to me. “A what?”

“A lamp. I thought you were a murderer or something, and I threw a lamp at you.” It sounds ridiculous when I say it out loud.

“A murderer?” he repeats.

“You startled me. I heard banging on the window, and then I looked up, and there you were,” I try to explain.

Trixie comes out to the porch, carrying some wet cloths and alcohol. She goes down to have a look at him.

“Oh my, you’ve got quite the lump on the back of your head. Can you open your right eye?” she asks him.

He tries but struggles to blink it open.

“There’s something in it,” he cries.

“It could be glass from the window. Can you stand?” she asks.

Keller grabs his hand and hoists him to his feet, and Aunt Trixie leads him to the steps of the porch.

“Willa, grab some warm water and a few extra towels, and I’ll try and flush the eye.”

Willa hurries inside and returns with a pot of water and a stack of towels.

After Trixie fusses over him for a few moments and assesses his injuries, she instructs Keller to take him over to the emergency clinic right away.

He protests, "I'm fine."

"Maybe, but you still need to have that bump checked and your eye looked at. I think I got all the debris out, but I can't be sure," she tells him.

He groans.

"Go on now. Go let the doctor look you over. I'll have dinner waiting for you when you get back."

"What about the window?" he asks.

"I'll have Bob come and board it up for the night, and we'll worry about it tomorrow. Now, shoo," she demands.

He begrudgingly follows Keller to his truck. As he passes me, I can see the bruise starting to color beneath the stubble on his jaw.

I could have killed him.

"I'm so sorry," I blurt out.

He doesn't look my way. He just raises his hand in a dismissive wave as he proceeds to the truck and climbs in.

Keller kisses Willa's cheek. "It's okay. He's going to be okay. You guys get inside. It's cold out here. We'll be back soon," he says before following his friend.

Aunt Trixie herds us all into the foyer, where some curious guests have gathered to see what the ruckus is all about.

"Sorry, folks. We just had a little mishap out on the lawn. Everything is fine. Please make your way into the dining room. Dinner is ready to be served," Aunt Trixie calls out.

I stand there in my robe with my hair in a towel, still shaking. Willa comes over and places her hands on my shoulders.

“Come on. Let’s get you dressed and the glass cleaned up from your room, so you don’t hurt yourself,” she says as she urges me toward the stairs.

I don’t move.

“Are you okay?” she asks.

“I could have killed him,” I whisper.

“But you didn’t. Bran’s tough. He’ll be fine.”

“I thought he was breaking in.”

She sighs. “That’s my fault. I’m so sorry. All the guests were told earlier today that the guys would be working at the windows, and Annette and I pulled all their curtains closed when we refreshed the beds this morning. Neither of us thought to tell you when you arrived. Plus, the guys were told the third floor was vacant until Saturday.”

“I could have killed him,” I repeat.

“It was just an accident. Come on now,” she insists.

I follow her up the stairs to my room. She walks over to the broken window to have a look at the damage.

“At least most of the glass ended up outside. Just a few shards fell in this direction. I’ll get Annette to bring in the vacuum and make sure everything is cleaned up,” she says as she collects the larger pieces.

I limp over to the bed and clean the shards from my feet.

“Are you hurt?” Willa asks.

“No. It’s just a few tiny glass pieces. I was so caught up in the drama I didn’t even feel them,” I reply, before standing and walking to the closet to grab a comfy sweater and leggings and making my way into the bathroom to get dressed.

I pull the towel from my head and run a brush through my damp locks as the tears run down my face.

Willa appears in the doorway. “Hey, stop that. No crying at the Gingerbread Inn. It’s a rule.”

I smile at her through the mirror. “What a way to start my vacation. I’ll pay to have the window replaced,” I tell her.

She waves me off. “That’s what insurance is for. Now, let’s go eat. A good, hot meal will make you feel better,” she assures me.



“You’re all set,” Uncle Bob says as he enters the living room, where Willa, Aunt Trixie, and I are settled in after dinner.

“Window’s all boarded up, and the glass has been cleared. It should hold up fine until the hardware store gets the new window in.”

“Thanks, Bob,” Willa says.

Aunt Trixie lets out a yawn.

“I do believe that is a sign that I need to take my bride home,” he says as he stretches his hand to her.

“I wanted to wait for Bran and Keller to return,” she says.

“It’s okay. I’ll make sure they get fed. It’s been an eventful day. Go on home, and I’ll have Keller call you with an update as soon as they arrive,” Willa tells her.

“All right. I’ll see you two in the morning.”

She finally relents and takes Uncle Bob’s hand. He tugs her to her feet and leads her to the door.

Willa looks at me. “Want a glass of wine?”

“I’d love one,” I admit.

“I’ll be right back.” She hops to her feet and disappears into the kitchen.

I pull my legs up and tuck them under me before tugging the fuzzy blanket from the back of the couch and wrapping it around me.

My attention is lost in the snap and crackle of the flames licking at the logs in the giant fireplace when she returns with a glass in each hand.

“I hope you like Pinot Noir,” she says as she hands one over to me.

“If it comes from a grape, I like it,” I quip.

She settles back in beside me. “Keller texted. They just finished up and are on their way now.”

“Any word on the damage?” I ask.

She shakes her head. “He didn’t say.”

I groan. “Ugh, I still can’t believe I threw a lamp through a window. Keller’s friend must think I’m a psycho.”

She laughs. “It makes for a great story—that’s for sure.”

The front door opens and closes, and in walks Keller.

“Oh, wow. That doesn’t look good,” Willa assesses as we catch sight of the man following behind him.

He has a black patch covering the white cotton gauze and medical tape over his right eye. An ace bandage wraps his wrist, and the small bruise that was forming on his jaw is now a large deep purple that’s crawled up to just under his injured eye.

I stand abruptly and make my way over to him, raising my hand to lightly graze his swollen cheek.

He reaches up with his good hand to clasp mine.

“Hannah, this is my partner, Brannigan Prince. Bran, this is my cousin, Hannah Whitmar,” Keller introduces.

Prince?

The name sure suits him. He looks like Prince Charming from my favorite fairy tale, Cinderella.

“It’s nice to meet you,” he says.

“I’m sure you’d prefer to not have met me,” I reply.

He smiles and then winces. "I might wish it were under different circumstances," he agrees.

"I'm so sorry. I was startled when I saw a man looking through the window while I stood there, naked, and I just didn't think."

"You were naked?" he asks.

"Yeah, I had just gotten out of the bath," I say.

"Damn, if I had seen that, I might not be as upset by the near-death experience," he mutters.

"You didn't ..."

"No. I didn't see a thing but a blur of gold metal before it crashed into my skull," he interrupts.

I sigh as relief crawls down my body.

Thank goodness.

"Not my finest moment," I declare.

"I don't know. It was an impressive throw. You could have been a quarterback," he teases.

My eyes fall to his wrapped wrist. "Is your arm broken?"

He lifts the hand not holding mine.

"Nah, it's just a soft-tissue injury. Doc wanted to use the splint to keep the muscles and ligaments in my hand and wrist stable while it heals."

"Jeez."

"No big deal. I hurt myself worse at the workshop daily," he whispers.

I look back up at him. "Sure you do."

We stand there, my hand in his, for a few beats when Willa clears her throat.

He drops his grip on my hand, and I step back.

"Are you hungry?" Willa asks.

Bran's eye shoots past me to the couch. "Starving. Plus, I just swallowed a handful of painkillers, so if I don't eat soon, I could end up being the naked one, dancing on the coffee table."

"Don't threaten us with a good time. You might not get a thing to eat," she says as she stands.

She grabs Keller by the shirt as she passes him.

"Follow me, fellas," she beckons.

We all make our way to the kitchen, where Willa and I heat up leftovers and feed them.



Chapter Four

Bran

I wake up and blink a couple of times before I realize my one eye is still taped shut.

According to the doctor, a shard of glass from the window at the Gingerbread Inn sliced into my cornea and caused quite a laceration. He assured me that the human eye was very resilient and most patients with the same injury would heal on their own within three to four days. However, because of the depth of the cut, he wanted me to err on the side of caution, use an antibiotic eye drop, and wear this ridiculous patch to protect the eye for at least a full week.

I roll out of bed and groan as the pain shoots from my hip up to my side.

Making my way to the kitchen to start the coffeepot, I stop when I catch sight of myself in the mirror hanging above the bookshelf outside of my bedroom.

Yikes.

The entire right side of my face is as black as coal.

I turn and look at myself, moving my head from side to side.

“Even black and blue, you are a handsome devil, Mr. Prince,” I tell my reflection.

I fumble around, filling the coffee machine with water and coffee grounds. It takes a few extra minutes, being that one of my hands is suspended in a splint.

Thank goodness it’s my left hand and not my right.

Once I’m sufficiently caffeinated, I shower as best I can, dress, and head out into the freezing morning to scrape my ice-covered windshield before making my way to work.

It’s a beautiful morning. The early sunlight bounces off the pristine lake and creates a rainbow of color that shimmers across the water’s surface.

It’s lovely in summertime—the lake is filled with kayaks and canoes and children swimming while men soak in the day, casting fishing lines—but winter in Lake Mistletoe is my favorite. The fresh snow blanketing the ground surrounding the lake and the majestic mountains in the background give me a sense of calm and renewal like none other.

How could anyone be grumpy in the morning when they wake up to this?

I turn on Main Street and see that the holiday decorating has already begun. The shop owners and town offices are in the process of decking the halls with festive garland and lights on every post and door. The general store’s window display is a quaint Christmas scene, depicting a family snuggled around a Christmas tree while the father reads from *'Twas the Night Before Christmas*.

I wave to Fran, who is sweeping the sidewalk free of snow in front of the mercantile, as I pull into the parking lot across the street, which connects to Keller Harris Design Studio.

Once I exit my truck, I make my way inside, careful to avoid any slick spots on the asphalt.

“You should have just stayed home,” Keller bellows as I walk through the door of the showroom.

The building we share is divided between this showroom, a design studio–slash–workshop that is separated by a set of swinging doors, and the offices in the back of the warehouse.

“Why would I do that?” I ask.

He wipes his stain-colored hands on the apron protecting his jeans. “I don’t know. Maybe because you fell three stories off a ladder yesterday and damn near broke your hand and lost your eye.”

I walk over to the counter that holds our computer and register and set my messenger bag down.

“I’m fine,” I say.

“I saw you wince when you heaved that bag up. How bad is the pain?” he asks.

I shrug. “I was a bit stiff this morning. I can definitely feel the bruised ribs, and driving a stick with one hand is a bitch, but other than that, I am good.”

“Willa will be happy to hear that. She’s already called three times this morning to check on you.”

“Tell her I won’t sue as long as a fresh plate of gingerbread cookies makes its way to my desk every morning until Christmas,” I tease.

He tosses the apron he removed at me.

“Hey, injured over here,” I gripe.

“I still don’t know why you bothered coming in. You can’t handle a chain saw with that splint. Why don’t you go home and rest? I got this,” he suggests.

“I appreciate that, man, but I can’t lie around and do nothing. I’ll stay here and handle any customers that wander in.”

He shrugs. “Suit yourself. I just finished the kitchen island for Lester Davenport.”

“Awesome. That’s a week ahead of schedule.”

“I couldn’t sleep either, so I figured I’d come in and knock it out.”

“I know this accident came at the worst time with all the holiday orders we have. I’ll be back up and running as soon as possible,” I promise.

He shrugs. “Not like you fell on purpose. Besides, you were doing me a favor. I’m more than willing to put in extra time while you heal. Now, I’m thinking about heading over to the Snow Bird Café for a big stack of German pancakes to celebrate finishing the Davenport order. You want to come?” he asks.

“Sure. All this work has stirred up my appetite!”

He rolls his eyes.



Keller turns the *Back in Forty-five Minutes* sign over and locks the door to the studio behind us, and we walk the block and a half to the Snow Bird.

“Good morning, fellas. Whoa, what happened to you?” Joe Walsh, the owner of the café, asks as we enter.

“He got in an argument with a woman,” Keller answers as we take a seat at one of the booths.

Joe makes his way from behind the counter, carrying a coffeepot. He turns the clean mugs that are sitting in front of us over and fills them with the steaming liquid.

“Boy, don’t you know better? You never pick a fight with a woman. You can’t win,” Joe says.

“Where were you with the sage advice yesterday?” I mumble.

“Right here. Dispensing wisdom, as always. You young bucks just refuse to listen.”

“I think he learned his lesson,” Keller teases.

Joe’s eyes come to me as he grins and shakes his head. “Doubt it. He’ll wrestle with that gator again,” he says before walking off.

“Hey, you didn’t take our order,” I call after him.

“Two orders of German pancakes with a side of bacon coming right up,” he yells.

“Don’t act like you know me,” I shout.

He turns and glances at me over his shoulder with a raised eyebrow.

“I want sausage links instead of bacon,” I grumble.

He ignores me and greets the next customer entering the front door.

I point across the table with my good hand. “Quit telling people a girl did this to me.”

“I’m just telling the truth,” Keller replies as he adds sugar and cream to his mug.

“Yeah, well, you drink your coffee like a girl. Light and sweet,” I say as I pick up my cup and take a huge gulp.

He watches as I wince.

“You want me to help you add sugar and cream to yours, ma’am?” he asks.

I don’t answer. I just turn my head as I slide my mug toward him.

He laughs and doctors my java.

“What’s your cousin’s story anyway?” I ask.

“What do you mean?”

“You know, her story. Why is she here? For how long? Is her man joining her?”

He grins. “She’s here to spend Christmas with us, and she’ll be here until the end of the month. And she’s single.”

“Oh, really?”

“Don’t get any ideas there, Romeo. Don’t forget the golden rule: no dating the holiday guests,” he states.

“Who said anything about dating?”

He gives me a knowing look. “What? None of the single ladies in town want to live that tree house life?”

“Plenty of women would love to be my tree nymph, thank you very much. I was just curious about the woman—that’s all,” I say before changing the subject. “How did that rule work out for you and Willa?”

“Technically, Willa was never a guest.”

“Whatever,” I mutter.

“I’m serious, man. Don’t mess around and fall for Hannah. She’s not that girl.”

“Noted.”



Chapter Five

Hannah

The alarm on my phone starts to play, and I remove the silk sleep mask from my eyes as I swat at the nightstand, trying to locate the source of the racket.

My hand finds the device, and I stop the noise.

Six in the morning.

I groan and toss the phone back onto the stand and cover my head with the pillow. I can't believe I forgot to turn off that alarm. I was sleeping so well.

Try as I might, I can't fall back to sleep as my mind starts whirling with the events of the day before. I remove the pillow and look over to see the boarded-up window.

Yep, still there. It wasn't a bad dream.

Giving up, I throw the covers off and make my way into the bathroom to get dressed.

Following the smell of coffee down the staircase and into the kitchen, I find Alice, Aunt Trixie, and Willa chatting.

“Good morning, Hannah. How did you sleep?” Aunt Trixie asks.

I shuffle toward the coffee maker. “Like a rock. Is that bed enchanted or something?”

Alice hands me a mug, and I pour myself a hot cup and take a seat beside Aunt Trixie at the island.

“It’s great, right? Willa invested in all-new mattresses and luxury bedding last summer. Hal says it’s like we are sleeping on a cloud.”

“It was quite a splurge,” Aunt Trixie adds.

“Well, when you run a business that is based on customers having a relaxing vacation, it’s worth it to put your money into anything that brings extra comfort to the experience,” Willa says.

“Oh, I think it was definitely a good investment. I could have slept all day if I’d just remembered to turn my alarm off,” I tell her.

“Oh no. I’ve done that a time or two. Thankfully, you have many more days to sleep in.”

“Would you like some breakfast?” Alice asks.

I shake my head. “No, I don’t want you to go to any trouble. I’ll just grab a smoothie or something in town,” I reply.

She plants a hand on her hip and frowns at me. “I’m making omelets for us, so it’s no trouble to make another. Besides, a smoothie is no way to start your day. You need real food.”

After the huge meal we had for dinner last night, followed by the gingerbread cookies I scarfed down while watching

television in my room, I'm sure my body is fueled up for a couple of days at least.

"I'm more of a *coffee and banana* type of breakfast eater," I say.

"Healthy food. Just like Willa here. I'll make it a veggie omelet," Alice says before she grabs a red bell pepper from the bowl on the island and proceeds to chop it.

Willa gives me a side-glance, and I decide to give in. Alice is a warm, large woman. She reminds me of my mother, and I can tell that feeding people brings her joy.

Willa leans her head to mine and whispers, "Calories don't count during the month of December."

Oh, how we all wish that were true.

"What are your plans today, Hannah?" Aunt Trixie changes the subject.

"I don't really have any. Maybe I'll do a little reading. To be honest, it's odd to not have a tight schedule breathing down my neck. I might be bad at it."

"Bad at what?" Willa asks.

"Vacationing."

She wraps an arm around my shoulders. "Don't worry. We'll show you how. Norah will be by soon. Want a tour of town?"

"I'd love that."

Alice places a plate in front of each of us. "Good. Eat up. Adventure awaits."



I meet the girls in the lobby, all decked out in my vacation attire. I spent the week before flying out shopping for snowy weather and holiday outfits.

Norah hugs me in greeting.

“Look at you. I love the shoes,” she compliments as she points to the white wool-lined faux rabbit fur and Italian leather boots, which I paired with a tan puffer vest and cream wool cap, mittens, and scarf.

“I might have gone a little crazy, buying all the cozy sweaters and stylish boots I could find,” I admit.

“At least you did your research. You should have seen the suitcase this one packed when she showed up from Florida,” Norah says as she gestures toward Willa.

Willa just shrugs.

“What’s on our agenda?” I ask.

“I need to run to the shop and pick up a crate of evergreen sprigs to deliver to Donna at the schoolhouse. Her students are using them to do some holiday crafts in art class this week. After that, we’re free to roam.”

Norah owns a flower shop in town, and her sister, Donna, is an elementary school teacher.

A crisp, cold breeze greets us as we make our way outside to Norah’s Jeep.

“I call shotgun!” Willa bellows as she sprints down the driveway.

Norah shakes her head. “Hannah is a guest. She should get shotgun.”

Willa turns and sticks out her bottom lip. “Fine.”

“I don’t mind sitting in the backseat,” I say.

“No way. She just wants the front because it has heated seats, and there is nothing better than toasting your buns while cruising around,” Norah mutters under her breath.

She is right; the butt warmer is divine.

As we drive around the lake to Main Street, the two of them point out all the attractions that Lake Mistletoe has to offer.

“For a small town, you sure have a lot of activity,” I muse.

“Oh, yes, we’re busy all year, but from Thanksgiving to New Year’s Day, the streets are bustling with holiday visitors,” Norah explains.

Vegas is wall-to-wall crowds at all times, but Lake Mistletoe is a different vibe. There is something heartwarming about the happy tourists milling around.

Every inch of the town is decorated to perfection. All the lampposts are adorned with garland and lights. The pedestrian bridge that crosses the lake is dripping with wreaths and glowing bulbs of all colors. The classic blue spruce and towering fir trees that outline the shore are lit, reflecting their grandeur in the shimmering water. There are snowmen and snowwomen, reindeer, and elves. Sleighs and sleds and carriages. And of course, mistletoe hangs above every door and eave.

It’s a winter wonderland come to life.

Norah pulls into a space on the street in front of her flower shop, and the three of us make our way in.

A young lady with plump cheeks and a long braid in her hair, wearing a cute corduroy dress, greets us from behind the counter, “Good morning.”

“Hi, Steph. This is my cousin, Hannah. She’s in from Vegas and spending the month with us. Hannah, this is Steph, my new full-time employee and a godsend,” Norah introduces.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Steph.”

“You too,” she returns.

“We’re here to pick up the crate for the school,” Norah informs her.

“It’s ready. And the truck just delivered another load of poinsettias and mini spruce trees.”

“Oh, perfect. Let’s pull a couple of those for the window display. I have a box in the supply room with decorations, and I’ll pick up some candy canes from the mercantile this afternoon. We can set it up before closing today,” Norah says.

Norah looks to me and inclines her head. “Come on. I’ll show you the rest of the shop.”

I follow her into the back room. One wall is covered with large-doored coolers, full of colorful blooms. Another wall is lined with shelves, holding wooden boxes, filled with ribbons, bows, and small ornamental accoutrements. The opposite wall holds vases of all shapes, sizes, and colors, cellophane rolls, and decorative tissue paper. In the center stands a fifteen-foot-long granite island and workstation with all the trimmers needed for clipping blooms and grooming potted plants and trees, a hot glue gun, and all the tools of the trade.

Norah opens a set of antique double doors that opens to a storage area, which is packed to the brim with poinsettias and tiny trees.

The scent of spruce floats out and envelops me. I close my eyes and inhale deeply.

“It smells like Christmas,” I whisper.

“I know. Isn’t it wonderful?” Norah says.

I open my eyes and smile to her in agreement.

She disappears for a moment and reemerges with a wooden crate of evergreen branches and sets them on the island.

My eyes fall on the two large picture windows that look out behind her shop.

“What’s that?” I ask as I nod toward the glass structure outside.

“That’s my greenhouse. I grow my own herbs and a few vegetable plants out there from seedlings. Not much, just some tomatoes and a few peppers. We sell them in the spring.”

“And the herbs?”

“Lemon balm, lavender, several varieties of mint, citronella, catnip, basil, and oregano. Did you know that peppermint is a natural relaxant?” she asks.

“I did not.”

“It is. I’ve been studying natural remedies for headaches and stress. I dabble in making my own tinctures and teas. I enjoy making homemade essential oil lip balms and ointments as well.”

“Do you sell those too?” I ask.

“Oh, no. I make them for myself and a few friends and family. It’s just a hobby,” she says.

“And they are amazing!”

We turn to see Willa enter from the front.

“She makes them for my guest baskets at the inn.”

“Like the one you left in my bathroom?” I ask.

She nods.

“Oh, Norah, I love those,” I tell her.

“Why, thank you. I can make you some to take back home.”

“Is this what we need?” Willa asks, taking hold of the crate.

“Yes. I’m going to grab a couple of poinsettias for us to deliver as well, if you guys don’t mind,” Norah answers.

We exit the store with our hands full, and I run into something hard and warm.

“Pardon me,” I bellow as I catch myself on the windowsill after losing my footing in the fresh snow.

“Whoa. You good?”

I glance around the poinsettia in my arms to the deep voice and see one amused eye focused on me.

Brannigan Prince.

He grins down at me, his mouth framed with a set of sexy dimples. His dark hair, highlighted by the morning sun, blows wildly in the breeze.

“Yeah, I’m good,” I manage to stammer.

“Tom Brady, it’s you,” he mutters.

“Yep, it’s me. You’re so tall,” I say, flustered.

You’re so tall? What?

He chuckles at my random musing.

Norah walks up and pushes him out of the way. “You guys need to watch where you’re going,” she says, and he groans, placing his hand protectively over his side.

“Easy, sis, his ribs are bruised,” Keller calls.

He is standing behind them with the crate Willa was carrying now in his hands.

Norah’s confused eyes look up to take Bran in. “What happened to you?” she asks.

I prop the poinsettia on my hip and slowly raise my hand.

She looks from him to me and back again. “Huh?”

“I threw a lamp through a window and knocked him off a ladder,” I tell her.

