

CATELYN MEADOWS

SNOWED IN

AT THE

*Event
Center*



SNOWED IN FOR CHRISTMAS CLEAN ROMANCE SERIES

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A SNOWED IN FOR CHRISTMAS CLEAN
ROMANCE



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PROLOGUE



The kitchen's stifling heat robed Mason with sweat. He couldn't step outside to cool off, though, not until he got the blend of cream cheese, bacon, and feta cheese just right. He had never delivered anything less than perfect to any of the inn's guests in the two years he'd worked here. Six guests were coming to one of his coveted personal tastings at Harper's Inn that night.

The buttery squares encasing the spinach puff pastries were setting perfectly, leaving a forked opening for those eating them to enjoy the colors before indulging. Mason inspected everything before opening the oven door and carefully sliding the pan into the oven.

Releasing an exhale and the tension built up in his back, he wiped his hands on his apron and smiled at Logan, his junior chef.

"Got them in?"

"Got them," Mason confirmed. "How is the flatbread coming?"

"Looking good," Logan said, gesturing to the bowl whose contents he'd finished stirring. "I'll have it in the oven as soon as I roll it out."

Mason checked the list to verify that everything they needed for the rest of the day was taken care of. He spent his afternoons in the kitchen most days, and today was no different. He had at least two tastings scheduled later. During these tastings, guests could meet with him one-on-one while

they enjoyed the delicacies he and his team prepared. They could ask him any questions, which would be a superb end to the evening.

While they served gourmet food during every meal, it was these tastings—as well as the inn’s dinners—that really got the renown. And Mason took pride in ensuring everything was as mouthwatering as possible.

Despite the music Mason had playing on his phone, a tinkling melody overrode every other sound in the kitchen’s stifling heat. Time stilled. He couldn’t be sure of what he thought he heard. Mason reached back to undo the ties on his apron. Distracted, moving in a daze, he pushed through the kitchen’s swinging doors.

Logan had stepped out; the large dining room was empty. Wide windows to the left revealed the prominent, snowy mountainside and the trees surrounding it. Mason moved in a stupor. Curiosity dangled a compelling carrot before him, luring him forward without a thought.

The music grew louder. Mason followed its tinkling taunt, passing the hallway that would lead to the inn’s spa addition, as well as the hall where Junie and her mom, Meg, lived. Mind trained on the hypnotic music creating a wafting trance over him, he moseyed to the living room.

Sound serenaded from the old, antique radio on the table directly across from the fireplace. It was comprised of strings and winds, the kind of old orchestration that built up to the opening of old movies. Other things accompanied the radio where it stood—teacups and old books—but Mason wasn’t the only one who’d come in to hear the melody play.

Junie Harper had an attractive face with wide brown eyes and freckles. Her attention was pinned to the same place as Mason’s: the radio.

He wasn’t sure why, but he was lured by the desire to stand closer to her. To place his hand on hers. Without thinking, Mason gave in. He wove his fingers into hers, and she lifted her face to his.

“The radio is playing,” he said.

“I never thought I’d hear it.” Wonder sparked off the gold flecks circling her toffee-brown eyes. Junie had always been beautiful, but now? She was enchanting here—in the living room—encased in the heat from the fire and the magic of the moment.

Words interrupted the song’s orchestration: “On the first day of Christmas, my true love gave to me: a partridge in a pear tree.”

The interlude faded. The music ceased, and with it, the cloud that shrouded Mason’s mind lifted. The desire that had flooded him was replaced with confusion. A similar shift overtook Junie’s expression, but she peered at him with curiosity.

“It’s you,” she said in a breath and stared at him as though all her dreams were about to come true.

He frowned. Another glance at their hands, and he separated his fingers from hers and took a step back. “What’s me?”

Redness splotched Junie’s cheeks. She shook herself and covered her cheeks with her hands. “Did I just say that?”

Mason frowned from her to the radio and back. A grim warning slid into the space behind his sternum. Having worked at Harper’s Inn for the last few years, he knew full well the superstition that shrouded this particular radio and exactly what Junie might expect to happen. The lore claimed that the radio was a matchmaker. That those who heard the mesmerizing songs play from its base would fall in love.

According to the stories she told every Christmas, previous couples who’d heard the radio play almost always ended up marrying before long.

He liked Junie, sure. She was cute and fun to talk to. Since she’d stepped into the manager position and taken over many of the duties Meg used to handle, he’d spent more time with her than he had when he first started cooking here. But *marrying* Junie?

Mason couldn't marry anyone. He *wouldn't* marry anyone.

"You don't think..." he began.

He couldn't let her carry on with the delusion that was sure to come. Junie bought into the stories just as much as the guests who flocked here every year to hear them did.

She ran a hand over her brown curls. "You mean you and me? The radio?" She fluttered her lips and waved her hand. "No way."

Her proclamation was too forced, too false. Considering how she'd said, "It's you," moments before, Mason saw right through her.

She bought it. She figured the radio had selected the two of them to be soul mates and would wait any day for his marriage proposal.

Well.

Sympathy stroked through him. Junie really was one of the sweetest people. She was spunky, lighthearted, and good-natured; the last thing he wanted was to hurt her. He was here at the inn because they paid well, and he'd garnered the title of top chef. Since working here, he'd been featured on the Food Station channel, which only served to bring more business to the inn, spreading its tale about Santa Claus himself visiting and depositing his own personal radio on the premises.

Mason wasn't sure he believed the stories surrounding the radio. Even if he did believe it had the magical ability to force people to develop feelings for one another, he couldn't allow himself to get close to anyone. Not after what had happened with Katy, the last woman he'd had a relationship with.

The other reason he couldn't let himself be hoodwinked into this had to do with his father. Dad was controlling. He interfered in Mason's life much more than Mason cared for. Forcing his opinions on Mason's life was bad enough. Mason didn't need a magic radio telling him what to do and who to love.

"I'd better get back to the kitchen," he said, not wanting to let Junie live in the radio's delusion any longer.

Mason did his best to avoid Junie the next day. But around the same time, as he was preparing the spread for the personal tasting, the music played again. And he found himself standing with Junie in front of the radio while “The second day of Christmas” pealed through. They were holding hands again. Junie gave a little chuckle, tucked her hands behind her ears, and chewed her lip.

“Weird,” Mason said, releasing her as soon as the music ended.

“Yeah.”

The third day was no coincidence. Nor the fourth, which was the most frustrating because he burned the spinach puffs. He’d had to start over from scratch and had barely had them ready for the tasting that night.

Logan had asked what was going on, and Mason told him, “If I wander out of the kitchen like a lost fool tomorrow, don’t let me leave.”

The attempt to avoid being pulled in by the radio didn’t work. The snow had started then, closing the pass down to West Hills, so Mason had been left without an option but to sleep in one of the old family rooms in the inn.

He’d overheard Junie and Boone arguing about the radio as well. About the meddling the radio was doing in Boone’s interactions with one of the guests—a woman named Grace. At that point, Mason determined to do everything he could to avoid the radio’s magical pull. He refused to let anything control his life.

The radio played in the morning rather than the evening, throwing him off yet again. Mason shook himself free to find himself in front of the radio, embracing Junie rather than simply holding her hand. Her arms were around him. His were around her.

And it felt—good.

Color flooded her cheeks, but she didn’t pull away. Neither did Mason. In fact, he couldn’t help but notice the fullness and shape of her lips and just how good her curves felt beneath his

hands. He'd never seen Junie in this way before. She was plucky and attractive—but she was a *friend*. Nothing more.

With conscious effort, he extricated himself and headed for the kitchen, the bathroom, anywhere he could have some space to think for a moment.

“What am I doing?” he'd muttered to the sink.

He needed to get prepped for the inn's annual bonfire. It was Mason's job to offer a spread for the guests to enjoy around the fire. He needed to concentrate on that, not on finding Junie so he could hold her close again.

On the fifth day, Christmas Eve, he thought he'd made it through. But just before the guests collected for the sleigh ride to the bonfire, he found himself standing in the living room with his arms around Junie once more. She burrowed her face into his chest but said nothing. Mason didn't move away quite as quickly this time. This time, his curiosity got the better of him.

The truth was, he liked being close to her. He hadn't dated anyone in a long time, and being around her reminded him of the reasons people dated: closeness, embracings, having someone to talk to, to share moments just like this with. There was something reviving about being held—about having someone hold you in return. Desire flared low but heady within him: desire to keep her close to him, to talk to her about her day, to inhale the scent of vanilla in her hair.

Questions began to override his stubbornness. Would it really be so bad? To hold her like this? To get to know her?

To kiss her?

She lifted her head then. The sight of her pretty freckled face, of her inquisitive eyes, of her pink lips...