She blinks a couple of times. “Excuse me, what?”

“I’ll explain in the car. I’m sorry—again,” I say to Bran as I scoot past them and hurry to the Jeep.

I’m sure my face is as red as the flowers I’m carrying.

“Run into you later, Hannah,” Bran calls after me, and I’ve never wanted to evaporate into thin air more.

“Probably,” I shout without looking back.



Chapter Six

Hannah

“So, you chucked a brass lamp out the window and knocked Bran’s block off?” Norah questions me after Willa gave her the lowdown on our previous night’s events.

“I sure did. Great way to start off a relaxing vacation,” I quip.

She bursts out laughing.

“It’s not funny. I hurt him, and I damaged Willa’s inn. I’m so embarrassed.”

“Is that why you blushed from head to toe when we ran into the guys?” she asks.

“Yes.”

Her eyes cut from the road ahead to me. “Are you sure?”

“Why else would I have blushed?” I ask.

“I don’t know. Even with only one good eye, Bran is a hottie,” she says.

“He sure is,” Willa agrees.

I turn and narrow my eyes at her.

She raises her hands in the air. “I’m just saying. I might be a taken woman, but I have eyes.”

“Same,” Norah seconds.

“I haven’t noticed his looks. All I see when I look at him is the pain I inflicted,” I assure them firmly.

“All right, if you say so,” Norah says, and I don’t miss the look she and Willa exchange in the rearview mirror.

I decide to change the subject. “Fill me in on this event space you were telling me about yesterday, Willa,” I prompt.

“I’ll do better than that. After we drop these off at the school, I’ll show you.”

We go by the school, and Donna introduces us to the kids in her class. Norah takes a few moments to show them how to carefully wrap the evergreen branches around the wire frames to create a wreath before we leave them to it and make our way back to the inn.

Alice and Hal have lunch ready, so we sit in the kitchen and eat before Norah has to head back to the flower shop, and then Willa leads me outside to the inn’s veranda and backyard area.



“Here we are,” she says as we walk about the space.

It’s a gorgeous spot, tucked between the inn and the owner’s cottage, with arched arbors, stained-glass birdbaths, a couple of stone benches, and a marble fountain. Winter

perennial blooms are scattered about between towering evergreen tree varieties and bright holly bushes.

“It’s lovely,” I say.

“This is Grammy’s garden. She loved to tool around out here. Her goal was to have her very own English rose garden right here in Lake Mistletoe.”

“She did a good job,” I praise.

“I was thinking of taking the space, enclosing it with black steel frame and glass with retractable panels that could be opened in the warm weather months, and converting it into a garden atrium in the late fall. That way, the roses could bloom all year. Guests could sit outside with a warm beverage and watch the snow fall all around them, stargaze on clear nights, or enjoy the garden even if there was six inches on the ground,” she explains.

“And it could be used for an event space,” I guess.

She nods.

“Inspired by The Glass Garden, where Sammy and Norah got married in Vegas. We could host weddings, all types of parties, dances, and showers year-round.”

I close my eyes and try to envision the garden as she described.

“What do you think?” she asks.

I open my eyes and start ticking off all the possibilities. “I think it’s a great idea. You have enough space here to seat close to a hundred guests, give or take. The fountain would make a unique backdrop for ceremonies, and you could clear a path from the veranda to make the aisle. I could see seating on each side with white folding chairs draped in beautiful silk covers or wrapped with pale pink ribbon and bows. I’d leave all the trees that have the blanketing branches to string twinkling lights on for evening events and to provide shade for daylight. You should remove the birdbaths and relocate them to the sides or the front of the inn because you don’t want birds being attracted here, where they could relieve themselves on the heads of your bride or groom or guests. I know that is

supposed to be good luck, but I doubt they would think so in the moment. You'd also want to have it wired for music. I'd add some outdoor speakers. And I'd invest in removable flooring. Then, you could create a dance floor for parties and receptions."

"Yes, and I was considering having a gazebo built to the left of the fountain. Inn guests could use it to sit out here and enjoy the gardens, and a band or DJ could use it during events," Willa explains.

"That would be perfect, and you'd need to add on to the inn, of course. Maybe build a second wing behind the owner's cottage," I suggest.

"Why would I do that?" she asks.

"Um, well, you only have, what, a dozen guest rooms?"

"Fifteen," she answers.

"The bridal party would take most of those," I point out.

"Okay," she says.

"Where would the guests stay? Lake Mistletoe is a small community, so it's safe to say, most weddings would be a destination event. You'll need adequate housing for everyone. The last thing any bride wants is for her friends and family to travel from afar to her celebration, partake of the wine and bar, and then have to venture too far. You need to have, at a minimum, forty to fifty rooms available."

Willa shakes her head. "I don't want to add to the inn. Its size is part of its charm, and we don't have enough year-round business to sustain the staff that addition would require. I'd rather help to fill the rooms at the other inns and rental homes in town. They're all close by—most are even walkable, weather permitting."

"Hmm, I guess that could work, but you'd make more money if you offered the accommodations yourself, and the cost of the addition would pay for itself in no time," I say.

"I get that, but this idea is about making more money for the entire town, not just for myself and the Gingerbread Inn. I

want Lake Mistletoe to thrive and to show it has more to offer than just the holiday festivities. Sun Valley is a few miles away, and it is huge and hosts these grand events and galas, but we can offer an option for people looking for a more intimate venue. Plus, there is so much to enjoy in our town and the surrounding mountains. We can plan guided hikes and fishing excursions for the guests. I could work out a skiing package with Sun Valley Ski Resort. The community center could do kayaking lessons on the lake. The possibilities are endless.”

“You’ve thought this through,” I say.

“I have. I love the quaintness of our town. I don’t want to turn the inn into some huge resort. I just want to add nuanced features to enhance the experience. It’s not just a business; it’s a home.”

“It’ll be an expensive endeavor,” I say.

“Yeah, I know. I already ordered the material for the enclosure. That alone set me back thirty grand, but my dad and I crunched the numbers, and it should pay for itself in no time. I’ll do an entire marketing campaign, introducing the new event venue, and offer planning services.”

“Do you have an event agency in town?” I ask.

“No. That’s where I was hoping to pick your brain. Do you think you could show me the ropes while you’re here? I have a degree in hospitality management, but I could use guidance in event planning,” she asks.

“You plan to take that on yourself?”

“Yes. I think I can handle it. I might have to hire a couple more staff members if it takes off, but I had a hand in party services at my former job in Miami. If you’ll help me, I bet I’ll be able to pick it up quickly.”

“I still can’t believe you gave it all up to stay here in Idaho.”

She shrugs. “I realized I had been working myself into the ground. It wasn’t the life I wanted any longer. I wanted more.”

That sounds familiar.

“Okay. Let’s do it. When does the construction begin?” I ask.

“I’m saving some costs, hiring Bob to do the installation of the atrium structure. He’s using Barry, Bran, and Keller as his crew. The frame, glass panels, and roofing will be delivered tomorrow.”

“You’re lucky to have all those people to pitch in on short notice.”

“Everyone needs some help now and then, and nothing beats having a village to support you. That’s what this community is all about. Neighbors helping neighbors.”

I love that.

“I’m shocked you’re starting now. What about the holidays?” I ask.

“Bob promises they can be done in under two weeks. If all goes smoothly and they can get it finished by then, I’m hoping to have the Holly Ball moved from the conference center to here. It would be a much more festive venue. I’ll host it for free. It can be my test run.”

“What is the Holly Ball?”

“It’s a new thing the town is trying. A chance for everyone to get dressed up and dance the night away. There is going to be a buffet, bar, and door prizes. It will be the town’s first annual ball. All the ticket sales will go to the Lake Mistletoe conservation fund. The fund helps maintain the lake, pedestrian bridge, and the walking trail.”

“When is it?” I ask.

“The day before Christmas Eve. Christmas Eve Eve.”

“Christmas Eve Eve,” I repeat.

“The best day of the holiday season. It’s that time when anticipation is at the perfect pitch.” She squees.

I take another look around the garden. “That’s a lot to accomplish in three weeks.”

“I know. It’s going to be a feat to pull it off. I’m hoping that, together, we can make it an event to remember.”

She folds her hands together under her chin and sets her pleading eyes on me.

“Hannah Whitmar does not back down from a challenge. Hannah Whitmar is a problem solver. Hannah Whitmar will pull this off,” I say, giving myself a little pep talk in the process.

“Hannah Whitmar is freaking me out, speaking in third person. Is that a yes?”

“I’m at your disposal,” I say, and she does a little happy dance before enveloping me in a hug.

“I’m sorry I’m hijacking your Christmas vacation.”

“It’s the least I can do for breaking your inn,” I say.

“We can start brainstorming over dinner. Bob is throwing some ribs on the barbecue, and his ribs are the best you’ll ever eat. Sammy and Norah and Donna’s family are coming. I’ll call Keller and Bran too. This is going to be so much fun,” she cries as she lets me go.

She has a lot to learn about event planning.

“I hope you still think that once we get started,” I say.



Chapter Seven

Bran

We finish our workday and close the shop. Keller informed me that we were invited to the inn for dinner. Bob is making his famous smoked ribs, and the girls are doing all the fixings and dessert.

I never turn down an invitation to be fed, especially one that comes from Willa or Trixie.

Keller and I agreed to help his dad do a construction job at the inn, starting next week. Evidently, he had a hard time finding subcontractors at a reasonable price this late in the season, and Willa didn't want to wait until after the first of the year to begin.

Impatient woman.

So, I let Keller talk me into taking the job. I could use the extra cash for Christmas, and I'm a sucker for making a woman happy myself.

Apparently, Bob wants to go over the specifics with us this evening.

Not sure how much help I'll be until the doctor removes the splint on my wrist; hopefully, that will be within a week.

I drive myself home to freshen up before Keller swings by to pick me up in his truck.

My driveway is only a quarter of a mile from his. I purchased the land from Keller's sister, Donna, and her husband, Barry. They have a large homestead that has been in Barry's family for generations, and their acreage backs up to the home that Keller inherited from his grandfather.

When I was looking to move back to Lake Mistletoe, they wanted to add on to their cottage, so they sold me an acre and a half of wooded land they weren't making use of.

Once I cleared some of the trees and leveled a plot on the side of the mountain for building, I found myself with the best view in town. High above the lake and nestled in the privacy of the forest, it's a little slice of heaven.

My father and mother, Norris and Linden Prince, live in the Lake View condo community right on the water. They sold my childhood home and downsized when my younger sister, Sela, graduated high school and moved to Boise to attend college.

Dad enjoys the fact that he doesn't have a yard to keep up any longer and can dedicate all his newfound free time to perfecting his golf game while Mom spends her days walking the lake and playing in a bunco league with the other ladies in the condos.

Keller pulls in and honks his horn, and I lock up and climb into the passenger seat.

He whistles low. "Don't you look nice," he says.

I look down at myself. I changed into a pair of black jeans and a new red dress shirt. Keller, on the other hand, is wearing the same jeans he had on this morning and a tan henley, covered by a brown-and-navy plaid flannel.

I shrug.

He leans over toward me and inhales deeply. “You smell good too.”

“Are you flirting with me, man? Because I’m starting to feel a little uncomfortable,” I quip.

“I’m just saying, you made some extra effort for dinner with my family,” he says.

“I can’t help that I always look good,” I counter.

“Right. It wouldn’t have anything to do with the fact that my cousin is going to be there,” he states.

“Is she?” I ask.

“There’s a good chance,” he confirms.

I grin to myself.

He shakes his head. “I wouldn’t get my hopes up. She’s too sophisticated for you.”

“I’ll have you know, I can stick my nose in the air with the best of them.”

“I didn’t say she was stuck up. I said she was sophisticated.”

“Whatever.”



We find Bob at the outdoor kitchen off the veranda at the inn, manning the grill and smoker.

The aroma of smoked ribs is heavy in the air, causing my mouth to water.

“Something smells delicious,” I say as I rub my hands together in anticipation of the beefy goodness.

“They’re almost ready. I glazed and rubbed them down this afternoon, and they’ve been in the smoker for about four hours. They should be falling off the bone soon.”

“That’s what I’m talking about,” I say.

“What’s on the grill, Pop?” Keller asks.

“Corn on the cob. Willa slathered it with all kinds of butter, cheese, and spices.”

“My favorite,” he states before he walks over to the firepit sitting in the middle of the screened-in area. He tosses a couple of logs from the wood box into the hearth.

He gets a blaze going while I pull Adirondack chairs from the garden up to surround the pit.

“I’m gonna tell Willa we’re here. You wanna beer?” he asks.

“Yeah, thanks,” I reply.

“Pop?”

“Yeah, I’ll have a cold one while the meat finishes.”

He disappears into the back entrance of the inn, and when he returns, Willa, Trixie, and Hannah follow. They are bundled up in coats, scarves, and gloves, and Hannah has a stack of wool blankets in her arms.

Keller passes Bob and me our beverages, and the ladies spread out around the warmth of the fire and cover their laps with the soft throws.

“Are you guys cozy?” I ask as I join them.

“Yes, it’s been a busy week. Most of the holiday guests have arrived. The trees were delivered today, so we can finish decorating this weekend, and Alice and I will begin planning and baking for the holiday market. It’s nice to sit and enjoy some downtime before the rush begins,” Trixie replies.

“How about you, Bran? How are you feeling? Did the doctor say how long it would take for your eye to heal?” Trixie asks.

“I’m fine. A little sore, but nothing I can’t handle. He thinks I’ll be right as rain by the end of next week. Which means I’ll be sporting this patch in the live nativity this weekend.”

“That should be fun,” Willa says.

I shrug. “I’ll just tell all the visitors who pass by that one of the wise men clocked Joseph in the eye.”

“Brannigan Prince, you will not say that,” Trixie gasps.

“You’re in the nativity?”

I look over to see a horrified expression on Hannah’s face.

“Yes, ma’am. I’ll be playing the handsome lead, Joseph, husband of Mary.”

She places her face in her hands and grumbles, “Great. I’ll be known around town as the woman who almost killed our Lord and Savior’s earthly father.”

“I won’t tell if you don’t,” I whisper.

A truck pulls up to the garage, and Sammy and Norah emerge. Behind them comes Donna’s SUV, filled with her, Barry, and their children.

“Hi, everyone. Are we eating out here? It’s freezing,” Sammy asks.

Trixie stands and envelops her grandkids in tight hugs.

“No, Hal and Alice will be serving the inn’s guests dinner in the dining room, so we’ll eat at the table and island in the kitchen. Come along, children. Let’s get your coats off and your hands washed,” she says.

They follow her inside, and Norah plops down in a chair next to Willa.

“I’m exhausted and starving,” she bellows.

“And whiny,” Willa says as she wraps an arm around her shoulders.

I look over at Hannah, whose gaze is fixed on the flickering flames.

“And what about you? Are you enjoying yourself here in Lake Mistletoe?”

Her eyes come to mine. Big, beautiful brown eyes, framed by long, curly lashes.

“I am. It’s exquisite,” she murmurs before focusing back on the fire.

“You should take her to see your place one day,” Norah suggests, and then she looks at Hannah. “You’d love it. It’s a tree house.”

Her gaze flitters back to me. “You do not live in a tree house,” she gasps.

“Yes, I do.”

“No, you don’t,” she repeats.

I furrow my brow. “And why would I lie about where I live?”

“I don’t know why, but you can’t live in a tree house.”

“Why not?” I ask.

“Because they’re meant for six-year-old girls and elves who bake cookies. Not grown men,” she explains.

“I assure you, mine is a man’s tree house.”

She laughs, and her face is bathed in moonlight. It’s the most carefree she’s been since arriving.

“I have to see that,” she says breathlessly.

I lean toward her. “Just say when, Brady.”



Chapter Eight

Hannah

Willa is right. Uncle Bob's ribs are the best I've ever tasted. And I've had them at Ellis Island BBQ in Las Vegas.

Once we finish eating, we stroll over to the great room for coffee and dessert.

A massive tree stands beside the stone fireplace.

"Aren't you going to decorate the tree?" I ask Willa.

"A little at a time."

"I don't get it," I say.

"I'll wrap it with lights tomorrow morning, and we'll string cranberries and popcorn one evening after dinner. We'll pull out the box of decorations from the past. Ornaments my grandfather made for Grammy over the years. Ones that she,

Mom, and I made together when I was little. But it won't be finished until Christmas Eve after the Inn Hop. Every family staying at the inn will add their own adornment. The kids love it, and it makes it more than just a beautiful Christmas tree; it tells a story and highlights the inn's history."

"You guys sure have a lot of traditions," I muse.

"We do, and here is one of my personal favorites," Norah interjects as she hands us all a red mug.

"What's this?" I ask.

"Eggnog."

I wrinkle my nose.

"You don't like eggnog?" Bran asks as he walks over and stands beside me.

"To be honest, I've never tried it. It doesn't taste like eggs, does it?" I ask as I sniff the creamy liquid.

He chuckles. "No. Not eggy at all. If I had to describe it, I'd say it tastes more like melted ice cream with a rum kick."

I bring the mug to my lips and take a tentative sip.

"Well?" he asks.

"It's good. Vanilla and spice, like melted ice cream," I agree.

"What about you? Do you have any Christmas traditions?" he asks.

"No, not really. I mean, I usually see my parents. Mom comes to Vegas from Palm Springs on Christmas Eve, and we spend that night and Christmas morning together. She makes cranberry pancakes for breakfast, and then I drive an hour out to my dad's home in Cactus Springs for dinner. We exchange gifts, and then I drive the hour back to my apartment. That sums up the extent of our merriment."

"And this year?"

"I told them both we'd get together after the new year. I just needed something different this year."

“You’re not a fan of Christmas, are you?” he asks.

“What makes you think that?”

He shrugs. “Just a guess.”

“I don’t dislike Christmas. It’s just an inconvenient time of year. The banks are closed. Everyone wants off work. Travel is expensive. Kids are out of school and running around loose. I’m much more of a Saint Patrick’s Day kind of girl. That’s a holiday I can get behind. It’s more my speed, and it makes for a great wedding weekend. Everyone feels lucky, and Vegas is the perfect spot,” I confess.

“Wow, Saint Patrick’s Day, huh?”

“Yeah. It knows it’s place. It’s one day in March. You celebrate it, and then it’s done. Christmas, on the other hand, is one day that people take celebrating way too far.”

“Christmas is not a day. It’s an entire season. A time of year we set everything else aside and celebrate what is most important in life,” he says.

“Maybe here,” I quip.

“Stick around. It’ll grow on you too.”

“Are you a pirate?”

We look down, and one of Donna’s kiddos is tugging at the hem of Bran’s shirt.

“Argh, matey. I sure am. Don’t you recognize me? I’m Captain Nog,” Bran answers, using a heavy brogue accent.

“Wow, are you and Jack Sparrow friends?” he asks.

“We’ve met, but we’re not friends. He’s my mortal enemy. He thinks he’s the handsomest pirate in all the land, but clearly, I’m the fairest of them all.”

A giggle escapes me.

“You know what’s hiding under this thing, don’t ya?” Bran asks, raising his splinted hand.

The child’s eyes go wide. “A hook?” he asks in wonder.

“That’s right. So, ye’d better be on your best behavior, or I’ll be forced to bring it out.”

The child turns and bolts off, calling for his mommy as he goes.

“Nice,” I say.

“Nothing like scaring kids at Christmas,” he states as he watches the youngster run off.

“You’re something else.”

His eyes cut to me. “So are you.”

I don’t get a chance to respond because a loud, familiar voice bellows from the hallway.

“Surprise!”

I turn to find my mother standing in the threshold of the great room with her arms wide open.

“Mom? What are you doing here?” I ask as I make my way to her.

“Trixie called and invited me to come spend the holidays with her and my daughter. So, I packed my bags and caught the first flight to Idaho.”

I embrace her. “Just like that? What about the office?” I ask.

Mom works at the front desk of a pediatric clinic in Palm Springs.

“I gave my notice in November. The first of this month was my last official day. I’m a retired lady of leisure now.”

“When did you decide this?” I ask.

“Trixie and I were talking at Norah’s wedding about how we wish we could see each other more often than weddings and funerals. That trip was the first time we’d had any in person time in eight years. Eight years. That’s too long. So, I made the decision to make some changes right then and there.”

“Congratulations,” I tell her as she squeezes me again.

“And who do we have here?” she asks over my shoulder.

We release our hold, and I turn to see Bran standing behind me.

“Mom, this is Keller’s friend, Brannigan.”

He smiles and extends his good hand. “You can call me Bran.”

“Hello, Bran. I’m Trudy, Hannah’s mother and Trixie’s much younger sister.”

“Fourteen months to the day younger,” Trixie corrects as she comes over to greet Mom.

“The point is, you’ll always be older than me,” Mom teases.

“Where are your bags?” Trixie asks.

“The driver left them by the front desk,” Mom replies.

“Oh, um, the inn is full, but you can share with me,” I suggest.

“Oh, thank you, sweetheart, but Bob and Trixie are putting me up at their house for the next few weeks. But don’t worry. I’ll be coming in with her every morning, and we’ll get to spend all kinds of time together.”

“Come on in and say hello to Donna and the kids,” Trixie prompts.

Mom removes her coat and hands it off to Bob and follows Trixie.

“Looks like you’re going to be making some new holiday memories of your own this year,” Bran says as we watch them fuss over the children.

“Yeah, looks like it,” I mutter.



We spend the rest of the evening enjoying each other’s company. A few guests make their way downstairs to mingle

with us.

I'm awed to find out that many of them have been spending their holidays at the inn for decades. They return for Christmas with their children and their children's children and have become dear friends of my aunt and uncle. They even visit one another and vacation together outside of the month of December.

I sit with the ladies by the fire and listen as they recount stories of Christmases past. Willa's grandmother was quite the character, and she and Aunt Trixie had many adventures here in Lake Mistletoe—from raising their families together to entertaining legions of visitors. It's obvious that this inn has been filled with love and happiness since the beginning.

I don't have a single close friend. Not since high school anyway. I have plenty of acquaintances. A couple of coworkers with whom I can enjoy an occasional after-hours cocktail, but for the most part, I don't have time to socialize. No, that's not entirely true. I've never made the time to get to know anyone on anything other than a superficial level. My days are filled with clients and meetings, and my weekends are consumed by day-long wedding festivities and crisis management. The schedule isn't exactly conducive to building relationships outside of business.

I doubt a soul from my life will even notice that I'm not around for the next few weeks, and yet these people from all over the country know each other intimately. Somehow, Aunt Trixie and Willa have found a way to blend their work and personal lives so intricately that it's hard to tell one from the other.

Impressive.

"A penny for your thoughts?" Norah asks as she sits beside me on the couch.

"I'm just thinking that I need a better work-life balance," I admit.

She looks me over. "I agree. You're young. You should be enjoying the fruits of your labor more."

“Perhaps if I finally get the promotion I’ve been after, I’ll be able to delegate some of my responsibilities, and then I can pencil in more time for myself next year.”

She frowns. “You’re going to pencil time into your schedule for fun? I’m not sure it works that way.”

“I’ll make it work,” I insist.

“Oh, Hannah, you’re supposed to work to live, not live to work. What’s the point of it all if you don’t have anything to come home to?”