“What are you thinking right now?” she asked.

Mason peered at her mouth. His heart rate elevated. Heat spread through his body, and his hands slid up her spine. The music had stopped playing, yet he still felt drawn to her this time. Could it be possible?

“I’m thinking I don’t know what’s going on,” he said truthfully.

Her arms tightened around him. “Me neither.”

Yes, it felt good to hold her. Eventually, they parted, his mind in a whirl of confusion. Was this real? He hadn’t wanted to immediately flee. He hadn’t felt any kind of repulsion. In fact, if anything, he’d entertained the idea of taking things farther.

Christmas Day, he found himself eagerly waiting for the music to play, if only to see what might happen. Sure enough, on the sixth day, six pipers piped, and Mason ran to the living room, where Junie leaped into his arms.

He did it then. Mason lowered his mouth and captured hers. His arms encompassed her, and he tasted the sweetness of her lips while disbelief coursed through him. Never in a million years had he considered anything more with Junie Harper than friendly passing glances or the occasional banter over meal plans for the inn. Yet, this kiss? The feel of her mouth and her softness in his arms unraveled him.

The kiss slowed, and he was awlirl, caught in the gust of their shared connection. His heart thrummed in his chest, pounding blood through his veins with so much life he swam with it.

She pulled away and smiled at him. Quivering, overwhelmed, Mason was ready to let the strange emotions dominate, to dip in for another kiss and for whatever would come along with it. Yet, the sight of Junie’s smile punctured him and allowed all of his previous doubts to cycle in.

What was he doing? This couldn’t be what she wanted. It wasn’t possible. He wasn’t looking to get married—not when his situation with his own family was so awful and complicated. Knowing how much Junie banked on the radio’s reputation, she probably *did* want marriage. He couldn’t offer her that.

Thoughts of the last woman he’d dated flooded in. He’d hurt her. He couldn’t hurt Junie in the same way, not someone

as sweet as she was, no matter how badly he wanted to kiss her again.

“Same time tomorrow?” she joked.

He stroked her lower lip, knowing it would be the last time he touched it. “I don’t know about this, Junie,” he said.

“What don’t you know?”

“It’s a fluke.”

She flinched. There. There was the hurt he was hoping to avoid.

A fraction of movement at a time, he retreated, letting her go and hoping she could read his withdrawal in his body language without him needing to say a word and hurt her even more. He pressed his lips into an apologetic grimace and turned his back on her, giving the radio a mental nudge to stay out of his business.

The day after Christmas, he wasn’t sure what to do if the radio played again, but he didn’t have to decide.

It never did.

Mason was relieved. He accepted its lack of sound and hoped Junie did too. It was a coincidence, after all. There was nothing between them. The kiss they’d shared had been nice but was definitely meant to be a one-time thing. Yes, it was for the best. Hopefully, Junie would accept as much.

He would make a terrible husband. Nothing between them could be allowed to happen again.

THREE YEARS LATER



Junie believed in Santa Claus.

To others at Christmastime, he was a jolly symbol of giving and goodness. People used Santa as a ruse to get their children to go to bed on Christmas Eve, inciting fear that Santa wouldn't bring their presents. Parents pretended to be Santa, and Junie wondered what the real St. Nick thought of that.

He wasn't just a figment of childish dreams or a nice poem to be read during the holidays. Santa Claus was as real to Junie as Jesus. Maybe that wasn't the best analogy since some people didn't believe in him, either, but she did. She believed in them both.

The attic of Harper's Inn was filled with dust, cobwebs, and boxes of memories. Mom had put some of this stuff up here; Grandma had put others. Some of it had been moved from Boone's cottage when he'd settled there eighteen or so years ago, and even more stuff had been brought over after he and Grace had gotten married.

Grace had determined to make the cottage their own rather than something Boone merely lived in. So she purchased furniture and gave it more of a French-country cottage look with antiques, white furniture and white porcelain accents that Junie found utterly charming. The place had been a bore before, the perfect hovel for a lonely widower to seclude himself. Now it felt like a home, which was perfect since they'd just had their first baby.

Junie inhaled the attic's musty smell. She was looking for something to spice up the annual bonfire. They had so many regular guests visiting for the holiday season. Some had complained that the bonfire needed something extra this year, and Junie found she agreed. That was one of Boone's complaints, too—that the bonfire was losing its appeal and they would lose guests.

“There's got to be something good up here,” she said, planting her hands on her hips and glancing over the collection of boxes and antiques.