“I love what I do. I actually enjoy my career.”

She tosses an arm over my shoulders. “So do I. I enjoy every second at the flower shop. I love the joy that fills a customer’s face when I drop off a delivery. I love being a part of the celebrations of life. Weddings, births, birthdays, and Valentine’s Day. It overwhelms me sometimes. But nights like this, with people I love? Eating and laughing and just being together? That’s the best part of all.”

“You’re lucky.”

Her eyes find Sammy across the room, who’s chatting with Keller and Bran. “Don’t I know it.”

Her gaze snaps back to me. “Now, we just have to work on getting you there.”

“Let’s just concentrate on the next few weeks,” I say.

“That’s a start. Now, let’s go raid the kitchen for another beverage.”

She beckons me to stand, and I teeter on my feet.

“Whoa, maybe you need to take it easy on the spiked eggnog. You’re sloshed.”

“It’s been so long since I’ve had a drink. I have the tolerance of a fetus,” I confess.

“Water it is then.”



Chapter Nine

Bran

“This is beautiful work, Bran. Do you think, with your injuries, you’ll be able to fulfill an order for an additional twenty-five before the seventeenth?”

Martin Absure came by this morning to pick up the items I had completed for him last week. I step behind the counter and take the credit card from his hand.

“It shouldn’t be a problem. I’ll be fully functional in a few days.”

We both turn toward the entrance of the showroom as the chime above the front door sounds, and Hannah breezes into the room.

“Good morning,” I greet her.

She smiles and walks over to us.

“Good morning. Is Keller around?” she asks.

“Nope. He went to meet Bob and Barry over at Willa’s place to help unload the materials being delivered for the garden project. I’m holding down the fort,” I inform.

“Oh yeah. I forgot about that,” she says.

We stand there in awkward silence for a couple of beats when a throat clears.

Right.

“Hannah, this is Marty, my favorite customer,” I introduce.

“And his favorite supplier,” Marty adds.

“Supplier?”

“I own the lumberyard right outside of town,” he explains.

“Oh, well, it’s nice to meet you,” she says.

“The pleasure is all mine.”

He bends and takes the box on the floor into his arms. “I’d best be getting back to work. I’ll be by on the seventeenth to pick up the rest, Bran.”

I exit from behind the counter and follow him to open and hold the door for him. “I’ll see you then.”

I shut the door behind him and turn back to see Hannah running a hand over one of the sample dining tables on the show floor.

“Not gonna lie; I didn’t know what to expect, but your shop is pretty cool,” she muses.

“We like to think so.”

“These pieces are amazing,” she continues.

“Thanks. Can I ask what brings you in this morning? Are you in need of some furniture?”

Her head snaps up. “Oh, no. Mom, Aunt Trixie, and I had breakfast over at the diner, and the two of them popped into the fabric store to pick up a few bolts for some craft project

they want to do, so I thought I'd wander over and say hello to Keller and see the studio while I waited for them."

"I'm glad you did. Come on. I'll show you around."

I extend my arm. "This is obviously the showroom. We keep a variety of samples on display for customers to come in and peruse. They are just for visual reference. We can take any of these and create unique custom designs for each person. Keller does the crafting of the wood, and I do any custom carvings or painting they request. We also do wood sculptures, and I work with metal as well. Follow me, and I'll show you where the magic happens."

I lead her into the back workshop.

"We don't let just anyone see behind the curtain. So, I expect your full discretion," I tease.

She makes a cross motion over her heart.

"This is the workshop. Keller occupies the left, and this is my space," I say as I gesture toward the right, where my art studio stands. "We meet in the middle when our specialties collide on a project."

She walks over to a bronze sculpture I'm working on for an upcoming fiftieth anniversary celebration. It stands approximately four feet tall and consists of masculine hands reaching up to take hold of a floating feminine hand. All that's left is the engraving of the poem the couple's children asked to be added to the plate on the base of the structure.

"You made this?" she asks as she looks back to me over her shoulder.

"I did."

"It's exquisite," she says.

Before I can respond, the front bell chimes again.

"Excuse me for a moment," I say before going to greet the new arrival.

Sandra McNeal sweeps in, carrying a box of confections.

"Good morning, Bran," she greets.

“Sandra.”

She sets the box beside the register. “I was over at the bakery and thought I’d bring you and Keller a few snacks and see if you were free for lunch.”

“I appreciate that, but Keller’s out, and he won’t be back until this evening, so I’m staying in for lunch today.”

Her bottom lip pops out, and she places her elbows on the counter and leans in. “Can’t you close up for an hour? You have to eat, don’t you?” she whines.

“We have a lot of pickups scheduled today. It’s a busy time of year,” I inform her.

“Fine. I’ll take a rain check this time, but I’ll be back on Thursday, and I won’t take no for an answer.”

Hannah appears through the swinging doors that separate the workshop from the showroom.

Sandra stands up straight and watches as she joins us at the register.

“Hello,” Sandra says.

“Hi,” Hannah returns.

“Aren’t you going to introduce us, Bran?” Sandra asks.

“Sure. Hannah, Sandra. Sandra, Hannah.”

Sandra rolls her eyes. “It’s nice to meet you, Hannah. I don’t remember seeing you around before.”

“No. It’s my first visit to Lake Mistletoe. I’m Keller’s cousin, just here for the holidays,” Hannah elaborates.

“How nice. I hope you enjoy your stay with us,” Sandra says before turning her attention back to me and giving me a pointed look. “I have to run. Thursday, Bran. Don’t forget.”

Then, she hurries toward the door, passing Trixie and Trudy as they come bounding into the shop, chatting away, as they do.

“Excuse me,” Sandra says politely before disappearing down the sidewalk.

“Hi, ladies. What brings you two beauties in this morning?” I ask.

“Oh, you charmer,” Trudy says, waving off my comment. “We’ve just come to fetch Hannah.”

“Are you ready, dear?” Trixie asks.

“I am. Where are we off to next?”

“Bob called and asked for us to swing by the hardware store and pick up the new post hole digger Hoyt is holding for him, and then we’ll head back to the inn and help Alice with the afternoon tea service.”

“Would you look at this? I need something like this for the pool area at my house in Palm Springs,” Trudy says as she admires the dining table Hannah noticed earlier. It’s a four-foot-by-eight-foot handmade solid acacia wood table with a custom resin river in a dark brown and emerald green.

She turns to her daughter. “Don’t you think this would be lovely with the tiki bar top, Hannah?”

“It would.”

“Bran, can you guys do this in an aqua-blue accent color?” Trudy asks.

“We can do it in any color. Keller builds the table, and I do the epoxy design,” I explain.

“I must have one,” she says.

“Okay. Let’s get an order written up,” I say as I walk to the counter. “You’ll have to be patient with me. It takes me an extra few minutes to type everything out, one-handed. I chicken peck on a good day, but now, it’s more like a chicken on Ambien pecking.”

“We’re in no hurry. I still can’t believe my daughter hit you with a lamp.”

“Mom, I didn’t just hurl a lamp at him for no reason. He was breaking into my room,” Hannah defends.

“Technically, it was an unprovoked attack,” I quip.

“Technically, perhaps, but I didn’t know that at the time,” she insists.

“I hope she at least apologized,” Trudy continues.

“Of course I did. Several times.”

“She did, but if she really wanted to make it up to me, she’d agree to go to dinner with me,” I say, both of us ignoring her.

“She definitely should,” her mother agrees.

“Dinner? You mean, like a date?” Hannah asks.

“Yes. Exactly like a date,” I reply as I turn to face her.

She raises a skeptical brow. “I don’t think Sandra would like that,” she cracks.

“Sandra? Why would she care? Wait, you don’t think Sandra and I are a thing?”

“Well, yeah. Aren’t you?” she asks.

“No, we’re just friends,” I insist.

“Does she know that? Because she seemed to think you were more,” she says.

“I’m positive. Look, Sandra is smart and beautiful and ...”

“Pushy,” she interjects.

I chuckle. “I was going to say, assertive.”

“You’re so nice,” she says.

“There was a date once and then a second date under protest,” I continue.

“Protest?”

“She kind of insisted in front of my mother, who was really hoping she’d have grandchildren by now. So, I relented, but that was over a year ago. There was no spark, and we’re just friends now.”

“Speaking of Lindy, how is she? I haven’t seen her in ages,” Trixie says.

“She’s great, loving that retirement life. You should call her.”

“I believe I will. Trudy and I will stop in to visit her this week.”

“She’d like that,” I say as I snatch the completed work order from the copier behind me. “Here you go, Trudy. Once I have a chance to talk to Keller, I’ll let you know a timeframe for the project.”

She takes the paper from my hand. “Perfect. We’ll see you this evening,” she says as she tucks it into her purse.

“This evening?”

Her eyes come back up to me, and she smiles.

“Yes, when you pick Hannah up for dinner,” she says.

“Mom ...”

“You heard the man. This Sandra person is a friend, and it’s the least you can do for breaking his handsome face, sweetheart.”

Hannah sighs and looks at me. “Fine. I’ll be ready at seven.”

“See you then.”

The three of them make their exit, and I sit back and enjoy a jelly doughnut.



Chapter Ten

Hannah

Willa and I meet in her office after enjoying tea and gingerbread pudding with Mom, Trixie, Alice, and a few of the inn's female guests.

"I cleared a spot for you over here on the credenza, and Annette is letting us use her chair from the front desk for a few days," she tells me.

"What will she sit on?" I ask.

"She carried one of the barstools in from the kitchen. She likes it much better. She doesn't know it yet, but I have a new adjustable-height chair on order for her."

How thoughtful.

"You're a great boss," I note.

“Thanks. I strive to be.”

I take a seat at my makeshift workstation and face her. “So, let’s jump right in, shall we? Where are you with the planning so far?” I ask.

She hands me a file folder. I open it to find a highlighted spreadsheet and an envelope, holding various receipts.

“The items in yellow have been purchased or reserved,” she says.

“Let’s see ... you have flowers, thanks to Norah’s business. Sound equipment being shipped. And you’ve put a deposit down on a DJ’s services for the evening,” I state.

“Yes,” she says.

I look from the paper to her. “That’s it?” I ask.

“Well, yeah, so far. That, and the guys have begun installing the atrium.”

We have a lot of work to do.

I tuck the spreadsheet back into the folder and place it on the corner of her desk.

“Event planning is all about relationships between you and the businesses you need to have on speed dial. You want to build a rapport with the absolute best professionals around. A fabulous florist, which you have covered. A local photographer and videographer. A dress boutique that offers tux rentals. A jeweler. A salon that can provide on-location hair and makeup services. Avenues for live music to include a pianist, harpist, ceremony vocalist, reception bands, and disc jockeys. A bakery that can handle a hundred specialty pastries for a baby shower as well as a gorgeous five-tier wedding cake that is both delicious and a work of art. You’ll need a reliable supplier for linens. A catering company that will be able to handle any dietary requirements a client can throw at you. So, they need to be able to create amazing traditional, vegan, gluten-free, nut-free, lactose-free, sugar-free, kosher, pescatarian, raw, and ketogenic menus and or any combination of those options in a variety of cuisine styles. You might need a full gluten-free Italian feast one night and a perfect tree-nut-

free Asian buffet the next. If I were you, I'd invest in your own folding chairs and tables and store those somewhere on-site. It's just easier than renting those staples and waiting for delivery each time. Some clients might even require transportation services to and from the other inns and the local airports," I say.

"Won't they handle some of those things themselves? Sammy and Norah brought their own photographer to Vegas," she says.

"Yeah, but some will drop all their requests in your lap and expect you to provide options for them. And as the planner, it's part of your job. You have to be able to create a magical day that comes off without a hitch. Brides dream about their wedding day from the time they can walk, and they count on you to help bring that dream to life."

I watch as the color drains from her face.

I reach over and take her hand.

"Maybe I've bitten off more than I can chew. Am I crazy, thinking I can do this?"

"Not at all. I'll be here to help through the entire process for the Holly Ball. It's your first foray into event planning, and whether it's a wedding or a garden party, every event requires the same things, just a different vibe—that's all. Each time, you'll build on your portfolio, and before you know it, you'll have all the weapons you need in your arsenal.

"We'll begin by making a list of services we'll need for the ball, and then we'll make appointments to discuss your needs with other business owners, starting in Lake Mistletoe. And what we don't find here in town, we'll move forward reaching out to vendors in nearby towns. So as not to overwhelm ourselves, we'll start with the two biggest budget needs for any event—food and beverage service. Do you know of any caterers in town?"

"Yes. Naomi Dixon caters out of her home kitchen. She's excellent and fully licensed and insured."

“All right, we can start there. Let’s contact her and see if we can meet at her home tomorrow.”

She takes a deep breath and nods. “I can arrange that.”

“Perfect,” I say as I stand. “Now, I need to go and get ready for my date.”

“Date? You have a date? Here, in Lake Mistletoe?” she asks, the worry in her expression instantly turning to curiosity.

“Oh, yes. My mother decided to play matchmaker this afternoon and railroaded me into agreeing to go to dinner with Bran this evening.”

Her mouth falls open. “Bran, as in Keller’s Bran?”

“The one and only,” I reply.

She bursts into a fit of laughter.

“I know. Shoot me now.”

“No, I think it’s great,” she manages to squeak out.

I’m glad one of us does.



Mom and Aunt Trixie are waiting by the front desk when seven o’clock rolls around.

I descend the staircase, and the first thing my mother asks is if I’m actually wearing *that* to dinner.

I look down at my outfit. I paired black jeans with a white thermal and a camel-colored cardigan, a chocolate double-breasted overcoat, and black snow boots.

“What’s wrong with what I have on?” I ask.

“It’s just a lot of layers. You look clunky,” she explains.

“It’s sixteen degrees outside, Mom. What do you want me to wear, a sundress?”

Before she can answer, the front door opens, and Bran walks in.

He is dressed in jeans, a tan henley, and a black peacoat.

I look from him to my mother and smirk.

“Bran, don’t you look nice,” she says as he leans in and kisses her cheek.

“Thank you, Trudy.”

He extends his gloved hand to me. “Are you ready?” he asks.

“As ready as I’ll ever be.”

I take his hand, and he leads me out to the porch. Mom and Trixie stand in the doorway, watching us leave.

“You kids have fun,” Mom calls.

Bran stops and turns back to them. “We will. Don’t worry. She’s safe with me, and I’ll have her home by midnight.”

Mom waves him off. “Oh, please, take your time.”

Thanks, Mom.



Chapter Eleven

Bran

I escort her to the passenger side of my Subaru Forester and help her inside before climbing in behind the steering wheel.

“I hope you’re hungry,” I say as I reverse out of the driveway.

“I am. Where are we going anyway?” she asks as she clicks her seat belt in place.

“To the best pizza joint in Lake Mistletoe,” I inform her.

“Sounds perfect. I love a good pie,” she states.

We drive in silence until we come to the edge of town, and I take a sharp left up a snow-covered gravel road that leads into the forest.

Hannah reaches up and places a steadying hand on the dashboard before turning her gaze to me. “Where is this place?”

“A couple of miles up the mountain,” I reply.

She looks from me to the rear of the SUV and then turns so she can see out of the passenger window. “Is this road safe?”

“Hopefully. We have four-wheel drive, so ...” I say with a shrug.

Her posture goes stiff, and she double-checks to make sure her seat belt is snug.

“Relax, Hannah. I drive out here all the time.”

“Well, I don’t, and there’re no streetlights, and there’s a steep drop-off on this side of the vehicle,” she says.

I reach over and clasp her hand. She immediately jerks it away.

“Both hands on the wheel, Brannigan,” she demands.

“Yes, ma’am.”

I keep my amusement to myself. I swear she almost passes out from holding her breath the entire drive through the trees until we make it to the clearing and I cut a left into the driveway.

“Are you serious?” she says when my home comes into view.

I pull up beside the steps that lead up to the deck and put the vehicle in park.

“I thought you might want to meet my elf buddies. They should have a fresh batch of cookies coming out of the oven now,” I tease as I open the door and exit.

She follows suit, and I meet her at the bottom of the staircase.

“I thought we were going for pizza,” she says as she looks up at the massive tree house before her.

“We are. We’re just gonna make them ourselves. Come on,” I beckon her as I climb my way up to the wraparound deck.

She follows me, and when she makes it to the top, she stops for a moment before walking over to the railing.

“Wow,” she murmurs.

“Best view in town,” I state.

“It’s breathtaking.”

“It sure is,” I agree as my eyes focus on the stunning woman before me.

She turns to me and smiles.

“Come on. Let me show you inside before you turn into an icicle.”

I lead her inside, where I already have a fire crackling in the hearth.

Hannah removes her coat and hangs it on the back of one of the stools by the kitchen island to the right before walking fully into the living space.

“I have to be honest; when you said you lived in a tree house, I imagined having to climb a creaky ladder up to a trapdoor and into an old fort that was barely tall enough for me to be able to stand up straight. Not this.”

“Yeah, schoolboy clubhouse wasn’t the look I was going for when I designed this place. I’m more the *comfortable living space, where I can sit on my couch and look at the foliage out of the large windows* kind of man. I also have a full bath and running water, if you can believe that.”

“Of course I can. How else could you bake cookies and crackers up here?” she quips.

I scoot around her and plug in the Christmas tree tucked into the corner beside the fireplace.

“Mood lighting,” I say.

“Nice.”

“Let me show you the kitchen,” I say as I turn and gesture to the small area behind the couch.

“It’s tiny. Where’s the stove?” she asks.

“Don’t have one. I have a microwave and a toaster oven.”

“I’m betting no one delivers up here, so what are we doing for food again?”

“Ah, the one thing I do have is a stone pizza oven. It’s built into the fireplace. I added it when I realized we didn’t have a single pizza restaurant worth a damn in town. So, roll your sleeves up. It’s time to get your hands in some dough.”

We stand side by side at the island while I teach her how to make her own crust.

“Now what?” she asks.

“Now, we add a little olive oil to the glass bowls and use the pastry brush to make sure the sides are coated. Pop the dough ball in, cover it with plastic wrap, and let it sit for about thirty minutes.”

While the dough rises, Hannah takes a seat at the island, and I open a bottle of wine and pour us each a glass.

“Willa tells me that you just moved back to town from Seattle,” she says.

I slide a glass in front of her. “I did. Keller asked me to partner with him, and I packed up and was back in Lake Mistletoe the next week.”

“Don’t you miss it?” she asks.

“I miss a few things, but then I wake up in bed, look out at the horizon, and remember that I get to go to work with my best friend, doing what I love, and the feeling passes.”

“So, you didn’t land in Washington because of a dream job?”

“Nope. I followed a girl.”

She raises a brow. “What happened with the girl?” she asks.

“Nothing. The relationship just ran its course. It clearly wasn’t meant to be.”

“I can relate to that,” she utters.

“How so?”

She shrugs. “Relationships in general are a waste of time.”

“I didn’t say that. Just because one didn’t work out doesn’t mean one never will,” I say.

“I guess,” she mutters.

“You don’t like to date?” I assume.

“I’m married to my career. There’s not a lot of time for much else,” she replies before turning up her glass and swallowing the wine down.

I pick up the bottle to refill her glass.

“I think the dough’s ready,” I inform her.

We unwrap our bowls, and she watches as I take a pinch of flour and spread it on the counter. Then, I begin to knead the ball until it’s pliant before taking the rolling pin to create a round-*ish*, more amoeba-shaped, crust.

“Once you have it as thin as you want, you fold the ends over like this, take the brush, and coat the whole thing with a little olive oil. Then, score the bottom with a fork to make sure the dough doesn’t bubble, and, *voilà*, it’s ready for toppings. Now, it’s your turn,” I instruct.

She repeats the steps, and once we have the pies on the cast iron pans, she dusts off the counter, and flour flies into the air. I bring my good hand to my face and yelp.

“Oh no. Are you okay?” she squeals.

I blink a couple of times as my eye waters.

“Yeah, I’ll be fine. Blind, but fine,” I groan.

“Jeez, for a big man, you’re so fragile,” she teases.

I move in and pin her against the counter, trapping her by placing my hands on either side of her.

“I can’t help that I’m too dazzled by you to prepare for your sneak attacks.”

“Dazzled?”

“Yeah, I like it. I like you.”

“You don’t even know me,” she says.

I lean in, and her eyes flutter shut as I whisper in her ear, “That’s half the fun.”

I take a step back, and she opens her eyes.

“Come on. Let’s get these in the oven,” I say as I grab one of the pans and head toward the fireplace.



“That last slice is all you. I’m stuffed.”

I finished my pizza and the remainder of her pepperoni, red onion, mushroom, and black olive pie is sitting on the coffee table along with the empty Pinot bottle.

I reach over, snatch the slice from the plate, fold it over, and take a huge bite.

She laughs.

“You were waiting for me to pass, huh?”

I swallow and turn to her.

“A gentleman never takes the last slice without permission.”

She yawns, and I look over to see that it’s almost midnight.

“I’d better get you back to the inn. I promised your mom I’d have you back by curfew.”

I finish the pizza and wash it down with water before wiping my hands clean and standing. I offer her my hand, and she lets me tug her to her feet. Then, I help her with her coat before pulling mine on while she waits by the door.

“Hannah,” I call to get her attention.

She turns to me, and I point toward the beam above her head.

She looks up. “Mistletoe.”

“Mistletoe,” I confirm.

“I thought it was red and green,” she says.

“No, red berries mean holly branches. White berries mean mistletoe. It’s a common mistake. People often use holly with mistletoe to create the magical kissing balls.”

“I’ve never understood what people find so magical about a weed,” she muses.

“Weed?”

She brings her eyes to mine. “Yeah, mistletoe is known as the tree thief. It’s a parasite that feeds off the nutrients of the tree it attaches itself to. Overtaking the mighty oak until it takes all the tree has to give.”

I look back up. “Sounds about right. It’s kind of like love. Once it attaches itself to you, it’s all-consuming.”

“Or smothering,” she mumbles.

I ignore her and continue, “The kissing custom dates back to the 1500s. Each time a couple kissed under a sprig of mistletoe, they would remove one of the white berries.”

Her gaze goes back toward the decoration. I look down into her eyes and bring my hand up to caress her cheek.

Her eyes flutter to mine.

“Why? What did they do with the berries?” she asks.

“I have no idea, but once all of them were gone, so was the kissing power of the mistletoe, and that last kiss would prove whether the magic worked. It would be true love’s kiss or a kiss good-bye.”

“Did you make that up?” she asks, our breaths mingling.

“No, ma’am. It’s a genuine legend.”

I grasp her chin and gently lift her mouth to mine. Her lips are soft and warm. I wrap an arm around her waist, and a sigh escapes her as I tug her in closer.

Taking advantage of the moment, I deepen the kiss. She opens, and her tongue tangles with mine as she threads her fingers through the hair at my nape.

I get a taste of the heat sizzling beneath her calm exterior before she pulls away and takes a step back.

We stare at each other for a beat, and then I grin, reach up, and pluck a berry from the hanging branch.

She watches as I toss it over my shoulder onto the kitchen island.

“Did you seriously just pluck a berry?”

“I did.”

She raises a brow. “What are we, stuck in some kind of romantic comedy?”

“What’s wrong with romantic comedies?” I ask.

“The cheesy leading man,” she deadpans before descending the steps and heading to the Forester.

Game on.



Chapter Twelve

Hannah

I find Mom and Aunt Trixie in the great room. They are sitting on the floor on opposite sides of the coffee table, chatting away as they work together on a jigsaw puzzle.

I quietly slip inside and take a seat on the couch.

“Hannah, how was dinner?” Mom asks.

“It was good. We made pizzas.”

“What do you mean, you made them?”

“Bran has a stone pizza oven at his house,” I answer.

“That sounds like fun,” Aunt Trixie muses.

“It was nice,” I admit.

Aunt Trixie glances over her shoulder, and her eyes come to mine. “He’s pretty great, isn’t he?”

“Who, Bran?” I shrug. “He’s okay, I guess.”

“Okay?” Mom exclaims.

“I mean, he’s handsome in a *rugged mountain man* kind of way. He’s living his dream, and he makes a mean pizza pie,” I continue.

“Uh-huh. Sounds more than okay to me. I’d climb him like a tree,” she remarks.

“Mom!”

“What? I’m an old woman, not a dead one,” she quips.

I slide down and sit crisscross beside her.

“What are you two still doing here anyway?” I ask.

“We helped Willa sort all the supplies for the ugly sweater contest tomorrow night, and while searching for bins in the garage, I stumbled upon this thousand-piece Santa’s workshop puzzle. We decided to put it together, for old times’ sake. Your grandfather used to buy one for us every December when we were girls. We’d work on it in the evenings after completing our schoolwork and chores,” Aunt Trixie explains.

“It was one of our favorite things to do,” Mom adds.

It warms my heart that the two of them are getting to spend this time together and reminisce about their shared traditions.

“Can I help?” I ask.

“Absolutely. Jump on in,” Aunt Trixie says.

We get lost in matching the tiny pieces for another two hours, and before I know it, it’s two in the morning.

“Why don’t you two go up to my room and get some sleep? I’ll curl up here on the couch,” I suggest.

“No, we don’t want to take your bed,” Mom says.

“I insist.”

“Willa already offered us the spare room over in the owner’s cottage. You go get some rest, and we’ll see you in the morning,” Aunt Trixie says.

I stand, and Mom follows suit.

She embraces me and kisses my cheek. “Good night, sweetheart. Sleep tight.”

“Good night, Mom. I’m glad you’re here,” I tell her.

“Me too.”



Willa and I wake early and head to our meeting with the catering prospect. I’m expecting a sweet grandma, cooking fried chicken in her tiny kitchen, but what I find is a thirty-five-year-old graduate of the Los Angeles Institute of Culinary Education with a state-of-the-art restaurant-quality kitchen and her own serving staff, including an experienced bartender. She has an impressive menu bible and rave reviews from clients in both California, where she began her career before relocating for her husband’s job, and here in Idaho, where she has catered several large events in Sun Valley.

After tasting a few samples she provides, we finalize the menu for the Holly Ball.

Then, we visit the local bakery to order a variety of holiday desserts and stop in the hardware store to meet with Hoyt—the owner and Lake Mistletoe’s newly elected mayor—to order two hundred white folding chairs and one hundred sixty-inch round tables, which he promises to pick up himself in Boise in order to ensure they arrive in plenty of time for the ball.

It seems my snap assumptions about the available professional resources here in Lake Mistletoe might have been a bit hasty.

I look over the spreadsheet as Willa drives us back to the inn.

“We got a lot accomplished today. While you were taking care of the paperwork at the hardware store, I walked over to the little dress shop on the corner. They have a lovely selection of evening gowns. I made an appointment for you, Norah, and me to go in on Friday afternoon to see what she has in stock, have a look at her bridal catalog, and try on some dresses. She doesn’t keep much on hand as far as accessories are concerned, but she offers veils, tiaras, undergarments, shoes, and hosiery on a custom basis, and she’s open to the possibility of expanding into tux rentals. I think if you were to offer her an exclusive contract for future business, that possibility could easily be turned into a reality.”

“Thank you, Hannah. I’m feeling a lot better about all of this. I’m so grateful you were with me today to help me navigate everything.”

“You have the instincts, and you’re business savvy. You’d have been fine without me,” I tell her.

“I’m glad I didn’t have to test that theory.”

“You’ll be a pro before you know it,” I add.

“That’s enough shop talk for the day. Tonight, we’re kicking off our first activity of the season. The guests are going to spend the evening making their own ugly Christmas sweaters to wear to the Inn Hop. They are bringing their own sweaters, and we are providing all the possible accoutrements to make them truly hideous. Then, Hal, who is not allowed to witness the construction, will choose a winner. I hope you’ll join us,” she says.

“What kind of prize are we talking?” I ask.

“A free three-night stay at the inn, redeemable at any time of the year,” she informs.

“Can we stop by the mercantile? I need to grab a sweater.”



Chapter Thirteen

Bran

“I can’t believe I let you rope me into this,” I say as Keller and I walk into the Gingerbread Inn.

“Rope you? All I did was answer your question when you asked what I was doing tonight. You invited yourself,” he says.

I shrug. “It sounded like fun.”

He slides his eyes to me as we hang our coats in the foyer. “Decorating sweaters sounds like a fun Friday night to you?”

“Doesn’t it to you?” I ask.

“No. No, it does not, but Willa and my mom think it is, and making the women in my life happy is fun to me. I have no clue why you’re here.”

We turn to follow the sound of the voices when Trudy appears in the hallway.

“This way, boys,” she beckons.

“Hi, Aunt Trudy,” Keller says as he kisses her cheek.

“Good evening. Keller. And, Bran, I had no idea you were coming, but I’m so glad you did. I’ll need a duet partner for karaoke later,” she says as she loops her arm in mine.

“Karaoke? You didn’t say anything about karaoke,” I say to Keller.

“Oh, he didn’t know. Trixie and I were shopping earlier today, picking up some things for the toy drive, and we found this microphone that connects to an app on your smartphone with song choices. Isn’t that clever? So, we bought it and thought we could karaoke to some Christmas songs after the contest. Doesn’t that sound like fun?”

“Yay, more fun,” Keller quips.

She leads us into the great room, where several card tables have been set up. Each one holding a variety of options for decorating the sweaters we are carrying. There’s a menagerie of kids being assisted by adults.

I scan the space until I find Hannah. Her hair is pulled back in a loose ponytail, and she has a strand of colorful, blinking Christmas bulbs around her neck. I watch as she helps one of the children with the hot glue gun.

“Bran?” Trudy calls, bringing my attention back to her.

“I’m sorry. Can you repeat that?” I ask.

She looks from me to Hannah and back again. “I’m heading to the kitchen for a refill, so I asked if you’d like a coffee or cider.”

“Coffee would be great,” I reply.

“Coming right up. Pick any station that has a free seat,” she says before fluttering off.

I join Keller at a table with three teen boys, and the five of us decide to do movie-themed sweaters. One kid creates the

Grinch out of felt and green glitter. One makes an *Elf*-inspired pattern, complete with yellow tights hanging from the hem. Keller tackles *A Christmas Story*, making a lamp with the leg of a doll and gold foil and black tinsel.

I cut out a black silhouette of a flat cat and trim the white fur from a fake Santa beard to outline it, mimicking carpet, and giving it an electrocuted appearance.

At one point, I stand and walk over to Hannah's station to ask if she has another necklace I can borrow.

"What do you need it for?" she asks.

"You'll see when it's done."

"You want my necklace? You show me now," she says.

"Extortion is not very Christmassy, now is it, kids?" I ask the children at her table.

"What's extortion?" a curly-haired girl around five years old asks.

"It's being mean to me," I reply, and I stick my bottom lip out.

"Don't be mean, Miss Hannah. Santa is watching," she whisper-shouts.

"Yeah, Miss Hannah. You don't want to find yourself on the Naughty List," I say.

She rolls her eyes at my grin and reaches into one of the bins to find a mini strand of battery-operated lights.

"Whose extorting who now?" she asks as she hands them to me.

"I'll make it up to you later," I promise before returning to my table.

I curl the string of colorful lights around my cat carcass and glue it in place.

"What is that?" one of the boys asks.

"It's Aunt Bethany's cat from *Christmas Vacation*," I say.

"Whose cat?" another one asks.

“Aunt Bethany’s cat that she wrapped in a box, which later electrocutes itself.”

They stare at me in confusion.

“Aunt Bethany and Uncle Lewis. Cousin Eddie? Clark Griswold? None of that rings a bell?” I ask.

They shake their heads.

“*National Lampoon’s Christmas Vacation* is a classic. How have you guys not seen it?”

I turn to Keller. “We can’t let this stand. Movie night here on Sunday.”

I look back to the boys. “You guys in?”

“Yeah!”

“You’d better clear that with Willa,” Keller mutters.

“I’ll take care of it. You guys just meet us down here after dinner. I’ll bring the snacks.”



I narrowly lost the contest to Mr. Patterson, who presented a truly gnarly sweater, consisting of a fruitcake constructed from fuzzy tinsel garland and the words *Fruitcake Sucks* written in glitter.

“I was robbed. His might have technically been more difficult, but come on. Mine was cleverer,” I mutter so only Hannah can hear me.

She turns to me. “Cleverer?”

I shrug.

“Where’s your sweater? I didn’t see it when Hal was judging,” I ask.

“I didn’t make one. I made something for you instead,” she says.

“Something for me? Awwww.”

She reaches into the pocket of her silk pants and hands me the creation, and I burst out laughing.

I hold up the white-fabric-covered cardboard with red elastic attached to each side. What looks like a bedazzled poinsettia flower, made of rhinestones, covers the fabric.

“It’s an ugly Christmas eyepatch,” she says.

I reach up and remove the black patch I’m wearing over the gauze and replace it with the new one.

“How does it look?” I ask one of the kids.

“Awesome!”

“Thanks,” I say as I ruffle his blond hair.

Willa commands the attention of the room and announces that Hal was unable to choose between the children’s masterpieces, so they each get a prize. Trixie will be handing them out at the bottom of the stairs as they head up to bed.

Once all the guests have retired for the evening, we clean up the stations and break down the tables while the girls make charcuterie trays and a couple of pitchers of Christmas rum punch.

Sammy and Norah arrive just as we are all settling in. Trudy reads off the song list from the phone app, and we each choose two songs. One for our solo and one for a duet.

Trudy and Trixie start us off with their duet of “Christmas Time Is Here.” Next is Bob, channeling Elvis with “Blue Christmas.” By the time my solo comes around, we are on our third pitcher of punch, and Norah decided we needed a rating system, so she and Hannah drew the numbers one through ten on the backs of a stack of paper plates and gave us each a set.

When I finish my lively rendition of “Last Christmas” by Wham!, I’m confronted with an average score of four—Keller rating me with an unfair score of one, saying that I was “pitchy,” but Trudy bringing up the curve with her nine.

To be honest, none of us can carry a tune, except for Sammy, the dark horse in the karaoke game, who slayed with a

combination of dance moves while singing “Rockin’ Around the Christmas Tree.”

By the end of the night, Willa, Norah, and Hannah are laughing and shaking their hips through a slurred rendition of “All I Want for Christmas Is You.”

“That was the sexiest butchering of a Mariah Carey classic I’ve ever witnessed,” I say as I give them the only ten of the night.

They all rush me and end up in a pile on my lap.

This is a train wreck I can get behind.

When eleven o’clock rolls around, Bob announces that he needs to get Trixie and Trudy home because the live nativity starts at noon, and after their late night the night before, they need to get some sleep.

Sammy and Norah, Keller and I head out as well. Willa and Hannah follow us to the foyer to say good night.

I stand under the mistletoe above the door and wait as each one of them gives me a quick peck, but when Hannah’s lips meet mine, I bring my hand to her waist and hold her against me for a moment longer. When I release her, I reach up and pluck a berry from the sprig and stick it in my coat pocket.

She smiles at our inside joke, and I watch as a tinge of pink crawls across her cheeks.

“Good night,” she says as she puts her right hand on my chest and pushes me out the door.

“See you tomorrow,” I say as she shuts it behind me.



Chapter Fourteen

Hannah

Willa and I help Alice and Trixie with afternoon tea, which features gingerbread cheesecake squares. Then, we head to meet Norah at Lydia's Dress Shop.

When we arrive, we find Lydia awaiting us with a bottle of chilled champagne and a rack of holiday-hued gowns for us to try on.

She and I discuss the projected sales and rental income that I worked up last night, and she brings out the catalog of bridal gowns and bridal party selections from the designers her supplier offers, and she agrees to order samples of several styles for brides to try on as well as two tuxedo styles in a variety of sizes to be available for rental.

Once she and Willa come to an agreement, I write down the terms for the exclusivity contract so that I can type it up tomorrow for them to sign off on.

We toast to the new relationship, and then the fun begins.

Each of us chooses a couple of gowns in our size, and we take turns, trying them on.

Willa walks from behind the cloth in a backless red mermaid gown with a thigh-high slit and sequined accents that cascade down the silk.

“Oh, wow, Willa,” Norah says.

Willa steps on the platform, surrounded by mirrors, and takes a look.

“It is a gorgeous dress, isn’t it?” she says.

I walk up behind her and lay a hand on her shoulder.

“The dress is amazing, but remember what I tell every bride. A dress is only silk and satin and buttons and zippers on a hanger until it makes its way onto a gorgeous frame. And you, my dear, are a stunning figure. This dress was made for you,” I say.

“You think so?”

“Oh, yes. The same applies for all the other frills that surround any event. Flowers are just pops of color, growing from the ground. Food is just gathered roots and sprouts and fruit. The love and care applied to them is the artistry that makes them magical.”

“This is the one,” she says.

“That’s the one,” Norah agrees.

After Norah tries her dress on and decides that she is going to repurpose the body-hugging one-sleeved black dress she wore to her rehearsal dinner, it’s my turn.

I only have to put on one because I knew the moment I laid eyes on it that I wanted it.

I slide into the regal, backless emerald-green cami gown with a sequined bodice and full tulle overlay skirt.

When I step out of the dressing room and onto the platform, Willa puts her hands together and exclaims, “And that dress was made for you!”

“It definitely was,” Norah agrees.

Lydia and her assistant place a few pins in mine and Willa’s selections before we change back into our jeans and sweaters.

“They’ll be ready next week. I’ll call the inn to let you know when to pick them up,” Lydia says as she takes our payment.

“Thank you, and I’ll make sure to refer your shop to everyone who inquires about gowns for the ball,” Willa tells her.

Norah leaves her Jeep at her shop, and the three of us climb into Willa’s Bronco and make our way to the Nazarene Church.



A young man in a bright yellow vest guides us to a parking spot.

“Enjoy your evening, ladies,” he says as we exit the vehicle.

“Thank you, Jeffery,” Norah calls.

The courtyard of the church is well lit, and we follow a brick pathway that leads to an open, roped-off wooden structure, filled with hay. Inside the area is the most realistic live nativity I’ve ever seen. Mary and Joseph stand by a squirming baby Jesus in a manger with shepherds outside, surrounded by two camels, a llama, several goats and sheep, and a donkey.

The scene is spotlighted by a huge star hanging high above the makeshift barn.

People are milling around, taking in the view. Excited children point to the animals as their parents guide them at a safe distance.

Goose bumps crawl up my arms as I take it all in.

“Joseph doesn’t look too bad, wearing an eyepatch,” Norah muses as she waves to Bran, who doesn’t break character but manages to wink in our direction.

We follow the crowd inside to the church’s library, where Norah purchases a Bible cover and an ornament for Trixie for Christmas and I buy a nativity snow globe that plays “Silent Night” to remind me of this experience.

There is a tent outside, and Hal is manning a hot beverage stand. The horse-and-carriage rides around the lake can be purchased for a five-dollar offering to the church, which helps cover the cost of the evening.

We find my mom and Trixie in the crowd, and the four of us contribute to the offering bucket and take a ride on a grandly decorated carriage, pulled by a gorgeous chestnut America Saddlebred named Figgy.

The gentle sound of the jingle bells around her neck serenade us as we take in the beauty of the lights and the serenity of the water.

Every home on the edge of the lake is festively decorated. Some with colored lights and others with white. There are Santa sleighs, reindeer, snowmen, and elves.

Residents sit out on their front porches, waving and shouting, “Merry Christmas,” as we pass.

“This is something else,” I say as I wave in return.

“Isn’t it?” Mom agrees.

It takes about an hour for us to make the four-mile loop around the water and back to the courtyard. I decide a warm beverage is in order to help defrost my frozen hands.

“Hey there, Hannah. Can I interest you in some hot cocoa? It’s my special recipe,” Hal greets.

“No, thank you, but I’ll take a cup of your strongest coffee,” I reply.

A muffled word comes from behind me. “Boring.”

I turn to find Bran standing in line behind me, holding a Styrofoam cup.

“Excuse me?”

He leans down to my shoulder and repeats himself, “I said, boring. You should have the cocoa.”

I point to his hand. “Is that what’s in your cup?”

He grins. “Uh-huh, with peppermint and extra marshmallows.”

I wrinkle my nose and turn back to Hal. “Sorry, I’m just not a fan,” I explain.

“It’s okay. I’ll get you a coffee.” He takes my money and then gets to work on making a fresh pot.

“Who doesn’t like hot cocoa?”

I turn back to Bran and scowl. “Adults in general. Me in particular. I don’t remember Joseph sipping cocoa in the nativity story,” I say.

“I’m on break, and you’ve just never had a perfect mug of chocolaty goodness before,” he insists.

He holds his cup out to me. I give him a quizzical look as he beckons me with his eyes to take the offering.

“No, thank you.”

“Come on. Take a chance and try something new,” he urges.

I roll my eyes and clasp the warm cup. I bring it to my lips as he watches. Then, I take a quick sip ... and it’s delicious.

Dang it.

Hal returns with my purchase, and I give back Bran’s.

“Here you go, Hannah.”

“Thanks, Hal,” I say as I take it from him.

He looks over my shoulder. “Bran, back for a refill already?”

“You know it,” Bran answers as he hands him the cup. “And I’d like another one as well.”

“Double-fisting. I like it,” Hal says.

I move to the side and open the lid to my beverage and add some milk from the thermos on the counter.

Bran pays, and Hal refills his cup and makes him a second one. Then, he slides in beside me, and without a word, he exchanges my cup for the fresh one, takes my coffee, and walks away.

I wrap my hand around the cup, bring it to my nose, and inhale, and then I take a sip.

Mmm, delectable.

“Smooth.”

I look up to see Hal grinning at me.

He nods his head in the direction Bran took off in. “Brannigan, he’s a smooth one.”

“Yeah,” I agree.

“You two are cute together.”

I snap my head to him. “Sorry to disappoint you, but we’re just friends.”

“Yep, my Alice and I were just friends once too,” he says.

“Right, but we’re actually just friends,” I clarify.

He leans over the counter. “I’ll tell you a secret. All the best couples start as just friends.”

I open my mouth to protest again, but before I have a chance, he is greeting the next person in line.

I take the cup and go off in search of the girls, and I enjoy every single drop.



Chapter Fifteen

Bran

“I can’t believe how much you guys have managed to get done in a week’s time,” I say as I look up at the metal frame rising above the garden at the Gingerbread Inn.

“Hoyt and a few more of Pop’s friends have pitched in,” Keller says.

I raise my splinted wrist. “I should be able to jump in when Doc removes this thing.”

“When do you go back in for an X-ray?” he asks.

“Monday morning.”

“Good. We’ll find something for you to do on the ground,” he teases.

“Ha-ha. That fall was not my fault,” I remind him.

“Yeah, yeah.”

“Did you remember the DVD?” I ask.

“It’s in the truck. Willa said we have to wait until the younger kids are put to bed before we start it.”

“There’s nothing inappropriate about *Christmas Vacation*,” I insist.

“Dude, Clark is a perv, who fantasizes about the store clerk in his pool and spies on the couple next door, a cat is killed, they curse, and Cousin Eddie is Cousin Eddie.”

I wave him off. “That’s nothing. Kids nowadays see more than that while watching network television shows.”

“Maybe so, but Willa said no one under fifteen is allowed to see it. We’ll start the evening watching *The Grinch*,” he says.

“Fine.”

Luckily, that is my second favorite holiday classic.

Alice serves an herb-roasted pork tenderloin with a peach preserve, mashed potatoes, and glazed carrots for dinner.

Once they’ve eaten, the kids go up and return to the great room in their pajamas. The parents and grandparents get an evening to themselves for a Christmas date night or to do some last-minute shopping while Willa, Hannah, Keller, and I entertain their children for a few hours.

We scoot the coffee table to the side, and Willa and Hannah make blanket pallets on the floor while Keller and I carry in the wood for the fireplace.

The younger kids pile onto the covers, and the teens settle on one of the leather couches.

I load up the first movie while Keller gets a fire going. The girls bring in a tray of milk and cookies. Once the snacks are distributed, Willa plugs in the Christmas tree, and we dim the lights and start *The Grinch*.

There’s a brief intermission halfway through the flick, and Willa and Hannah take the kids to the restroom while I toss six

bags of popcorn into the microwave.

Hannah walks into the kitchen as the last bag finishes popping.

“Better speed it up. The teens are getting restless,” she warns.

“That’s because they think they’re too cool for Dr. Seuss. They’ll be fine once we start the next movie.”

“Probably,” she agrees.

She grabs four large bowls from the pantry and begins opening the paper bags and dumping them in, adding a light sprinkling of salt to each one.

“You’re good with them,” she says.

“With the kids?” I ask.

“Yeah. They adore you. It’s sweet.”

“It’s a gift,” I boast.

I open the final bag and top off each bowl.

“Shall we?” I ask.

Each of us takes two bowls, and we rejoin the group.



“Wow, that movie did not get the response I’d expected,” I say once all the teens retire.

It got a few laughs from the boys, the majority during the Cousin Eddie scenes, but the girls were unimpressed and kept remarking about the lame fashion and the slapstick comedy.

“What did you expect? The movie is twice their age,” Hannah cracks.

“I expected them to respect the timelessness of Chevy Chase’s straight-man comedic genius. It’s a classic. Classics can hold up throughout generations,” I exclaim.

“I think they enjoyed it. At least, they enjoyed watching you choke on popcorn kernels while you laughed,” Willa says.

“Next week, we try *Home Alone*. Written by John Hughes, directed by Chris Columbus, and starring an adorable ten-year-old Macaulay Culkin. I bet they’ll appreciate that holiday classic,” I state.

“Ah, I love *Home Alone*, and dare I say, *Home Alone 2: Lost in New York* was even better than the original,” Hannah says.

I gasp. “You take that back.”

“No. It’s true. The second film has a much more heartfelt story. Kevin isn’t just protecting his house from thieves because he has to; he chooses to protect the toy store and the money meant for the local children’s hospital. The musical score is better, and it takes place all over New York City and not just the family’s little home in Chicago.”

“First, the better musical score is debatable, and you think that house was little?” I ask.

She lifts her hand to halt my argument. “Tim Curry.”

And with those two words, she shuts me down.

“Touché,” I concede.

Keller stands and tosses me the keys to his truck. “I’m gonna stay over at the cottage with Willa tonight. Swing by and pick me up on your way into the shop in the morning.”

“I’ve got my doctor’s appointment at nine,” I remind him.

“Right. Pick me up afterward.”

“You got it,” I say.