Some boxes she'd never gone through, so Junie started there. She set aside an old rocking chair, a box filled with what looked like metal spice jars, and another with brightly colored dishes. In the back, near the wall, sat a box with her name written in a much younger style of her own handwriting.

“What's this?” Junie lifted the lid and gasped, nostalgia instantly sweeping over her. “My Santa box?”

She'd drank in every story her grandparents had told about the visitation when Great-Grandpa Harper was a boy. She believed in the magic of the radio and had fantasized about it playing a part in her own romance someday. When she was small, she would whisper wishes to the radio about the kind of man she wanted to marry—and she'd gone far enough to write each trait down.

Was the letter still in here?

She pulled the trinkets out one at a time, things she'd collected, the research she'd done about Santa's true origins to find out if he existed. One smaller wooden box inside made her wonder. It'd been years. She couldn't remember what she'd stored in here but lifted the lid, and—there it was. She removed the paper, which was rolled like a scroll, and read:

Kind, like Grandpa.

Sweet smile.

Dances with me.

Loves Christmas like me.

Want lots of kids.

Loves Jesus.

Eyes striped like candy canes.

“Oh my gosh,” she breathed.

“What have you got there?”

She turned with a gasp and clutched the paper to her chest. Mason Devries stooped over the hatch leading into the attic. She hadn't heard him climb the ladder, but she had left it gaping open, so she supposed she should have known someone might see what was going on.

She waited for the sudden rise in her pulse to get it together, but that wasn't happening anytime soon. The sight of Mason had the same effect on her as it always did: every one of her nerves fired at full speed as though she'd stuck a fork in an electric socket.

He looked *good*. Mason was several inches taller than she was. His jeans and a t-shirt rather than his chef coat served to emphasize how toned his body was. His black hair was a stick-out wonder of modern art—now that it had been freed from its hairnet—yet somehow, the look suited him and made her stare at him longer than she should have.

Junie was sure her face rivaled the color of Santa's suit, but she shook sense into place and played her embarrassment off the best she could. “Did you just get off?” she asked.

“Yeah. I thought I'd check if you need anything before I head home, but Boone told me you were up here. You looking for something?”

Junie fanned her fingers over the paper on her chest, her face still blasting with heat. She considered lowering the paper. And risk Mason getting a glimpse of it? Not a chance.

“I was hoping to find something to spice up the Christmas Eve bonfire this year.”

“Is there something wrong with the bonfire?”

“I—not exactly. I just worry guests who return for the event tire of the same thing every year.”

He edged in and placed a hand atop a stacked cardboard box. She clamped the paper harder.

“Why would they get tired of it?” he asked. “That script you and your mom do is a hit.”

That was part of the problem, she supposed. Mom had left the inn for the season. She’d settled with some friends in St. George, Utah, where it was much warmer this time of year. That left Junie more on her own than she’d ever been. She’d agreed to it when Mom had told her of her plans before she’d left but hadn’t thought of doing the skit all by herself before.

“I don’t know. I just...I have weird reservations about it.” There was something else to her reservations, something she couldn’t completely understand herself. Lately, while going through the motions day after day, Junie had begun to ask herself a life-altering question—

What was it all for? What was the point? Of her life. Of the inn. Of everything she did.

All she’d wanted was for the radio to play for her and match her with her perfect man. It had played. But nothing had gone as she’d hoped, and since then, the more time passed, the more pointless everything seemed.

“Is it the guests, or are you just tired of doing the same thing every year?” He had a knowing quirk to his mouth.

“I guess it could just be me. I tell the same stories every year.” She could never tell him. She could never explain what the real problem was. The magic had been dying a slow death for her since her dreams had been deflated. And she couldn’t figure out how to bring it back.

“Guests drink it up every year,” he said. “Not to mention my delectable offering of food. You know it’s a hit.”

“Yes. Your food is definitely the best part of the bonfire.”

He cocked his head and smiled at the most tantalizing angle, which made her stomach flip and lit sparklers under her

skin.

Make matters worse, why don't you? Junie thought.

“Don't tell me you're only now realizing that fact,” he said.

Though she didn't want to be, though she'd fought it harder than a chocolate addict avoiding the candy cupboard, Junie was still head-over-heels for this man. Simply being around him made her feel boneless. And brainless, for that matter.