He helps Willa to her feet and bends to kiss Hannah’s forehead.

“Good night,” she says to them both.

“Night,” Willa says as she takes Keller’s outstretched hand.

“Are you tired?” I ask her once we’re alone.

“Not yet. I’m kind of a raging insomniac. I usually have to read for a couple of hours before I can fall off to sleep,” she says.

“Me too. Not the reading part, but the other. I’m a night owl.”

“It sucks, doesn’t it?”

“I don’t know. I like the nighttime. It doesn’t bother me,” I say.

“You’re lucky. It wears me out. Sometimes, I feel like a zombie at the office.”

“You want to watch *Home Alone*?” I ask.

She raises a brow. “Now?”

“Why not? We’re both wide awake. I don’t have to be up too early, and you’re on vacation.”

“This is true,” she agrees.

“How about it?”

“Sure. I’ll go change and grab us a glass of wine,” she relents.

When she leaves the room, I flip on the lights, so I can locate the remote to sign in to my streaming app on the television and find the movie.

She returns, wearing a pair of penguin pajamas and fuzzy red socks, carrying an open bottle of wine and two glasses.

I take the bottle from her and fill both glasses, and then I dim the lights again. We settle on the couch, and I hit play.



Chapter Sixteen

Hannah

“Looks like someone is sleeping in.”

“Two someones.”

I blink my eyes open at the sound of the voices and find Norah, Willa, and Aunt Trixie smiling down at me.

“Hi,” I say hoarsely as I move to sit up but am stopped by a large arm tightening around me.

Oh no.

I slowly turn my head to see that I am on the couch downstairs, cuddled with a sleeping Bran.

“Busted,” Norah whisper-shouts.

“What time is it?” I ask.

“Eight thirty,” Willa answers.

Oh no.

I push against Bran’s chest and start shaking him. Instead of opening his eye, he just tightens his hold on me and buries his face in my neck.

“Let me go, Brannigan,” I grumble.

“No, I don’t want to wake up. I’m having the best dream,” he mutters.

“I bet you are,” Norah quips.

He finally turns his head and blinks up at the trio.

“Good morning, ladies,” he says sleepily.

“Don’t you have an appointment to get to?” Willa asks him.

He sits up, taking me with him.

“Yeah. What time is it?” he asks.

“Eight forty now,” Norah says.

He scoots me to the side and stands. “Shit. I gotta go. Tell Keller I’ll be back soon.”

He rushes out of the room, and I’m left with three pairs of assessing eyes focused on me.

“Having sleepovers, are we?” Norah asks.

“We were watching a movie and must have fallen asleep,” I tell her.

“Uh-huh,” she says.

“Aren’t you supposed to be at work?” I ask.

“We’re closed on Mondays. Now, stop changing the subject.”

“It’s true. Nothing happened. If I wanted to ravish a man, I’d take him to my nice, comfy bed upstairs, not attack him on the couch in the common area,” I retort.

She and Willa look at each other.

“That’s probably true, and those penguin PJs don’t scream sexy interlude,” Willa says.

“Oh, you two, stop teasing Hannah and come help me with the pancakes. Hannah, sweetheart, your mom stayed at the house today to rest a bit.”

“Is she sick?” I ask.

“No. She wanted to relax today. If you want to drop in on her later, I can pack a picnic lunch for the two of you.”

“You don’t have to do that. I’ll stop and pick something up.” I ask Willa, “What time are we going to the lighting company?”

“I’m ready as soon as you are.”

I stand and pluck the two wineglasses and empty bottle from the side table.

“Give me twenty minutes to freshen up, and I’ll meet you in the kitchen.”



“I was thinking white lights strung through the trees and hanging in the rafters of the atrium,” Willa says as we peruse the aisles of the lighting warehouse in Hailey.

“Sounds great. What about hardwired lights?” I ask.

“Do you think we’ll need more than the string lights?”

“I’d have hardwired backups. You never know when string lights will blow a bulb and take out the entire operation,” I suggest.

“Yeah, I didn’t think about that. Maybe a couple of large pendant lights, like those.” She points to massive rectangular fixtures hanging from the warehouse ceiling. “They are eye-catching, and the shape won’t block the natural light coming in from the glass ceiling during daylight hours or the moon and stars at night,” she explains.

“Yeah, I agree. They’re great, and they would light up the area nicely in the event you need them for an evening soiree.”

“Those are from our new contemporary line. They should be in stock,” the salesman says.

“Perfect. What can you show us in lanterns?” I ask.

“What do you have in mind?” he asks.

“I’m thinking retro with jewel-toned glass.”

“Moroccan-style?”

“Yeah, if you have any that give off an antique vibe,” I say.

“I have just the thing. This way.” He leads us out of the warehouse and into the adjoining showroom.

On the back wall sits an assortment of lanterns in aqua, red, green, and gold.

“Now, these are vintage-inspired, but they have battery-operated lights inside, designed to mimic the soft flickering glow of a candle without the mess.”

“Yes. Willa, what do you think about using these on the buffet and with the centerpieces on the tables?” I ask.

“They’re beautiful,” she says.

“The nice thing about these is that by adding some greenery and ribbon, you can reuse them as centerpieces for any garden party and other balls. They add an elegant pop of color without having to invest in expensive floral arrangements every time. Especially in winter, when blooms have to be imported.”

“So, they’re beautiful and cost-effective. My favorite combination,” she says before a deep frown frames her mouth.

“What is it?” I ask.

“Don’t I want to invest in expensive flowers?”

Norah.

“Do you mean, because of Norah?”

She nods.

“I think I have a way for her to make mad money regardless,” I assure her.

“How?”

“Just trust me. We’ll discuss it with her soon.”

She turns back to the salesman. “What kind of deal can you make if we were to order, say, a hundred of these?” she asks.

“You buy the string of lights, the two pendants, and I’m sure I can cut you a deal on the lanterns. Come to my office, and I will crunch the numbers,” he says.

Willa follows him, and I take the opportunity to check my phone while they handle business.

A text from my dad and four missed calls from my office.

I type a quick reply and send it to my father, and then I step outside and dial my boss.

She answers on the second ring. “Hannah.”

“Hi, Mara. I’m sorry. My phone’s been off, and I just noticed you’d called. What’s up?”

“We had a last-minute wedding book for New Year’s Eve, and I was wondering if I could possibly lure you back to the city earlier.”

“How much earlier?”

“Is tomorrow too soon?” she asks.

I laugh.

“I’m not joking, Hannah. The bride asked for you specifically, and she said the magic words.”

“Money is no object,” I say.

“Those are the words,” she confirms.

“My mother came from Palm Springs, and I bought this fabulous gown to wear to the Holly Ball.”

“What’s a Holly Ball?” she asks.

“It’s a charity event that’s being hosted at the inn where I’m staying.”

“Hannah, please. I need you.”

“I’m sorry, Mara. I can’t. I’m sure one of the other girls would be more than happy to take the booking and bank the commission.”

“I’m sure they would, but the client wants my best.”

The door opens, and Willa emerges, waving the invoice in the air.

“Can I call you back later?” I ask.

An exaggerated sigh comes over the line.

“Fine. I’ll be here all day.”

“Okay. Thanks.”

I click off and drop my phone back in my bag.

“All set?” I ask Willa.

“Yep. And they can do the installation three days before the ball. Which I know doesn’t give us a lot of setup time, but it was the best they could do, and that was after a fit of embarrassing begging on my part.”

“Three days is more than enough time,” I assure her.

“What’s left on the list?” she asks.

“Confirming the electrician for the sound system and getting a playlist to the DJ, and then we’re pretty much done,” I inform.

“Really? Oh my goodness, I could kiss you,” she squeals.

“I told you we could pull it off.”

“Let’s head back to the inn to check on the fellas’ progress and tell Trixie the good news,” she says.

“Can we stop by and check in on Mom first?” I ask.

“Absolutely.”

We stop by the diner and pick up three of Joe's meatloaf lunch specials before making our way to Aunt Trixie's house.

Mom answers the door in her bathrobe with a clay mask on her face.

"Girls, come in," she invites.

"We brought you lunch," I say.

"How thoughtful. I was just about to rummage through Trixie's pantry, so it's perfect timing."

Willa excitedly spills all of the plans that have come together for the ball while we eat.

"I knew you guys could do it. There isn't an event or wedding that my girl can't pull off."

"Except for her own," I quip.

Mom narrows her eyes at me.

"God has a plan for your life, Hannah Rose, and when he sees you going down the wrong road, he throws up a roadblock."

"Really, Mom? What about you and Dad? What was the big guy's plan in that?"

She smiles and takes my chin in her hand.

"That's easy, sweetheart. It was you."



Chapter Seventeen

Hannah

“Wow, look at you,” I say when I see Bran holding a glass panel in place while Hoyt secures it to one of the frames.

He turns, and I get a look at his face and *both* of his steel-blue eyes for the first time.

“Your appointment must have gone well.”

“It did. He freed my hand from its confinement as long as I promise to take it easy for a while.”

I eye the massive slab in his grip. “Good to see you’re following his advice,” I deadpan.

“Keller is sending him to the shop after this one,” Hoyt calls from the top of the ladder.

“He’s just being silly, refusing to let me on a ladder,” Bran tells me.

“Sounds like a good idea to me.”

He shrugs. “I have a huge order to finish anyway, so I don’t mind.”

“The anniversary sculpture?” I guess.

“Nah. That is done. It’s for twenty-five snow globes for Martin Absure.”

“Snow globes?”

“Yeah. I make custom snow globes. Martin is giving them as corporate and employee gifts this year.”

“Really? How do you make snow globes?” I ask, fascinated by the thought.

Hoyt makes his way down the rungs, and Bran releases the panel.

“I carve the design and the base in the size the customer requests, and then I hand-blow the glass for the globe,” he says.

“How do you get the water and snow in it?”

He chuckles. “Tell you what. Why don’t you come by the shop this evening, and I’ll show you?”

“I don’t want to get in the way,” I say.

“You wouldn’t be,” he insists.

“Okay. I’ll see if Uncle Bob will give me a ride when he finishes up here.”

“Sounds good. We’ll grab some dinner.”

“Are you trying to con me into another date?” I ask.

“Nope. I’m flat-out telling you that I’m taking you to dinner. This time, to an actual restaurant.”

“Okay. I’ll see you later,” I agree.



Willa and I spend the afternoon helping Trixie and Alice bake two hundred sugar cookies and make six liters of royal icing for the cookie decorating party at the inn tonight.

“Will you be joining us?” Alice asks as we separate the icing into seven different containers to add coloring.

“Not this time. Bran and I are going to a restaurant for dinner, and I’m not sure what time we’ll be finished.”

“Ooh,” she says.

“Not you too, Alice.”

“That boy is fine, and if I were you, I’d say *merry Christmas to me* and enjoy every second with him,” she says out of earshot of the rest of the room.

“He is, isn’t he?”

“Uh-huh, and funny. He’s the whole package in my book.”

“I just don’t want to give him the wrong idea.”

“And what idea would that be? That you’re both attractive, young, and single?”

“That I want anything serious,” I state.

“You live six hundred miles away. I’m pretty sure he’s only looking for a holiday fling.”

“You think so?”

“What else could he want?” she asks.

“True.”

“I say, you relax, don’t overthink, and let whatever happens happen,” she suggests.

Whatever happens.

It has been a while since I did that. It could be fun.

“There you go,” she says, and I look to her. She grins and gives me a wink.

“Thanks, Alice,” I whisper.

Willa called Norah and asked her to swing by the inn on her way home, so it’s no surprise when she sweeps in and snatches a cookie from the cooling rack.

Once we finish the preparations, Willa, Norah, and I sit at the table in the kitchen, and I lay my idea out for Norah.

“I think you should start offering your gift baskets as part of a pampering package for all brides and bridal parties that book here at the inn. The town doesn’t have a local spa. At least, not yet. I know Willa would love to open one someday. Something quaint that fits perfectly into the *small resort town* vibe, but until that happens, you could instead offer an exclusive package with a basket full of organic, locally grown and sourced handmade balms, oils, and lotions that couldn’t be purchased anywhere else. You could include the robes and slippers and maybe a silk sleep mask.”

“You think people would pay for the products I make in my kitchen?” Norah asks.

“Are you kidding me? My brides would eat this up. And I’ve tested those products, and they’re magnificent. They smell great, and they make your skin and lips feel amazing,” I declare.

“I’ve never considered it before.”

“Well, it’s time you do. It would be mutually beneficial to both of you.”

“Okay.”

“Here’s what I need you to do. Go home and tally your bottom-line cost. Factor in everything from the cost to grow and maintain the plants, the ingredients you use to produce the products, the tins and bottles, labels, the baskets, wraps, and bows. Everything. Then, take that number and mark it up a hundred percent. That will be what you charge Willa. Willa will then mark it up fifty percent for the exclusive package.”

Norah looks back and forth between Willa and me.

“A hundred percent? You’re sure?”

“Honestly, that’s you giving her a sweet deal.”

I leave the two of them to continue discussing the possibilities and excuse myself to head upstairs, take a bath, and get ready for my date.

Uncle Bob installed the new windowpane in my room this morning, and I laugh to myself as I close the blinds and pull the curtain shut before undressing and sinking into the hot water.

I light the candle still perched beside the tub and close my eyes, letting the stress of the day—no, the stress of the entire year—fall away. I soak until the water turns cool and my fingertips are wrinkled. Then, I reluctantly exit the bath and wrap up in one of the soft bath sheets and twist my hair in a towel.

I use the remainder of Norah’s homemade lotion, smoothing it into my damp skin. It’s luxurious.

I have to ask her to make me a batch of this to take home.

Checking the time, I call down to Aunt Trixie and ask her to let me know when Uncle Bob is ready to leave. Then, I quickly dress in a Kensley V-neck sweater dress and add a dark leather belt and slouchy, knee-high, bohemian-style suede boots with a two-inch heel.

A simple gold cross necklace, pearl studs, a couple of cream-and-brown resin bangles, and a topaz ring complete the look.

I release my long brown hair from the towel and run a brush through it. Then, I apply light makeup and spritz myself with Chanel No. 5.

Standing back from the full-length pedestal mirror, I decide to top the look off with a cream-hued wide brim felt fedora.

Perfect.

Aunt Trixie calls when my ride is ready. I toss a lip gloss and my phone into my brown crossbody bag and head downstairs.

Uncle Bob is waiting for me in front of the inn.

“Don’t you look nice,” he says when I slip into the passenger seat.

“Thank you. And I appreciate you taking me to Bran’s studio,” I say.

“It’s no trouble. I’ve got to run by the hardware store, and it’s on the way.”

He drops me at the door and waits until Bran unlocks the door and escorts me inside before he drives away.



Chapter Eighteen

Bran

I lock the door behind her, take her hand, and lead her to the workshop, stopping at the swinging doors.

She looks confused for a moment until I look up and she follows my gaze.

“Mistletoe,” she mutters.

I take her face in my hands—it’s the first time I’m able to use both of them—and I guide her mouth to mine. This time, I don’t hold back, and I kiss her thoroughly before I release her mouth. I reach up and snatch a white berry and place it in my pocket.

She shakes her head and walks past me to the table on my side of the shop.

I join her, and she examines the piece I'm currently working on.

"It's a tree of life with the lumber company's logo carved at its roots."

"It's huge."

"That's what she said," I crack.

She gives me a look.

"Sorry, I couldn't resist. Marty ordered a six-inch-diameter globe featuring the tree with a music box that plays 'The Christmas Waltz' and a light feature to reflect the white snow and iridescent glitter."

I take one of the completed globes from the box behind us and unwrap it. "This is what the finished product looks like."

She takes it in her hand and winds the music box, which prompts the light feature to glow. Giving it a good shake, she watches with rapt attention as the glitter illuminates and dances to the sound of the waltz.

"It's spectacular. I can't believe you hand-blow this glass; it's so clear."

"It took a lot of practice. Each one is unique; no two globes match exactly. But only a trained eye would catch the difference."

"I'm awed," she says.

"I aim to impress," I tell her.

"How many do you have left to do?"

"I have all the bases carved, and the stain has to set. I'll start on the glass tomorrow, so we can go," I reply.

"Sounds good."

I shut everything off and lock up the studio before leading her to the sidewalk for the short trek to Nawab, the new Indian restaurant down the street.

"I hope you like Indian. I've been dying to try this place," I say as I open the door for her.

“I love it.”

I made a reservation, so the hostess immediately seats us at a candlelit booth in the front window.

We order a round of cocktails and a naan bread appetizer before deciding on our entrées.

Her phone buzzes in her purse, and she peeks inside and then sets it to the side.

“Do you need to get that?” I ask.

She shakes her head. “It’s just my boss.”

“Some sort of wedding emergency?” I guess.

“Yeah, she booked one while I was here, and now, she’s freaking out.”

“That must be a good feeling,” I muse.

“How’s that?”

“It sounds like they can’t manage without you. You must be the bridezilla whisperer.”

“I guess. It’s partly my fault. I’m happiest when I have a lot to do. I don’t do well with idle time. And I hate the term *bridezilla*,” she says.

“Why is that?”

“There’s honestly nothing worse than an indecisive bride. It’s your job to gently nudge her in the right direction while simultaneously keeping her mother and bridesmaids happy. One who knows what she wants for her big day, that it will be everything she’s always dreamed of, isn’t some kind of monster; she’s a blessing. The grooms are a bigger headache.”

“Really? The grooms? I’d never have guessed that.”

“Do you have any idea how many grooms hit on their wedding planner? I swear, J.Lo screwed us all when she made that stupid movie. It gave every sleazeball husband-to-be the wrong idea.”

I laugh.

“We all know how great all of her marriages have turned out.”

“Exactly. I’d rather not deal with the men at all. Nobody cares about the groom; they all come to see the bride. Except for maybe his mother.”

“That’s harsh.”

“It’s true. That’s why they all wear the same tuxedo. No one remembers what he wears. I had one insist on parachuting into the ceremony once. It was a disaster and added four times the stress on me. Nobody should upstage the bride.”

“You don’t tell the grooms that they don’t matter, do you?” I ask.

“Of course not. I’m a professional. I’d never let my personal beliefs affect my work.”

“If it’s so stressful, what do you love about it?”

“For me, it’s about creating that moment. The one where the doors open, the bride appears on her father’s arm and the groom is awestruck as he sees her for the first time.”

“Sounds like you’re a romantic.”

“Only when it comes to my job. Personally, not so much.”

Her phone buzzes again just as the server shows up with our cocktails.

“Are you sure you don’t want to get that?” I ask.

“I’m positive. I’ve been working my ass off for that company, pulling all-nighters and never taking a vacation. Striving for a promotion to senior coordinator for over two years now. I’ve had four wedding features in bridal magazines this year and two covers. Doing ninety percent of the work and never getting the credit. Mara takes all the credit.”

“Is Mara your boss?”

“Yep.”

“That sucks.”

“I’m sorry. I’m talking about work too much, aren’t I?” she asks.

“I’m the one who asked. I mean, I want to get to know you, and your job is a big part of that, but tell me who you are outside of work. That’s what I really want to hear,” I prompt.

She blows out a breath. “There’s not a lot to tell. I have a great little apartment off the Strip. I go to the gym twice a week. I keep saying that I’m going to start going every other day, but I’m just lying to myself.”

“Ah, see, I knew if I prodded long enough, I’d find something we had in common. I, too, am a gym poser.”

That wins me a smile.

Our entrées arrive, and our dinner conversation turns to places we’ve traveled and places we’d like to travel to someday.

I find out she’s a dog lover, but because of the restrictions at her apartment building, she can’t get a puppy. Which is probably a good thing with the hours she works.

By the time the dessert menu hits the table, I feel like I’ve gained some insight into her.

She thinks she’s not a fan of love, yet everything about her screams romance.

She picks up the menu.

“Do you want to split something?” she asks.

“I have a better idea,” I say and gesture for the check.



Chapter Nineteen

Bran

“Prepare yourself. You’re about to have one of Lake Mistletoe’s most legendary treats,” I tell her as I pull the tin from the pantry.

“Popcorn? That’s the legendary treat you lured me to your house for?” she asks.

“Not just any popcorn. It’s Mrs. Sugarplum’s Gourmet Popcorn,” I tell her.

I reach over her head and grab two bowls. Then, I pop the top of the tin to reveal the contents.

White cheddar cheese, dill pickle, maple caramel, and white and dark chocolate swirl drizzle.

I start adding a scoop of each to the bowls.

“You aren’t mixing those, are you?” she asks.

“Yeah, duh,” I reply.

She snatches one of the bowls and holds it behind her back. “I’ll keep mine separate, thank you. I’m not a savage.”

I lean into her and mutter, “Nope, you’re just ... blah.”

She gasps. “Take that back. I’m not blah.”

I reach around her and wrench the bowl from her grip. Then, I slide the other bowl of mixed flavors in front of her and dust the top with red and green sprinkles for good measure.

“Prove it,” I challenge.



“Okay, so tell me, what is the most ridiculous wedding you’ve ever thrown?” I ask.

“I thought I was talking too much about work.”

“Come on. I want to know.”

“Hmm, let’s see. I planned a lavish, insanely expensive wedding for a billionaire’s dog once,” she says before tossing a piece of popcorn in her mouth.

“You’re kidding.”

She shakes her head. “Nope. The King Charles spaniel found true love with the neighbor’s corgi. It was magical. They pledged their undying love to one another in front of three hundred fifty of their closest friends, both human and canine. Then, they boogied the night away at an exclusive nightclub while dining on the finest sockeye salmon pâté and Evian water,” she elaborates.

“Wow, that’s really ...”

“Opulent. Posh. Pretentious,” she offers.

“I was going to say wackadoo.”

“That’s not even the best part. They sent the two of them to a doggy resort spa in Fiji for a two-week honeymoon.”

I take the bowl from her hand and set it on the coffee table, then face her. “Now, you’re just yanking my chain.”

She raises her hand. “Scout’s honor. It’s true, and I can even top that.”

“Not possible,” I declare.

“Want to bet?” she asks.

I raise an eyebrow and consider the question.

“Yeah, but who will be the judge?”

She shrugs. “I trust you to be honest. If you think it outdoes the doggy *I dos*, then I win. If not, you win.”

I lean in and lick my lips. “What’s the wager?”

She pauses for a moment.

“What do you want?”

My eyes flicker to her mouth and then back to her eyes. “That’s a loaded question, sweetheart.”

She moves in closer. Our breaths mingling. “That’s how confident I am.”

She snatches the bowl back. “Your move.”

“All right. If I win, you stay the night with me,” I toss out.

“And if I win?”

“I stay the night with you,” I suggest.

“That’s the same thing.”

“You said I got to make the terms.”

“Fine,” she agrees, and then she slides back to her side of the couch.

I grab my bottle off the coaster and take a long swig. “Lay it on me.”

“I had a very wealthy, let’s say, woman in her golden years, who hired us to plan her wedding to her much less

golden-aged fitness trainer,” she begins.

“So far, nothing too shocking,” I quip.

She gives me a sly look. “I haven’t gotten to the good part. Two years later, she comes back for us to plan her next wedding.”

“So, it didn’t work out with the young lad?” I ask, feigning shock.

She giggles. “I’m afraid not. She left him for another man.”

“Let me guess ... the pool boy?” I say.

She shakes her head and grins. “Nope. Her yoga instructor.”

I shrug. “Okay, still not shocking though.”

“He happened to be the trainer’s twin brother.”

Her eyes go wide at the reveal, and I have to hold back a chuckle at her animated expression.

“No,” I gasp.

“Yep. And the best part? She decided not to bother with hiring a photographer. She said she could just re-hang the ones from her original wedding and no one would be able to tell the difference.”

She sits back, wearing a pleased expression.

It takes a moment for the info to sink in.

“That is twisted,” I finally announce.

“I know, right?”

“You win. That is definitely the worst wedding story I’ve ever heard.”

“No. That’s not the worst. You asked for the most ridiculous,” she says.

“You have one worse than that?”

“Yeah. The one where the bride gets left at the altar, her heart gets shredded, and she’s utterly humiliated in front of

everyone she knows.”

“Some asshole groom did that to one of your brides?”

“Nope. Some asshole groom did that to me.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

“What an idiot for standing you up.”

“Pretty sure I was the idiot for saying yes in the first place.”

“Agree to disagree?”

“Sure,” she says.

“I guess I’ll go pack a bag,” I say as I stand.

She grabs my hand. “I’m not taking you back to the inn,” she exclaims.

I lean down and bring my mouth to hers. “Hey, a bet’s a bet,” I tell her.

She sighs. “You’re right. A bet is a bet.”

I stand up and rub my hands together. “I’ll grab my PJs.”

“You’d better make sure they are PG-rated.”

“What fun is that?”

“Well, my mom is bunking with me tonight, so unless you want to contend with a cougar of your own—”

“I change my vote,” I say.

“You can’t change your mind after the fact.”

I prowl back to the couch, pluck her up, and drop her in my lap. “Says who?”

She wraps her arms around my neck and leans in.

“Hannah ...” I moan her name, and her eyes come to mine. Her big brown eyes.

She opens her mouth to say something in response, but she doesn’t get the chance because I bring my hand to her chin and

rub my thumb over her bottom lip before I bend my head and brush my mouth against hers. Her eyes widen, but she returns the kiss. I pull back and drop my hand to caress her cheek.

“You’re so beautiful.”

I don’t get to finish the thought before she tightens her grip and pulls me back to her mouth.

All coherent thought flies from my mind as she opens her mouth, and her tongue darts tentatively against my lips. I part for her and then take over as I wrap my arms around her back and bring her body closer to mine.

She slides a leg over my hips and seats herself astride me without breaking the kiss. It’s been so long since my body reacted so strongly to a woman. My hands take over and slide down her back until they clasp her bottom. I move her against me as she laces her fingers into my hair.

All the tension of the last couple of days melts away, and all that matters at this moment is the feel of the woman in my arms as our tongues wrestle and we fight to get as close as possible.

I break from the kiss and drop my forehead to hers. The intoxicating smell of her sweet perfume surrounds us as her heart beats rapidly against my chest. I bring my hand up and move it across the pulse throbbing just below her ear, and then I bring my lips to the spot and lay a soft peck. She closes her eyes, and her head falls back to give me better access to her neck. I slide my tongue down to her collarbone, tasting the sweet saltiness of her glistening skin. She moans as I suck at the hollow spot just where her throat meets the top of her chest, and her breathing grows ragged.

She releases my hair and runs her hands across my shoulders and around to my sides. Gripping the hem of my thermal, she pulls it up, and her hands roam my chest. Her fingers tug gently at the hair she finds before her nails score lightly down my abs. My mouth stays at the base of her throat, lavishing attention just above her breast. My cock grows painfully hard between us, and it takes all the self-control I possess not to raise my hips and nestle into her heat.

She gasps when she realizes and bears down heavy against me.

I groan.

She wiggles her hips a little, and I dig my fingers into her ass as I try to keep myself from rocketing off the couch, throwing her over my shoulder, climbing up to the loft, and tossing her on my bed like a caveman.

She buries her face into my neck and whispers, “Bran ...”

“Yes, baby?”

“I’m ready to go to bed now.”

I immediately stand, hoist her up, and carry her with me.



Chapter Twenty

Hannah

As soon as we make it up to the top step, Bran drops me to my feet, and his large hands settle on my hips and tug at the hem of my dress. I lift my arms, and he pulls it over my head and tosses it onto the loft floor.

His mouth finds mine immediately, and he hungrily kisses me as he walks me back to the foot of the king-size bed that covers most of the space up here.

His hands slide down and around to cup my behind and lift me. I wrap my legs around his waist, and he slowly lowers us and comes over the top of me. My head falls back against the soft comforter, and I arch my back as his mouth finds my breast. I reach and thread my fingers through his silky, dark hair and hold him against me. He presses his body into mine,

and the evidence of his need pulses against my thigh as an all-consuming heat crawls up my spine.

My body starts trembling with desire, and I hook a leg behind his back, trying desperately to get closer.

He rears up for a split second, grabs the back of his collar, and flings his shirt over his head and across the room. When he returns his attention to my breast, I slide my hands down his bare back, the tips of my fingers digging into his muscles.

He lets out a guttural groan as his tongue runs circles around my taut nipple before he sucks it between his teeth and bites down gently.

The need that pulses through me catches me off guard. How can I burn this intensely for someone I just met a couple of weeks ago? Never have I responded this way to a lover's attention. I want to touch and kiss every inch of his body.

I grip him tighter as he slides a hand between us and undoes the button of his jeans as his mouth continues to explore and his other hand kneads the globe of my breast. An exquisite ache pulses in my lower back.

God, that feels so good.

I purr my encouragement as I struggle to release him from his jeans.

He brings his head up at the sound, and before I have a chance to complain, he leans up and yanks his jeans down his legs and kicks them off.

I wrap my fingers around him, and he places his hand over mine to halt my motion.

“Hannah.” My name falls from his lips in a lusty plea, and I love the effect my touch has on him.

I bear up and take his mouth, and he releases my hand. He is hard and ready. I grip him with one hand as I stroke him firmly with the other. Running the nail of my finger down the hard ridge from top to base. He twitches in my fist, and his breath catches as he watches me.

“Hannah,” he rasps again as his hands drop to my shoulders, gripping me tightly, and he stares into my eyes.

He wants permission.

I dart my tongue out and lick his bottom lip as I continue to stroke him.

“Yes,” I murmur, and the heat in his eyes as he watches me nearly sets us both ablaze.

He groans, and his hands fist my hair. I fall back to the pillows and mutter unintelligible sentences as his mouth finds my breast again. I can sense that he is holding back as he takes his time.

Frustrated, I begin to move my hips with the rhythm of my hand.

There’s nothing left between us when he starts to kiss his way down my body at a maddeningly slow pace. Stroking and caressing every exposed inch until I’m a desperate, quivering wreck.

When he reaches my rib cage, he stops at the lotus flower tattoo just below my left breast.

“I wondered if this was a flower,” he murmurs before placing a kiss on the ink.

“What? How did you know I had a tattoo?” I ask.

His eyes snap up to mine, and he grins.

“Brannigan Prince, you did see me naked through that window, didn’t you?”

He doesn’t answer. He slides his hands to my thighs and presses them apart.

“You scoundrel,” I cry as I let my legs fall open for him.

He growls low and deep in his throat when he finds my core wet and ready for him. He rakes a callous finger across me and then brings it to his lips and licks it clean.

I watch his face as he looks at me, completely bare to him. His breathing speeds up, and then he groans my name before I

feel his mouth on me.

He spreads me apart with his fingers, and his tongue starts to explore my intimate flesh.

I arch up as I cling to him.

“Yes. Right there,” I moan.

Desire ripples down my spine as I bring my eyes to watch him devour me.

I cry out his name as he nips at my clit with his teeth, and my hips involuntarily jump in his hold.

Every nerve ending in my body ignites, and pleasure twists and knots inside of me as he inserts a finger and starts to curl in and out, hitting the perfect spot.

He takes his time in using his mouth, tongue, and hands to drive me into a frenzy.

I sink my fingers into his scalp and keep him where I need him as I raise my hips to meet his tongue until I am shaking and writhing beneath him.

His eyes come to mine and hold my gaze as he takes me there, and I gasp his name as my orgasm rockets through me.

As I lie there, attempting to catch my breath and recover from the moment of ecstasy, he pushes himself up off of the end of the bed.

My eyes feast on him standing before me. His broad chest, his sculpted abs, and his powerful thighs. It's a sight I could get used to.

He retrieves a foil packet from the chest of drawers behind him and then returns. Placing one knee on the bed, he tears the packet open and slowly sheathes himself. I sit up and take his hand and pull him on top of me. His hot, slick, bare skin against mine. He guides his cock to my entrance, and with one swift thrust of his hips, he's inside of me. Filling me completely.

“Oh, yes, that's it,” I manage to gasp out.

He reaches back and clasps one of my legs, leading it over his hip so he can move deeper and faster. I fling my head back into the pillow and grip the comforter in a tight fist.

He bends his head, so he can kiss my exposed neck, and the sensation of his gentle kiss in contrast to his pounding rhythm is just what I need to bring me back to the crest of the wave.

His breath starts coming in short, hard pants as my legs begin to tremble, and I lock them firmly around his waist.

“Hannah,” he grunts as my muscles begin to tighten around him.

He grips my hips as he mounts up and begins to thrust rapidly into me.

I slide my hands down his sides, grazing his skin with my fingernails before digging into the curves of his ass and holding on as best as I can manage. The guttural noises escaping him let me know he is close to the edge.

I’m so close myself and desperate for another release when he slips one hand between us, pinching me in just the right spot. That does it. My body begins to convulse as I hoarsely shout his name.

He loses his hold on control, and his tightly coiled climax explodes into me. He brings his mouth to mine as his own pleasure takes him over.

We lie here, sated, for several moments, drained of all strength. Me beneath him, taking his weight as I stroke my hands mindlessly up and down his back.

“Bran,” I whisper.

“Yeah, baby?”

“Do you have any of that popcorn left?” I ask.

He tilts his head up and looks at me. “What?”

“I’m hungry again,” I say.

He brings his forehead to mine and laughs.

“What?”

“You want to talk about food while I’m still inside of you?”

“I think we just burned off dinner.”

At that moment, my stomach lets out a loud growl.

He dips his face to mine and kisses the tip of my nose. “I’ll be right back.”

“Okay,” I whisper before he nips my bottom lip with his teeth as he slips out of me.

He stands and removes the condom and ties the end off before disappearing down the stairs.

When he returns, he is carrying the popcorn tin and a sprig of mistletoe.

He ties it to the headboard and proceeds to pluck an entire cluster of six berries, placing them on the nightstand.

Then, he leans into my ear. “I plan to see how many I can collect before dawn.”



Chapter Twenty-One

Bran

I wake Hannah by peppering her face with kisses.

“Open your eyes, sleepyhead. I have to get to the inn, and if you want a ride, you’re going to have to get that pretty ass of yours in gear.”

She grabs the pillow beside us and pulls it over her head.

I chuckle as I tug it away.

“You’re not a morning person, are you?”

She opens her eyes and blows a stray piece of hair from her face. “It’s your fault I’m so exhausted,” she grumbles.

“I apologize, ma’am,” I say.

“That doesn’t help one bit,” she snaps.

“You’re welcome to stay here if you want. I can come back and pick you up this evening.”

She raises her arms over her head and stretches, which distracts me from my mission momentarily. Then, she slings the comforter to the side and heaves herself from the bed.

I lie back and watch as she walks, naked, into the bathroom.

That’s a sight a man could get used to.

I force myself to get up and wait for her downstairs before I decide to play hooky for the day.

Once she’s dressed, we load into the Forester and make our way to the inn. I park beside Keller’s truck and glance over at Hannah.

“You gonna be all right, going in there?” I ask.

She rolls her eyes. “I haven’t had to endure a walk of shame since college, but I shall survive the humility with dignity,” she quips.

“Attagirl.”

I exit the vehicle and walk around to open her door. Then, I guide her to the garage door.

“What are you doing?” she asks.

I look up, and she does too.

“Are you serious? I haven’t even brushed my teeth this morning,” she says.

“A rule’s a rule,” I tell her.

She huffs and then bears up on the tips of her toes and lays a long, loud, closed-mouth smack on my lips.

I grab a berry from the branch dangling above us, and we walk side by side to the inn, where Keller and Barry are standing on the veranda.

As Hannah passes them, Keller calls to her, “You look like a truck ran over you. What happened last night?”

“Let’s just say, I got into the Christmas spirit,” she replies.

“Which one—Past, Present, or Future?” he teases.

“Present.”

“You sure about that?”

“Maybe Future. Definitely wine,” she mumbles before disappearing into the inn.

Did she say, maybe future?

“You caught that too, huh?” he asks me.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

One side of his mouth lifts into a half-smile.

“Come on, slacker. Let’s get to work. I promised my girl that we’d be done with this by the end of the week.”

“You did what? Are you crazy?”

“Yep,” he admits.



Bob rallies all the troops. By lunch, our four-man crew has grown to a crew of nine.

We work through the afternoon and right through lunch with Trudy and Trixie coming to our rescue with ham and turkey sandwiches, chips, and lemonade.

I have to leave around four and head to the shop in order to get the glass blown for Marty’s order to ensure I have time to assemble the globes and that they have time to set and be tested before he picks them up on Thursday.

Keller isn’t far behind me.

He has a couple of custom orders to sand and seal before the weekend. We work for several hours. Keller seems uncharacteristically quiet and lost in thought.

The two of us order Chinese delivery for dinner, so we can work through the night.

“So, you and Hannah, huh?” he says between slurping up lo mein noodles.

I shrug. “Don’t ask me any questions, man, because I honestly have no answers for you.”

“I warned you to avoid that,” he reminds me.

“I know.”

“Willa likes the idea of the two of you seeing each other, so she made me promise not to give you shit,” he informs me.

“She does? Cool,” I say.

Somehow, Willa’s approval makes me feel at ease.

“You’re hopeless,” he mutters.

“And it’s annoying how you slurp your food down.”

“They forgot to send forks, and I’m no good with these damn chopsticks. It’s either slurp them or use my fingers. I assumed you’d rather I not do that in case you wanted some.”

I look over at his stained hands and then down into his carton. “Good looking out.”

“Thank you.”

And with that, the discussion about me and Hannah comes to a close. That’s the beauty of male friendships. We don’t have to break down and analyze every single situation. He lets me know that he knows and that he thinks I should tread lightly, and I let him know that I have no expectations—all in under ten sentences.

“Tomorrow evening, I’m gonna need your help. If you’re free, I’ll throw some steaks on the grill,” he says.

Whew, it’s a busy week.

“Sure. What are we doing?”

“Pop dropped his boat off this morning. It’s in my old workshop. I need to get it ready for the parade this Saturday.”

Every year, the town hosts a Christmas boat parade. It’s one of the biggest attractions on the night of the Christmas market. Bob and Keller take the contest very seriously.

“You know I’m down. What’s the theme this year?”

“Pop wants to do *The Polar Express*. So, we’re gonna have to build a train frame and cover it with lights.”

“That shouldn’t be too difficult.”

“I’ll see if Willa and Hannah want to come and help,” he says.

“Cool.”

We pack up our leftovers and store them in the fridge, where we keep our beverages.

“I bought a ring yesterday,” he blurts out once we are back to work.

I look up from the globe in front of me to him. “Are you serious?”

“Yep.”

That explains why he’s been acting kind of strange.

“It’s about time. When are you going to ask her?”

“I’m thinking about doing it the night of the Holly Ball. She’s on edge, worrying about whether everything will come together. I figure that night, after that stress is lifted from her shoulders, I’ll take my shot. All our friends and family will be in attendance, so there won’t be anything to raise her suspicion,” he says.

“Sounds like a solid plan,” I tell him.

“Yeah. I just have to figure out the perfect moment to do it.”

“You’ll know when it’s right,” I assure him.

“That’s what Pop said.”

We both focus our attention back to the tasks in front of us. Then, I look back over at him.

“Keller,” I call.

He brings his eyes to me.

“Congratulations, man. Willa’s a helluva woman,” I say.

He smiles. “Yeah, she is.”

His words drip with pride, and I’m so happy for my buddy.

He found one of the good ones.

“We’re going to be building a Christmas village out of gingerbread for the table in the foyer tonight. You want to join us?” Mom asks.

“That sounds like fun,” I say.

She smiles at me, and the knot in my stomach eases a bit.

“Annette left some phone messages for you at the front desk, Hannah,” Willa says.

“Thanks.”

“Are we avoiding someone, sweetheart?” Mom asks.

“Yeah. My boss. She wants me to come back to Vegas as soon as possible.”

“Before Christmas?” Trixie asks.

I sigh. “Yeah. They need my help with a big client they booked after I left.”

“What are you going to do?” Mom asks.

“I don’t want to go, but she’s implied that my promotion might hinge on whether I do or not.”

“She can’t do that, can she? You deserve that position, and this was a scheduled vacation, not you just laying out of work,” Mom says.

“Should she do it? No. Would she do it? It’s her company, and she can do what she wants. If I refuse and it pisses her off enough, then she probably will,” I explain.

“That’s horrible. Why would anyone treat their employees that way?” Trixie asks.

“It’s how the corporate world works most of the time, Trixie. I lost my job in Miami because my boss was a dishonest prick,” Willa reminds her.

“Well, it shouldn’t be that way.”

“If you decide to go, we’ll understand, but if you decide to stay and then quit if they pass you up for the promotion, I’m positive another agency would be delighted to scoop someone

of your talent right up. Mara's loss will be another boss's gain," Mom says.

I lay my head on her shoulder, and she kisses the top, like she did when I was little.

I don't want to leave her before Christmas. I know what I have to do,

I excuse myself and go up to my room and turn on my phone. Then, I dial Mara's number.

"Hannah, thank goodness you're alive. I thought I was going to have to send the police out to do a wellness check on you."

"Alive and well," I assure her.

"Have you made up your mind?"

"Yeah. I'm sorry, Mara, but I can't come back before Christmas. I'll be happy to make myself available for a consult, and I'll bump up my return flight a few days, so I can be back in Vegas the day of the wedding, but that's all I can promise. I want to wake up with my mother here in Lake Mistletoe on Christmas morning."

The line goes silent.

"Mara? Are you still there?"

"I am. I can't say that I'm not disappointed in your decision, but it is your right to finish out your vacation. I'll be in touch if I need your assistance before you return. Make sure you answer the phone, please."

"I will. I'll keep it on and by my side at all times."

"Enjoy your holiday," she says.

"You too."

We disconnect, and I fall back on the bed and close my eyes.

That went as well as could be expected.



I shower and join everyone downstairs to construct a gingerbread village.

The food, phone call, and shower went a long way in pulling me out of my funk.

Norah and Willa are seated across from Mom and Trixie, and the other guests are spread out across the long dining table. Everything needed to create the gingerbread confections is included in the boxed kits at each chair. Bowls containing extra candies and sprinkles and icing are scattered across the center for everyone to use.

Each person's house is different. There are churches, cottages, lighthouses, storefronts, and even a tree house, which just happens to be the one that is placed in front of me to assemble.

"I came up with a name," Norah says once the construction is underway.

"A name for what?" I ask.

"For the new products. I figured if they were going to be purchased, I needed to brand them."

"Yes, you definitely should," I agree.

"I've decided to call it Mistletoe Magic."

"Mistletoe Magic," I repeat.

"What do you think?" she asks.

"It has a nice ring to it."

She beams. "I think so too."

We spend the next two hours perfecting our structures and helping the children with theirs. Once we are all satisfied with our creations, we take them to Hal, who arranges the village, adding streetlamps and figurines to bring it all together.

The knot in my stomach begins to tighten again as I double-check that my phone is indeed on and in my pocket.

Should I have just gone home?

I shuffle into the kitchen and find Norah and Willa rummaging through the refrigerator.

“Hi,” Norah greets, and then her expression grows concerned when she turns and catches a look at me. “Are you okay?” she asks.

At her question, Willa’s eyes find me. “What’s wrong?” she asks.

I plop onto one of the barstools at the island. “Everything,” I mumble.

They give each other a look, and then Norah asks, “Is this about Bran?”

“No.”

“You sure?” Willa asks.

“Positive. It’s about me and standing up to my boss.”

“Care to drown your sorrows?” Norah asks.

“Sure. What are we talking—eggnog, mulled wine, tequila?” I ask.

“We were thinking pizza and ice cream,” Willa offers.

“That works too,” I agree.

We load up on junk food and make our way to the couches for a marathon binge session of *The Great British Baking Show: Holidays*.



Chapter Twenty-Three

Bran

I cannot believe we finished Willa's garden project this afternoon. As we were loading up Bob's truck to leave, the van from the lighting company was unloading their equipment to get started with their install.

The place turned out better than any of us had even imagined, and Willa started crying when Keller called her out to show her the final product.

There's a certain measure of pride a man feels when he is able to contribute to a woman's happy tears.

I follow Keller to his house, and the two of us draw out the plans for the train frame for the boat.

We work steadily until we see the lights from Willa's Bronco in the drive.

Willa and Hannah exit, each carrying a brown paper bag.

Keller stops to ignite the grill, and then we relieve the girls of the bags and follow them inside the house.

They get to work on washing veggies to slice up for a salad while Keller and I grab the grilling tools and the platter of steaks that we seasoned and left to rest on the counter.

When I scoot around Hannah, she stops and laces her arms around my neck. Then, she kisses me hard and lets go.

My hands are full, so I can't, but she reaches up, twists a berry off the mistletoe hanging between Keller's kitchen and living room, and slips it in the front pocket of my jeans. Then, she turns and continues peeling cucumbers.

I take the tools to Keller, and then I continue transferring our design onto a sheet of plywood while he cooks.

By the time I'm prepared to begin cutting the frame, he has our food ready.

We carry the meat inside to find the two of them dancing around the kitchen, singing an off-key version of "Jingle Bell Rock" as they set out the plates and silverware.

The four of us sit at Keller's small kitchen table and enjoy a delicious meal together. Hannah fills us in on her drama back in Vegas, and I'm secretly overjoyed that she didn't pack up and head home today.

After we eat, the girls clean the dishes while Keller and I take a saw to the wood. Then, Willa and Hannah, armed with staple guns, help by adding the lights to one panel while we work on cutting the second one.

We finish all but a few details that Bob and Trixie plan to add before launching on Saturday, and Willa decides she is going to stay the night.

"You're welcome to take the Bronco home if you want," she tells Hannah, offering her the keys.

"I got her," I interrupt before Hannah can reply.

Willa closes her hand around the pink metal carabiner holding her keys.

“Cool. Thanks, Bran,” she says.

Hannah just shakes her head and lets me lead her out to my Forester.

I don't even pretend to be taking her home. I turn in the opposite direction of the inn and toward my place.



I park the SUV close to the steps, and as soon as Hannah exits the vehicle, I scoop her up, lift her over one shoulder, and fireman-carry her up the stairs.

She giggles as I switch my grip on her in order to fish my key from my pocket and unlock the front door.

Once inside, I toss her onto her back on the couch, quickly kick off my jeans, and climb over top of her.

I use my body to pin her to the cushions and settle my weight between her thighs.

My mouth finds hers, and I kiss her deep and slow.