She smoothed her fingers over the paper still held against her chest. She had been slightly infatuated with Mason from the minute he started working at the inn. He was gorgeous, with his chiseled features and dark hair, which was all the more reason to be completely thrilled when *he* was the one who answered the radio's call. The radio had played for them three years ago, bringing them together at random times, sometimes in such a way that neither of them remembered leaving what they'd been doing. They'd found themselves unexpectedly standing together in front of the radio.

She'd thought that was it. She'd thought they would get married the following spring. The radio had worked that way for countless others—why not them? Mason was *perfect*.

But the radio didn't play again. Mason had stopped meeting her in the living room. He'd stopped looking at her with stars in his eyes. In fact, he didn't speak to her for a few months, right after everything happened. Though the fact had gutted her, she hadn't had the nerve to approach him and ask why. Instead, she'd played along with his apparent amnesia.

The way she had every day.

And every day, it was agony trying to pretend he had no effect on her or that the memory of their kiss didn't dominate her thoughts more often than she liked.

The day after Christmas, Junie had anxiously awaited the song to summon her into the same room with Mason. There were still six days in the song to go, after all. She'd waited for the meaning behind the magical summons, for the radio's

magic to kick into play, and for Mason to fall madly in love with her like he was supposed to. But the song never played again. “The Twelve Days of Christmas” countdown stopped right in the middle, and she went back to seeing Mason only when she needed to discuss the guest’s responses to the food.

What had gone wrong? Why hadn’t the radio worked for her and Mason? It had played for Grace and Boone, and they were married now. The radio had also played for Lacie and Jared, thrusting them together in a fake marriage scenario during their stay. And she’d received a request to have the actual ceremony at the Harper’s Inn Event Center.

So why hadn’t it played again for her and Mason? The least the radio could do was finish the song.

“You never told me what you’re holding,” Mason said, bringing her back to the present.

“Oh, it’s nothing. My shopping list.” Huge lie. Her pants were totally on fire.

“Must be pretty important to you.”

“Why do you say that?”

He fought a bemused expression, let his brows lift, and gave her a pointed glance. She peered down at her chest. She was clutching her list exactly as someone who found a precious, long-lost letter might. Junie lowered her hands, fisting the paper in her fingers, letting it crumple slightly.

“You startled me, that’s all.” Not true. Total play-off.

“Funny, I’ve never seen you hold anything else like that.”

“Funny, I never thought you paid that much attention to what I did.”

Where did that come from?

Mason blinked, startled as if not sure what to say.

“Me neither, I guess,” he said dully.

An awkward pause lingered between them.

“So...you don’t need anything from me?” he said with the air of a man who wanted to get away as quickly as he could.

“I don’t think so. Where are you headed? Home?”

Mason lived in West Hills in the gift shop’s basement. He shook his head. “Actually, I’ve got a fill-in coming. Someone to take my place. I’m headed to New York for a few days.”

She couldn’t remember Mason ever leaving since he’d moved into town and taken the position five years ago. Come to think of it, despite her infatuation with him, she didn’t know the inn’s chef all that well. Did he have family in New York? What was taking him so far away?

“How long will you be gone?” she asked. Speaking of the bonfire, Christmas Eve was in a little over a week. Their biggest influx of guests came during December. Mason’s cuisine was unsurpassed. “I hope your fill-in will be able to do justice to your dishes.”

“I’m sure she will,” Mason said, acting guilty. He kept his head down, and was it just Junie, or did he refuse to look at her? “I’ll be back in a few days.”

She waited, hoping he would give her some details or indication about the nature of his trip, but he didn’t say anything else about it.

Of course, he didn’t. They were boss and employee. Nothing more.

There were times during this past year when Junie had gone to see how things were going in the kitchen and found herself caught in conversation with Mason. She’d perched on the countertop and laughed and joked with him and his crew. She found herself wanting things to be like that with him now.

“All right then. Enjoy your shopping list,” he said, turning to make his way back down the ladder.

Junie didn’t breathe easily until he was gone. Even then, her heart didn’t quite beat exactly the same. After a few moments of wondering about his trip, she lifted the paper and reviewed the list again.

A moony, foolhardy, lovesick young girl had written this list. A compilation of everything she wished for in a husband in case Santa needed to keep everything straight for the time the radio played for her. She'd left the letter out for Santa Claus that Christmas Eve; she'd stuffed it into her stocking, knowing he would find it when he left her trinkets there instead.

But that Christmas morning, when she'd dug out her candies, socks, ChapStick, and keychain, the list of her husband's future traits was still in there. Santa hadn't gotten it.