Her hand moves between us and takes hold of my throbbing cock. She wraps her fingers around my length, and I can feel myself growing thicker.

She pulls away from my mouth and growls impatiently, “I want you inside of me now.”

I continue to kiss and caress her neck, and then I reach for my discarded jeans and produce a silver packet from the back pocket. I rip it open and then fall to my knees on the floor in front of her and slide the condom on slowly.

“Bran,” she groans my name as she reaches for me.

Damn, she's hot.

I help her as she discards her knit pants and matching cashmere sweater, exposing her creamy skin and that sexy-ass tattoo. It's a glorious sight, and my erection is standing hard and ready.

I slide her hips forward and come back over her, her hot, slick, bare core open for me.

"Ready to come for me again?" I ask.

"Again," she yelps.

With a cocky grin, I lift my hips and thrust inside of her. Filling her deeply.

"Oh my," she gasps.

I slowly pull out till just the tip remains inside of her and then plunge in again, filling her over and over, and it feels so damn good.

My head flies back, and I grip her hips as I quicken my pace.

She arches up and kisses my exposed neck, and her soft lips against my hot skin feels amazing as I pound into her at a steady pace.

I can feel the tension building in my lower back, and my body coils tightly. My orgasm ready to spring at any moment.

Her breath starts coming out in short, ragged pants as my legs lock, and I try with all my might to hang on for a few minutes longer.

"Damn, you feel amazing," I grunt as her muscles clamp down on me.

I release her hips and snake my hands under her ass to lift her, so I can move deeper. She begins shaking, and a guttural sound comes from her throat as she teeters on the edge.

I'm so close myself and desperate for a release when she slips one hand between us and begins to run circles around her clit.

That does the trick. She starts convulsing around me as I lose the fight with my own control, and I chant her name as I

ride out my orgasm.

Hannah loses her grip on control, and she bears up and cries out as she explodes around me. I bring my mouth to her shoulder and nip at her flesh as her climax crashes over the both of us.

It's the most intense experience I've ever had with a woman.

We lie, wrapped together, her cuddled in my arms, as we catch our breath. After a few minutes, I lift her chin and smile as I bring her mouth to mine.

I sit her on the couch and wrap her in the blanket that I keep draped across the back, and then I walk to the bathroom. When I return, sans the condom, she lifts the blanket, inviting me to join her underneath it.

I close my eyes and lay my head back against the sofa. The exhaustion from the last couple of long days and tonight finally catching up to me.

Hannah snuggles in close and rests her head on my chest, and the feel of her breath on my skin is the last thing I remember before passing out cold.



Chapter Twenty-Four

Hannah

I offer to help run the Gingerbread Inn's table at the Christmas market, but Mom and Trixie refuse to let Willa or me pitch in, insisting that we enjoy the festivities with Keller and Bran.

"You two have done enough work the last couple of days, getting the Holly Ball organized," Trixie argues when we try to force our way behind the table. "Now, shoo. Go have a little fun."

We meander through the tents, sampling the festive treats, and browsing the wares. Carolers are walking about, singing joyful songs, as families play games and eat all the holiday treats.

Keller and Bran find us, and the four of us pile into the photo booth and make faces at the camera. The result is a

hilarious string of black-and-white snaps.

Bran and I share a cup of Hal's secret-recipe cocoa, and he leads me under every single mistletoe he spots.

At the last one, I am pelted with a snowball in the shoulder.

I turn to see Keller grinning at me.

"Uh-oh," Bran says before dashing off after Keller, supposedly to defend my honor, but instead of tackling my cousin, he joins forces with him.

I squat to the ground and start scooping snow, packing it into a perfect ball. Then, I stand and take off running, launching it in the air as I give chase.

My snowball makes a precise arc to the intended target when Keller grabs Bran's sweater and uses him as a human shield.

He yelps and falls backward into the snow, holding his eye and screaming.

Not again.

I freak out and sprint to him and lie in the snow beside him.

"Are you okay?" I ask as I try to remove his hand from his face.

He doesn't answer. He just tugs me forward, and I fall on top of him. He gives me a devious grin.

"You jerk."

I try to escape his grip, but he tightens the hold.

"You're going to have to stop milking it," I growl.

The intercom announces that the contestants with boat parade entries need to meet at the launch pad, so he releases me, and he and Keller run off to assist Bob.

Willa is stopped by one of her guests, who asks her to be in a few family photos that they have the local photographer

snapping for them. I wander off to watch the boats as they begin to fill the shore when snowflakes begin to fall.

I raise my face to the heavens and enjoy the unique beauty of watching snow as it falls from the heavens. I extend my hand and watch as a flake floats down and lands in my palm.

“You should make a wish.”

I look up to see a stocky, older gentleman with a short white beard smiling at me. His head is topped with a red-and-white plaid newsboy cap, and his worn-out black corduroy pants are held up over his long-sleeved white shirt by a set of red suspenders.

“Pardon me?”

“The first time a snowflake lands on your hand, make a wish as fast as you can,” he sings.

“I think that only applies to the first snowflake of winter,” I say.

“Oh, no. That’s a Christmas snowflake you caught. It’s special, and you don’t want to waste its magic,” he says.

“I don’t believe in magic,” I say.

“Just because you don’t believe in it doesn’t mean it isn’t real. What can it hurt to take a chance?”

“I don’t want to be let down,” I say, and the honesty surprises us both.

“I see. You know, Hannah, sometimes, the things we think are wishes that weren’t granted turn out to be exactly what we wanted; the packaging is just different than we expected.”

“How very cryptic of you,” I quip.

“It’s Christmas. The season of miracles,” he adds.

“I don’t believe in those either.”

He chuckles. “No wishes or miracles. Next, you’ll say you don’t believe in Christmas magic.”

“I don’t. Those are things of childhood dreams. An enchanted sleigh with flying reindeer. A man in a red suit, who

grants wishes and brings presents to all the good boys and girls.”

“That is part of the magic, but it’s not about the gifts or the big guy in the North Pole. It’s the feeling that anything is possible at Christmas. You lost that somewhere, and that’s why you’re here. Everyone lands in Lake Mistletoe for different reasons. Although it’s not always the reason they think.”

“If you say so—wait. How did you know my name?” I ask.

He smiles, but before he can answer, I hear Mom calling my name.

“That’s me. Enjoy your night,” I say as I skirt around him.

“You, too, and have a merry Christmas,” he replies.

As I stroll back toward the market, I look down at the icy flake that is somehow still clinging to the fabric of my mitten.

Closing my eyes, I make a fist and whisper a wish to be promoted at work into the air.

From my lips to God’s ears.

I must be losing my mind.

I find Mom and Trixie, and they each have an armful of beautifully wrapped gifts.

“Hannah, sweetheart, can you help us carry these over to the toy drive donation table?” Mom asks.

“All of these?” I ask.

“Yes. We might have gone a little crazy, but we’re so blessed, and you should never hoard a blessing.”

That’s really sweet.

I take a couple of boxes from each of them.

“Why do you guys waste all the time and money on this extravagant wrapping? You can buy a cute Christmas bag and some tissue. It’s half the cost, and it takes half the time,” I say as I follow them.

“Because we pour the love into the wrapping,” Aunt Trixie answers.

“You do what?”

“When I sit down to wrap a gift, I pray over the person receiving it. I hide their name in my heart even if they are anonymous recipients. I ask for protection and provisions and for blessing, favor, and healing in their lives as I tape the ends and tie the bow.”

“That’s beautiful, Aunt Trixie.”

“It’s been done with every single birthday and Christmas gift that you’ve received from me your entire life,” she says.

“And from me,” Mom adds.

“Your grandmother taught us to do it. And now, you’ll find yourself doing it every time you wrap something.”

I think back to the drawer in my closet at home that is stuffed to the brim with reused gift bags and wrinkled tissue.

I’ll just get rid of them.

“I hope I grow up to be like you two,” I say.

We drop the packages at the donation table, and then the three of us find a spot on the shore to watch the parade.

When Bob’s name is called, we cheer as Keller and Bran push him off from the edge of the lake.

Sandra, who was helping launch her own family’s entry, walks over and wraps her arms around Bran. He returns the hug before stepping back, and I watch as he smiles down at her while they carry on an animated conversation.

Mom leans over my shoulder and says into my ear, “You’re smitten.”

“I am not,” I disagree.

“Protest if you must, but I spy love dancing in your eyes when you look at him.”

She lifts her chin toward Bran, who is still chatting up his old friend, who he went on two dates with.

“I’m incapable of falling in love, Mom. My love thingy is broken.”

“You mean, your heart?” she clarifies.

“Yeah, that useless organ.”

“Oh, Hannah.”

“Please don’t, Mom,” I mutter.

“You spend every second of your life making someone else’s dreams come true. When did you stop chasing your own?” she asks.

I turn and face her. “I do chase my dreams. That’s why I work so hard.”

Her eyes fill with sympathy, which really strikes a nerve with me.

“You of all people know why I’m not willing to take risks with my heart anymore.”

“Oh, baby, there’s always a risk. In business and in love. But if you don’t take the leap, you can’t ever reap the reward.”

“I live in the moment, Mom. I soak in what makes me happy right now, and I don’t make plans for the future. Right now is all I need.”

Willa plops down beside me. “Did I miss it?” she asks.

“No,” I answer.

She has a bag in her hands.

“Roasted chestnut?” she offers.

“No, thanks. I think I’m going to head back to the inn,” I say as I stand.

“Are you okay?” she asks.

I look at Bran, who is now watching with Keller as Bob flips the lights of the boat, then back to Mom and Willa.

“Yeah. I’m just ready to go to bed.”

“Okay. I’ll see you in the morning.”

“Good night.”

“Sweet dreams, Hannah,” Mom says.

“You too.”



When I get back to my room, I check my phone and see that, once again, I have missed calls from Mara.

I shoot her a text, apologizing for not getting the calls, and let her know I’m looking into having my flight changed.

It’s time to go home.



Chapter Twenty-Five

Bran

“Where’s Hannah?” I ask Willa after we bring Bob’s boat back in and load it on the trailer

“She left,” she says.

“Left? Why?”

She shrugs. “I have no idea, but I get the feeling she and Trudy got into an argument or something.”

“Can you do me a favor and ask Hal if he’ll help Keller and Bob load the boat back onto the trailer?”

“Sure.”

“Thanks.”

I walk across the street to the inn in search of Hannah. The thought of her being upset after the wonderful evening we had

doesn't sit well with me.

I climb the stairs two at a time to her room and knock.

"I don't need turndown service tonight, Annette," she calls.

I grasp the knob and slowly open the door.

She turns, and whatever she was about to say dies on her lips when she sees me.

Her face is red and tear-streaked, and I look past her to see her open suitcase on the bed.

"Going somewhere?" I ask.

"Yeah, it turns out, I need to get back to Vegas after all."

"I thought you made up your mind to stay until after Christmas," I say.

"It's an emergency. I had my ticket transferred to the first available flight home," she says.

"A wedding emergency, huh?"

"Yep," she lies.

"Liar," I accuse.

"Excuse me?"

"I don't believe you. There's no emergency. You're just running because you're scared."

"Scared of what?"

"Of this." I gesture between the two of us. "Of what's happening between us."

She laughs. "We just got caught up in the moment or the season. Whatever the spell of this place is."

"No, it's not a spell; it's just us," I tell her.

"Nothing is happening, Bran. We had a Christmas fling—that's all. We both knew that going in, and we both knew it was going to end," she protests.

"You're so cynical," I say.

She walks over and snatches a few sweaters off the hangers in the closet and tosses them in her suitcase:

“Cynical? No. I’m a realist,” she insists.

“Okay, so tell me what’s real.”

“I’ll tell you what isn’t real. Happily ever after. It’s an illusion sold to us from birth by movies and made-up fairy tales,” she bellows.

“Says the woman who plans fairy-tale weddings for a living,” I point out.

She scoffs. “That’s right. The wedding. The one perfect day. I do everything in my power to make it unforgettable for the bride. To make sure all her dreams come true. Dreams she has dreamed since she was a little girl. I create that day for her, and hopefully, that memory will get the poor, unsuspecting soul through the next twenty years of shit.”

“You don’t believe that,” I say.

“Oh, yes, I do. All you can truly expect is *happy right now*. That’s it. That’s all my parents got. That’s all fifty percent of marriages get.”

“What about Bob and Trixie? Norah and Sammy? Willa and Keller?” I ask.

“They’re the exceptions.”

“All of them?” I ask.

She shrugs. “Uncle Bob and Aunt Trixie are. It’s yet to be seen for the others.”

I blow out a long whistle.

Her eyes cut to me.

“Wow, that ex of yours really did a number on you, didn’t he?” I ask.

“No, he did me a favor actually. He left me standing in my fantasy wedding gown in the middle of a beautiful chapel with all my friends and family present, and if he hadn’t done that,

then I'd probably be a divorced single mother of three kids with emotional damage, driving a minivan," she retorts.

I take slow, measured steps toward her.

"I agree. He did do you a favor because you deserve to have a man standing at the end of the aisle, waiting for you, who loves you with everything he has inside of him. You deserve to be treasured."

When I make it to her, she looks up, and I wipe the tear from her cheek.

"I'm sorry that dumbass was reckless with your heart."

"I'm sorry I was reckless with yours," she whispers.

"So, that's it?"

"That's it. That's all I have," she replies.

I give her one final kiss and reach up and pluck the last berry from the mistletoe in her doorway.

"I guess the legend is true after all. It was a good-bye kiss," I say as I place it in my pocket.

Then, I turn and walk out.

Willa, Keller, and Trudy are coming in as I walk out the front door.

"Did you find her?" Willa asks.

"Yeah, she's in her room, packing."

"Packing?" Trudy repeats.

"Yep. She booked on the next flight back to Vegas."

"No. She can't leave. What about the ball?" Trudy asks.

"I don't think she's coming to the ball, Trudy."

"I'll go talk to her," she says and moves to scoot around us.

Willa reaches out and grasps her hand. "Don't. I think you should wait. She's not going to hear anything you have to say right now."

Trudy looks up the stairway. “I caused this. I was just trying to talk to her.”

“Let me take you to Mom’s, Aunt Trudy. You can get a good night’s sleep and talk to her in the morning.”

“What if she’s gone come morning?” she asks.

“Then, you’ll fly to Vegas to see her. You’re her mom. She won’t stay upset with you long.”

She nods. “Okay.”

Keller leads her out to his truck.

“I hate this. I don’t know if I should go talk to her or leave her alone,” Willa says.

“She’s gonna do what she wants to do. I wouldn’t worry over it,” I tell her.

She looks at me. “I liked having her around.”

“So did I,” I say.

“This sucks.”

It does.

“I’m going to go. Lock up behind me.”

She grins. “I don’t think everyone has made it in from the market yet, Bran.”

“So, lock it in between arrivals,” I say.

“Okay, if it will make you feel better,” she agrees.



Instead of going home, I end up at the studio. I spend the night there, finishing up something I have been working on this past week.

Working with my hands helps me navigate my emotions. It always has. When I was a ragey teenager, it was as if I could open myself up and bleed onto a blank canvas.

It calms and centers me.

By the time sunlight begins to peek around the mountaintops and flow into the windows, acceptance has settled into my soul.

I scribble out a quick note and drop it into the box I have packed and ready to deliver.

I leave the wrapped package on the steps of the old house and head home to get some sleep.



Chapter Twenty-Six

Hannah

I wake up, feeling particularly stupid for the way I acted—or rather, overreacted last night.

Mara texted me in the middle of the night to let me know that she was able to get me on a flight from Boise to Vegas this afternoon.

It's for the best. Honestly, the longer I stayed, the harder it was going to be to leave at the end of the month anyway.

I call Uncle Bob and ask if he would please give me a ride to the airport.

He says he'll pick me up in thirty minutes, and I take my bag and make my way downstairs.

Mom, Aunt Trixie, Alice, Norah, and Willa are all in the kitchen, waiting for me to appear.

“Good morning,” Willa greets.

“Look, guys, I’m sorry. I’m sorry I acted like a fool last night, and I’m sorry I’m cutting out before Christmas.”

Willa picks up a box from the island and brings it to me.

I tug at the bow and open the top.

Tucked inside is the emerald-green gown I purchased for the ball.

I sigh.

Then, I close the box and set it on the kitchen table.

“I can’t believe you’re going to miss it. After all the work and planning we did,” Willa says.

I bring my eyes to her. “It’s going to be magical. Every detail has been covered. I know it’s going to go off without a hitch. Send me lots of photos.”

She nods.

“Can you return that to Lydia for me? I know it can’t be refunded because she did alterations. Just tell her to try to resell it or use it as a sample.”

“Sure,” Norah says, and then she picks up another box and hands it off to me.

“What’s this one?” I ask.

“We have no idea. It was left on the stoop, and it has your name on it,” she says.

The box is much heavier than the dress box, so I set it down and proceed to open it.

I reach inside and pull out a beautiful snow globe. I wind the music box, and it starts to play “All I Want for Christmas Is You.” Inside is a hand-carved tree house, a slice of pizza, and a box of popcorn. I pick it up and shake it and watch as the snow swirls.

“What are those?” Norah asks as she watches over my shoulder.

“Mistletoe berries,” I say.

Willa walks over and picks up a slip of paper from the floor. “This fell out,” she says as she hands it to me.

I unfold it and read the handwritten note.

Hannah,

I read somewhere that according to a study conducted by a neurologist at Syracuse University, it only takes one-fifth of a second to fall in love. The rest of the time before we admit it to ourselves is just our brains in denial, trying to fight it.

I don't know if the study is accurate or not. All I know is that it took me exactly thirty-three kisses under the mistletoe to fall in love with you. I know that because I saved every single one.

Bran

“Awwww,” Norah says, and I turn to look at her. “Sorry, I totally read it over your shoulder. That’s who I am.”

I giggle. “It’s okay.”

“You’re not going to ask me to return that too, are you?” she asks.

I shake my head.

“Does that mean you’re going to stay?”

I look from her to each of them.

“It’s okay to change your mind, sweetheart,” Mom says.

“I want to stay,” I cry.

She rushes over to embrace me. “Yay!” she shouts. “Come on. Let’s get you unpacked.”

“I have to do something first,” I tell her.

I take my phone and walk out to the porch, and I dial Mara’s number.

“Hannah, tell me you are en route to the airport.”

“I’m not.”

She sighs. “I was afraid of that.”

“I’m really sorry, Mara. But I’ve decided to stay here and finish this vacation after all.”

“Fine. Just stay and come back to us, operating at a hundred percent, please.”

I pause.

“You are coming back eventually, aren’t you?” she asks.

It’s time to be brave.

“I don’t think I am.”

“You’ve proved your point, Hannah. This company can’t survive without you. I can’t. You’re the best planner I’ve got. If you come home, we’ll discuss the details of your new position. The promotion is yours,” she announces.

I don’t say anything.

“As well as a substantial salary increase,” she adds.

“That’s what I’ve been waiting to hear,” I whisper.

“Excuse me? Is that a yes?” she asks.

“Thank you for the very generous offer, but I think I’m ready for my own adventure.”

“I can throw in an annual bonus,” she pleads.

“Mara,” I cut her off.

“You’ve made up your mind, haven’t you?”

“Yes. I’ll call you back next week, and we’ll talk about things,” I offer.

“Okay. Merry Christmas, Hannah,” she says, defeated.

“Merry Christmas to you too.”

She ends the call, and I turn my phone off.

I sit on the first step and try to clear my thoughts. A month ago, I knew exactly what I wanted and where I wanted to be, but that’s changed. It’s time to regroup and deal with my feelings because the world is never going to be exactly what I envisioned it to be. Life doesn’t work that way.

What's gotten into you, Hannah?

Lake Mistletoe. Lake Mistletoe has gotten into me.

Uncle Bob comes from the side of the house and sits down beside me.

"I'm not going to the airport, Uncle Bob," I say.

"I know. Trixie already told me."

"I'm sorry I called you out here for nothing," I say.

He wraps an arm around my shoulders and tucks me into his side. "I'd have been here eventually anyway. I always end up here. But here isn't a bad place to be."

"I blew it big time. Maybe I'm having a midlife crisis," I tell him.

"You're not old enough to have a midlife crisis."

"When can I have one?" I ask.

"In about fifteen years, give or take."

"Yay, something to look forward to," I deadpan, and I can feel the chuckle building up in his chest.

"Get it all out," he encourages.

"I'm not the same person I was when I left Vegas and came here," I confess.

"What's changed?"

"It's hard to put into words. I tried all night. I just feel different on the inside."

"Different isn't a bad thing. Different could signify a new adventure. Instead of fighting it, why don't you give embracing it a try and see how it turns out?"

"Thanks, Uncle Bob."

He kisses the top of my head.

"You're by far my favorite niece," he says.

"I'm your only niece."

“That has no bearing on the fact that you’re my favorite,”
he assures me.



Chapter Twenty-Seven

Bran

When I walk into the decorated garden, the sight takes my breath away.

A pianist is playing Christmas music as the guests mingle in their best black-tie attire.

“Don’t forget to grab a ticket for the door prizes, Bran.”

I look to the left to see Hoyt standing with a roll of tickets in his hand. He tears one off and hands it to me and drops its twin into a large black bucket.

“Thank you.”

“Good luck,” he calls out as I make my way deeper into the space.

A dance floor rests at the edge of the gazebo, which holds a podium and microphone. Tables are draped in white cloth with illuminated lanterns in the center, flowers and greenery sprinkled around them. A buffet is set up in front of the stone fountain to the right. The high-vaulted glass ceiling above twinkles with string lighting.

I make my way over to the beverage cart beside the buffet and order myself a whiskey cocktail, and then I head into the crowd in search of Keller and Sammy.

I spot Willa and Norah across the dance floor, talking to the mayor's wife while sipping from flutes of champagne.

"Wow, ladies. It should be illegal to look that good," I say to the three of them as I approach.

"You clean up pretty well yourself there, Prince," Norah offers.

I do a spin in my spiffy tuxedo, which I rented from Lydia's shop.

"Very nice," Norah says.

"This place turned out insane, Willa."

"I agree; it's extraordinary. It's just what the town needed," Hoyt says as he joins us and wraps an arm around his stunning wife.

"It wasn't me. It was all because of Hannah," Willa says.

"That's what we really need here in Lake Mistletoe," Norah says.

"What?" I ask.

"Our very own Hannah."

I don't respond. I just drain my glass.

"You really love her, don't you?" Norah asks me.

"Pretty much since the moment I laid eyes on her through that window," I admit, "but she'd never leave her big-time job in Vegas to move here."

"Did you ask her to?" Willa asks.

“No. I couldn’t ask that of her. Besides, this town would never have enough business to make it worth her while.”

“Maybe we have more to offer her than just a job,” Norah says.

I feel a tap on my shoulder and turn to see Hannah standing there, looking like an angel in a green dress.

“Can I help you?” I ask her.

“Maybe. Do you dance?”

“Not very well,” I say.

“Why does every man say that?”

“Because it’s true.”

“How about you pretend to spin me around the dance floor and just listen?” she suggests.

I step to her and place a hand on her hip and pull her close. As the pianist starts a new song, we begin to move round the outer edge of the floor.

“In the last few weeks, my life has been turned inside out. Everything I ever wanted was offered to me, but everything I never knew I wanted crept in, and I’ve been the happiest I’ve ever been because of this inn, this town, and especially you,” she says.

“Me?”

“Yes. You’re the real Christmas miracle I was looking for.”

“You were looking for me, huh?”

She nods. “Somehow, you knew exactly what I needed. You brought out parts of me that I had buried so deep. I don’t want to lose it again.”

“Lose what?” I ask.

“Hope. Just being here, I discovered the person I want to be. The person I’m already becoming.”

“And who’s that?”

“Someone who takes the time to slow down and enjoy the smell of gingerbread and appreciate the magic of mistletoe.”

“And love?” I inquire.

“Yeah, someone who slows down and enjoys being in love too. I just need to know what you’re looking for.”

“That’s simple. Someone who is happy to see me come in the door at night and is sad to see me walk out of it in the morning,” I say.

“Me too. So, what do you say? You want to give this a chance with me?” she asks.

“Absolutely,” I say.

Tears fill her eyes, and she leaps into my arms. I catch her and spin her around.

“Yes!” Norah shouts, and she and Willa both run out onto the dance floor and wrap their arms around us.

“It’s a love sandwich,” Norah exclaims.

Hoyt takes the stage and taps the microphone to get the partygoers’ attention.

“Oh boy, here we go,” I say.

“What?” Hannah asks.

I grin down at her. “Just watch. This night keeps getting better and better.”

“Hello, everyone. On behalf of the rest of the town council, I’d like to say thank you for joining us this evening for Lake Mistletoe’s first annual Holly Ball, benefiting the town’s conservation fund. I hope everyone is enjoying themselves. Our hosts have certainly outdone themselves, and we are very grateful for their hospitality.” He pauses while the crowd gives a round of applause. “I’ve been informed that the big guy from the North Pole has arrived to help us spread a little cheer tonight. Santa, will you please join me up here to pass out the door prizes to our winners? So, everyone, please get your tickets out.”

Keller steps out onto the gazebo, dressed as jolly old Saint Nick, toting a large bag stuffed with packages. He waves to everyone as he joins Hoyt.

“The floor is yours, Santa,” Hoyt says as he steps back.

“Are you guys ready?”

A symphony of yeses fills the air as he reaches into the basket sitting on the podium. He plucks a ticket and starts to read the numbers but stops short.

“Wait. We’re missing something. Santa needs a Mrs. Claus. Where’s Willa?” he says into the microphone as his eyes scan the crowd.

“Here she is,” I call out as I point down at Willa, who is still standing beside us.

“Come up here and help me do this?” he beckons her.

She makes her way to the gazebo, and Hoyt walks over and helps her up to stand with Keller.

“Hey, everyone,” she says into the mic and waves. “You want me to draw the ticket or announce the number?” she asks him.

“Hmm,” he says. “Switch places with me.”

She shakes her head at his odd request, but she walks around him. When she turns back around, Keller is on bended knee, holding a little blue box.

She gasps when she sees him.

“What’s happening?” she asks, her voice trembling.

Norah and Hannah are immediately reduced to puddles, and I feed an arm around the both of them.

“I’m not good with words. But I mean all the things, and I feel all the things. With everything in me, I want you to be my wife.”

He flips the box open to show her the sparkling rock within.

“Will you marry me?” he asks.

She doesn't answer; she just leaps down into his lap and starts kissing his face off.

"Was that a yes or what?" I yell.

"Yes, yes, yes," she cries through tears, and Keller slips the ring onto her finger.

Hoyt approaches them and offers his congratulations, and then he steps to the microphone.

"I guess I'm going to be announcing those door prizes after all. Everyone, ready for the first number?"



"I can't believe Hannah and Bran made it official and Keller and Willa got engaged, all on the same night," Norah says as we all sit around a table, eating a delicious meal. "You all can thank me with something pretty under the Christmas tree this year," she states.

"Thank you?" Keller repeats.

"Yes, thank me. The only reason you and Willa are together is because I talked her out of selling the inn, and the only reason Bran and Hannah even met is because of Willa inviting her to come visit at my wedding."

"That's a stretch, sis," Keller quips.

"It is not. It's the truth, and you all owe me."

"What happened with your job?" I ask Hannah.

"I got the promotion," she says.

"You did?"

"Hell yeah. I deserved it, and Mara finally realized it."

"But you're here. Did you turn it down?"

"I did. I got a better offer, and I decided having a small part in something wonderful is better than having a big part in something mediocre."

“What offer?” I ask.

Willa says, “I decided I am not cut out to be an event planner. I was completely overwhelmed. I’m an innkeeper. I love being an innkeeper. I’m happy I own this space, but I’d rather have someone else handle all the details.”

“So, you two are going into business together?” I ask.

“Not exactly. I’m starting my own business, and Willa and Norah here are my first two official vendors. Now, I just have to find somewhere to live. Rent an office space and pick a name and branding and go clear out my apartment,” I explain.

“You could always move into my place,” Keller says.

“Are you offering to take me on as a roommate, Keller Harris?” she asks him.

He shakes his head. “Nope. As much fun as that sounds, I think I’m gonna be moving in with Willa.”

“Are you sure? Wouldn’t the two of you rather live in your house?”

“We talked about it, and it makes sense for us to live closer to the inn. Willa wants to be on-site for anything that comes up with guests. Besides, she just remodeled the owner’s cottage, and it’s exactly what she wants. So, my place is all yours, but you’ll have to redo the old bachelor pad.”

“I don’t know what to say,” she cries.

“Say yes. It was Grandpa’s house, and it just makes sense for it to stay in the family. Plus, it has the workshop in the back that can be converted into offices. You can make it into your new event planning company.”

“It would be perfect,” Willa encourages.

“Like it’s meant to be. That’s the magic of Lake Mistletoe. Everyone ends up smitten with this place,” Norah says.

“That’s it!” Hannah gasps.

“That’s what?” Willa asks.

“Smitten in Lake Mistletoe Event Services—that’s the new name.”

“Oh, I like it,” Willa states.

“Let’s toast to new beginnings,” Norah shouts.

We all bring our glasses in and clink.

Hannah lays her head on my shoulder. “Merry Christmas, Bran.”

“Merry Christmas, Hannah.”

Sometimes, Christmas wishes do come true.



Epilogue

Hannah

Four Months Later

I stand back and watch as the groom takes his bride into his arms for their first dance.

It's fitting that Willa and Keller's big day is the very first wedding by Smitten in Lake Mistletoe Events. A small intimate affair bursting with joy and love.

A hand settles on my shoulder, and I look over it to see my mother. Her eyes fill with tears as she looks from the carefree couple to me.

"You did an amazing job, sweetheart. Everything is perfect," she says.

I turn to face her.

“Thanks, Mom.”

She tugs me in for a tight hug.

“You look so beautiful.”

“And happy. I’m so happy,” I mummer.

She leans back and brings a hand to my cheek.

“I can see that.”

A high pitch squeal brings our attention to the stage.

Bran stands front and center. He taps on the microphone as he clears his throat.

“Hi, everyone. It’s time for me to roast, I mean toast, the groom.”

He mesmerizes the entire audience as he gives his witty yet heartfelt best man’s toast.

“That man is a living, breathing chef’s kiss,” I muse.

Mom’s amused eyes come to me.

“Who are you and what have you done with my daughter?”

“I set her free,” I tell her.

The crowd applauds, and Bran bows dramatically before hopping off the platform and making his way to us. He kisses Mom’s cheek before she rushes off to find Aunt Trudy.

Taking my hand, he spins me and wraps his arms around me from behind.

“Time to take off your planner hat and put on your bridesmaid hat and enjoy the rest of the evening,” he says.

There was a time when I would have balked at the idea, but I’m learning to let go and live in the moment.

“I just want to make sure everything goes perfectly with the cake cutting and then I’m all yours,” I tell him.

“Close your eyes,” he whispers in my ear.

“Why?” I ask.

“Do you trust me?”

“No, not really,” I tease.

“Humor me,” he insists.

I close my eyes and wait as he releases me and steps around so that he faces me.

“Okay, you can open them.”

I blink as my eyes focus on his handsome face. Then he lifts his chin, guiding my gaze above us. He has a sprig of mistletoe dangling from his fingertips.

“Where did you get mistletoe in April?” I ask.

“I have connections.”

I bear up on the tip of my toes and wrap my arms around his neck.

“So where do you stand on this Happy Ever After issue now?” he asks.

“I can settle for Happy Right Now as long as it’s every day for the rest of our lives,” I answer.

“So, you’re glad you stayed?”

“Pretty glad.”

“What can I do to change that to really glad?” he asks.

“Kiss me.”

He brings his mouth to mine and takes it in a hard, deep kiss. When he releases my lips, he looks me in the eye.

“I love you, Brady.”

“I love you, too, Bran.”

I met a guy in a Christmas-themed town and fell completely in love with him. How cliché is that?

The End

Preview of

Life
after
Wife



A BALSAM RIDGE
NOVEL

A M B E R K E L L Y



prologue

Taeli

Seventeen Years Ago

I start snatching my clothes from the closet, flinging them inside the suitcase on my bed, when a soft knock sounds on my bedroom door.

“Taeli, sweetheart, can I come in?” Daddy asks.

I swipe at the tears on my cheeks and walk over to unlock and open the door.

His eyes land on the suitcase, and he sighs.

“You’re really leaving?” he asks.

I nod. “Damon is on his way to pick me up. We’re flying to Chicago in the morning.”

“I wish you’d wait until the end of the summer.”

“Why? So Mom can spend the next thirty days telling me what a disappointment I am?”

“She didn’t mean any of that. She’s just angry,” he says.

“It sure sounded like she meant it. I’m sorry I’m not the perfect daughter, but this is my life.”

“Your mother doesn’t want to see you throw away the opportunities you’ve been given or see your talents go to waste. We’re not saying to break up with the boy. We’re just asking you to wait. Give it another year and see how you feel then.”

“I don’t want to wait a year. He was accepted into Northwestern, and I’m going with him.”

“Are you sure this is what you want?” he asks.

“I love him, Daddy.”

He sits down on the foot of my bed and pats the spot beside him.

I sit and lay my head on his shoulder.

“Love, huh? I know better than to argue with a woman in love. I guess that settles it.”

“It does for me. He makes me happy. Why can’t Mom be happy for me?”

“You and your mother are more alike than you realize, kiddo. You’re both lead by your heart. That’s why you two butt heads so often.”

“Alike? More like complete opposites,” I disagree.

He chuckles.

“You’re both hard-headed as well.”

I shrug.

“Maybe a little.”

“Promise me one thing, Taeli. Someday, you’re gonna want to come home, but your pride is going to get in the way, and you’re gonna think it’s too late. When that happens, you come home anyway because it’ll never be too late.”

“I promise.”



Chapter one

Taeli

Present Day

I glance into the rearview mirror to see that my twelve-year-old son is still laser-focused on the tablet in his hand. He has had his earbuds in and a game in progress since we crossed the Illinois state line, headed for my home state of Tennessee. That's approximately eight hours and nearly five hundred seventy miles without one word from him other than to ask for a bathroom break and a Gatorade.

I know that picking up our lives and moving to my hometown of Balsam Ridge wasn't exactly on his agenda for the summer. He planned to attend a soccer camp with his best friends to hone his skills for next year's middle school tryouts. He wanted to swim at the community pool with our neighbors. He expected it to be a normal school break, like all the ones that had come before.

Yeah, well, so did I, kid.

I was supposed to head up the neighborhood's Fourth of July planning committee. I intended to start tennis lessons at the club to improve my serve. I wanted to have mimosa brunches with friends and to take a family vacation to Cabo.

Never in my wildest dreams did I fathom returning to the small mountain town where I had grown up, but when the twenty-four-year-old medical assistant to your husband of sixteen years knocks on your door one rainy Thursday afternoon to inform you that she is pregnant with his child, you tend to do unfathomable things.

Damon is an internal medicine physician in private practice in Chicago. We met at the University of Tennessee during my freshman year. He was a senior and had been accepted into the medical school program at Northwestern. After a brief but passionate courtship, I fell madly in love and decided to drop out of school, leaving my full-ride athletic scholarship behind and following him to Chicago. We married the following spring. He went on to medical school, and I went to work as an office administrator for a machine tool manufacturing firm. I also worked nights to support us, making collection calls for a cellular company, while Damon spent his time, including nights and weekends, studying and doing his clinical rotations.

We were busy humans, ships passing in the night but bumping into one another enough to create another tiny human and drag him into the chaotic fray.

Caleb was born between Damon's graduation from medical school and his first year of residency. It wasn't easy—juggling my two jobs, the residency, and parenthood—but we made it work. It was a delicate balance that got a little easier once Damon finished his residency, and with the financial backing of his parents and a substantial business loan, we opened Lowder Family Medicine in Naperville.

I brought my office manager skills to the family business, and Damon was the talent. Caleb was four years old when the practice opened, and he spent many hours entertaining himself under the desk on my office floor while I worked.

By the time Caleb started third grade and had a dozen commitments, including baseball and soccer practices and games, the business was out of the red, and we decided to hire an administrative manager so that I could be a stay-at-home mom. My reward for all the years of sacrifice.

It was glorious. I had worked so hard, for so long so that Damon could open his own practice, and all that work was finally paying off. We built our dream home in our dream neighborhood. I made mom friends through PTA and at the community pool. We joined the local country club, and I became a lady who lunched with other ladies while our husbands were at work and our kids were at school. My job became keeping a magazine spread-worthy home, being a social director for an eight-year-old, playing tennis, practicing yoga, going to Botox parties, and keeping myself in top physical shape for my husband. I was damn good at it too.

At the time, when Caleb started middle school, we had a seamless routine, living in our happy suburban bubble. At least, I thought so. I was living with blinders on. I stopped going to the office for noonday kisses and to say hello to the staff. I stopped paying attention to who was hired and fired. I no longer questioned Damon's extra-long hours at the office and when he stopped taking half-days off on Fridays. I wasn't alarmed at the number of after-hours emergencies that had to be handled in the middle of the night. I got comfortable and became numb to it all.

I was living in a beautiful house of cards until that twenty-four-year-old with her cheap hair extensions and enhanced figure kicked it over one hot, humid May afternoon, and it all came tumbling down.

Damon didn't even try to deny it. I called his cell while she was still standing at my front door and screamed the allegations at him. He politely asked if we could discuss the "issue" when he got home.

The issue? Really?

Ivy, the homewrecker, was as composed and confident as could be when she blew my bubble apart. She was non-

apologetic as she professed her love for my husband and explained her intention to keep his love child.

Love.

As if either of them knew what that word meant.

I shut the door in the tramp's face, went upstairs, and packed a bag for me and a bag for Caleb. I picked him up from school. I checked us into a deluxe suite at The Peninsula Chicago, using Damon's black card, and I turned off my cell phone.

It took him two days to track us down and another two days to talk me into returning home. His mother was there to watch Caleb while we discussed things, but I was fairly sure he'd called her to be a referee or a witness should I stab him in the neck.

I tried to stay calm. I kept telling myself that Damon loved me and it all had to be a misunderstanding. Ivy was probably some tart who was looking for a windfall. A simple paternity test would clear up this entire matter.

By the time my mother-in-law had rounded Caleb up in her car to take him for pizza, I was as cool as a cucumber. Damon poured us a glass of wine, and we sat down in the living room on the exquisite Ambella sofa that I had special-ordered in Venetian ivory, which had just been delivered the week before. I'd planned and invited all our friends to a dinner party the following weekend to show off the new statement piece of furniture. That was before my husband's playmate visited me.

"I'm glad you came back."

"Tell me it isn't true. That you didn't throw away sixteen years of marriage for a romp with your assistant. Tell me she made it all up and you'll fire her and we can go on with our lives."

"I, um ..."

"Oh my God, Damon. You didn't!"

“I didn’t mean for it to happen. It was an accident.”

I carefully set my wineglass down on the coaster and slapped him as hard as I could across his cheek.

“You cheating asshole,” I screeched.

He grabbed my hand before I reared back again.

“Stop it. You’re being ridiculous.”

“I’m being ridiculous? How do you accidentally sleep with another woman? Did you trip in the office after an emergency call, fall on top of her, and your penis slipped out of your scrubs and into her vagina?”

“Of course not. I messed up. I made a mistake.”

“A mistake. Oh, silly me. A mistake. That’s no big deal. Except for the oopsie you left behind in her uterus.”

He sighed, and his head fell into his hands. “She said she was protected.”

“And you believed her? You’re a doctor, for fuck’s sake. How many times have you told a young man to make sure he protects himself?”

“I know. It was stupid. But you do stupid things when you’re in love.”

“Love?!”

He brought his eyes to mine.

“I thought it was an accident, a mistake?”

“It was. I didn’t mean to fall for someone else.”

I stood and started walking back toward the kitchen island. All of a sudden, I was dizzy, and I felt like I might throw up. I was angry at his indiscretion. I expected him to deny it or cry and beg for forgiveness—not profess his love for another woman.

He stood and reached for me, and I swatted at his hands.

Pain slid down my spine as reality sunk in.

“Get out!” I cried.

“Taeli.”

“I said, get out!” I screamed.

“We have to talk about this.”

“No. I don’t feel like talking. I want you to leave.”

He raised his hands in surrender. “That’s fine. I’ll go. For now.”

A horn blows from the car behind me and shakes me from my memory. I give him a curt wave and gun it through the traffic light that apparently turned green while I was reminiscing.

“Mom!”

Caleb’s irritated voice comes from the backseat, and I look in the mirror to see him scowling at me.

“Sorry, buddy.”

“Are we close?” he asks.

I nod toward the sign up ahead that reads, *Welcome to Balsam Ridge. One thousand two hundred fifty-seven smiling faces and one old grump.*

His eyes skim the road sign.

“Is there really an old grump?” he asks.

“Oh, yeah, and you’ll know when you meet him,” I answer, hoping to get a smile or a grin or even a grunt from him.

He just rolls his eyes and looks back down at his monitor.

Needless to say, I’m not winning any Mom of the Year prizes anytime soon. My kid hates me. Not his father. Me.

I don’t blame him. I’m the one who ripped him from his home and everyone he knew and fled to the hills once word got out about Damon and Ivy.

You see, in Naperville, it’s all about who you know and what you have. Girlfriends might have your back at brunch

when you complain about your husband, but it's a different story when shit really and truly hits the fan. And Dr. Damon Lowder is more important to remain friends with than his cheated-on and dumped wife. Shunned. That's me. Poor, pitiful, shunned Taeli. I had to escape. Damon can have our ex-dream home, our ex-friends, and our ex-life. To hell with them all.

So, here we are, ten miles from my mother's house. The home where my brother, Gene, and I grew up. The place I couldn't wait to leave in the rearview mirror the second I graduated high school.

Fuck me.

The sun starts its descent behind the mountain as we turn onto the gravel road that winds up to the old farmhouse.

The road is narrow, the climb is steep, and there's not a streetlight or guardrail in sight.

I throw the Volvo XC90 into four-wheel drive, and rocks ricochet off the tires and ping against the undercarriage.

Caleb removes his earbuds and tosses his tablet across the seat.

"What's wrong, buddy?" I ask.

"There's no reception," he says as he looks out the window and his eyes go wide.

"Pretty, isn't it?" I ask as he takes in the view.

"We're going to fall down the mountain," he says with a tremor in his voice.

"No, we aren't. Your momma can drive these mountain roads with her eyes closed. This is my old stomping ground. I learned how to drive a stick on this very gravel."

"A stick?"

"Yep, a manual stick shift truck with no automatic steering. It was a beast. My daddy made me stop and start every half-mile straight up the mountain. I wore the clutch out

on that old truck, but by the time I had to go take my driver's test, I could drive it as well as he could," I say with pride.

"Good job," he says, sarcastically raising his thumbs in the air.

This sweet child of mine.

We finally make it to the top at fifty-two hundred feet and turn into the open gate. I park in front of the house.

It looks the same as it did the day I left. A two-story robin's-egg-blue Colonial farmhouse with white trim. A wide-columned front porch with a large bay window from the dining room that overlooks the yard. Gone is the shingled roof from my childhood, and in its place is soft gray tin.

I take a deep breath as I turn off the ignition.

I haven't been back here since my father's funeral five years ago. I half-expected the place to be a dilapidated ruin, not the postcard picture-worthy scene before me.

"You ready, buddy?" I ask as I glance back at Caleb.

"I guess," he mumbles as he gathers his things.

We exit the vehicle as my mother, Leona Tilson, appears on the front porch, her face alight.

She is a sight in her long green kaftan. Her silver hair is held back from her face with a headband. I can hear her booming voice before a word leaves her mouth as she stretches out her arms.

Here goes nothing.

Acknowledgments

This year. What can I say about this year?

It did its best to outdo the one before it. For the first time ever, I found myself dreading the holidays, and anyone who knows me knows how much I LOVE Christmastime. Actually, I'm usually giddy from the first whisper of fall all the way through the new year.

Things are so different now. With all the loss of the past few years, it's been hard for me to wrap my head around what the holidays and my family's traditions would look like, going forward. Writing this book and diving back into the magical world of Lake Mistletoe was exactly what I needed. I needed Bran and Hannah and Keller and Willa and all the jolly residents and guests of Lake Mistletoe to remind me that life goes on. It might look different, but if I look hard enough, I can find the joy again. I will find it.

Don't take any of it for granted. Stop in the middle of the chaos—the exhaustion from baking and decorating and shopping and wrapping and traveling—to take a breath, look around at your loved ones, and enjoy being in the moment. The mess can wait to be cleaned. The tree can wait to be put away. Sit in your pajamas with your mom and your little ones and soak it all in. You only get a finite number of Christmas mornings with them. This could be the last. So, hug them a bit tighter. Celebrate a day or two longer. Take lots of pictures.

Pour all your love into the time you have. Be smitten with Christmas this year!

I have a lot of people to thank for getting me through this past year. My team has been phenomenal at holding me up and

helping me push through each release with my uncertain and ever-changing schedule.

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My & girls, my hens, my cousins, and all of you, the readers—You have been the village I needed to get me here. Sharing stories of hope and healing with you all is what I live for. I hope my stories have helped heal you, just as they helped me. Thank you for continuing to show up.

Last but not least, I want to thank my husband, David, and my puppies, George and Theo, for allowing Mom to be a hot mess most of the time. You guys are my world and my heart.

Here's to a better 2023.

Happy holidays to you all.

Other Books

Cross My Heart Duet

Both of Me

Both of Us

Poplar Falls

Rustic Hearts

Stone Hearts

Wicked Hearts

Fragile Hearts

Merry Hearts

Crazy Hearts

Knitted Hearts

Lake Mistletoe

The Balsam Ridge Series

Life After Wife

Fate After Fame

Rain After Fire

About the Author



Amber Kelly is a romance author that calls North Carolina home. She has been a avid reader from a young age and you could always find her with her nose in a book completely enthralled in an adventure. With the support of her husband and family, in 2018, she decided to finally give a voice to the stories in her head and her debut novel, *Both of Me* was born. You can connect with Amber on Facebook at [facebook.com/AuthorAmberKelly](https://www.facebook.com/AuthorAmberKelly), on IG @authoramberkelly, on Twitter @AuthorAmberKell or via her website www.authoramberkelly.com