She'd fought back the tears. She'd taken all her radio research and Santa memorabilia and stuffed it in the attic that day. She was determined to forget any hope for the radio to play for her. It didn't completely take away from the delight the idea of the radio had still brought to her. She could enjoy the stories about it still, couldn't she?

The radio had played. It had played, and the legends she'd been boasting about started to rust into lies. In that moment, Junie finally began to make sense of the problem. She suddenly knew the reason for her sense of pointlessness—

It was because there was, in fact, *no point*. Imagine that.

How could she take guests up to the mountaintop and share the same exciting stories she'd shared every year when she felt her belief in those stories waning? Every hope she'd had was doused. Deflated like a punctured tire.

There was no doubt about it—she needed to change up the bonfire this year. Not for the guests, but for herself. The focus couldn't be on the radio anymore. She wasn't sure she could go up there and tell giddy lovestruck stories of magic and people who found love from the radio, not when she'd been so jilted by it herself.

CHAPTER 2



Mason sank to his bed in exhaustion. Traveling always wore him out, but the additional strain of cooking for the owners of the Hyacinth Restaurant in New York City and putting himself emotionally out there for a cause he didn't have any personal stakes in himself—to be considered for the position of executive chef in a much larger kitchen than the one he currently managed—had been taxing.

Now that he was back in his basement apartment again, the tension and effort of being “on” were catching up to him. The entire interview had gone well. Extremely well. He knew he'd impressed the managers of the Hyacinth by the comments they continued making and the remarks he'd overheard from other kitchen staff members. He was positive he'd receive an offer for the position any day.

Though he'd gone through the effort of traveling to New York and presenting himself as an interested qualifier, though he'd answered their questions and given a rather remarkable impression of himself and his abilities, he wasn't sure he would take the job if they offered it to him—and therein lay the problem.

He was happy at Harper's Inn. That was enough for him. Why couldn't it be enough for his father?

Dad had been the one to set up the entire interview at the Hyacinth. He'd arranged for Mason's travel and had been a third party in the communication between Mason and the restaurant's managers. Instead of putting his foot down and

telling his dad how he felt about the whole situation, Mason had gone along with it.

He was weak. And he hated himself for it.

Mason's phone pinged, and he groaned when he saw who the message was from.

It seemed like every time Mason spoke with his father, Dad expressed his disappointment that Mason had endured years of schooling “only to learn how to cook food,” as he'd said it. From the tone he'd used a thousand times before, Mason knew his dad thought the profession was beneath him somehow. Dad didn't understand what went into crafting a delectable meal or the care it took to get a sauce just right.

Foodery was a craft, an art. People connected over food in ways they didn't over anything else. Food could be used to solve familial problems, to bring people together as an excuse for strangers to get to know one another. It was life-sustaining, for goodness' sake. *Everyone* needed to eat, yet Dad thought it was beneath Mason to learn how to present food in its best form possible.

Dad was a neurosurgeon. He'd encouraged the medical route Mason's whole life, and every time he'd done so, he'd sparked with pride that someday his son might fill his shoes with the same aplomb he had.

Mason had seen the praise, accolades, and many framed awards hanging in Dad's office. Telling Dad that he'd chosen cooking school over medical school had dimmed some of that light in Dad's eyes. It had taken Mason down a few rungs on his approval scale—and Dad made sure to let him know it every chance he could.

Mason considered telling Dad about the successful results of the interview in New York. Dad's approval had been the reason he'd gone, after all. Yet, something held him back. His father might be proud if Mason worked for a more prestigious restaurant, but that wasn't what Mason wanted.

Why had he even gone? A high-end chef's position still wouldn't be enough to win his father's approval. He would

still be a chef.

He wished he didn't care. He wished he could ignore Dad's message that had pinged on his phone, but it blared from his screen all the more.

He was glad he didn't have to come up with a response right away. Truth be told, he didn't know what to make of this message and continued staring at it as though the words were in a foreign language he didn't understand.

Dad: *Thought we'd come your way this Christmas and see what you've made of yourself. Mom and I'll be in Montana on Christmas Eve.*

Sweat collected in Mason's palms. His nerves disconnected from their usual landing points and rearranged themselves to various locations, making everything inside him off-kilter. Mom coming here would be one thing. Mom never thrust any sort of disapproval or disappointment at him. She'd been proud of Mason's accomplishments and had loved the food he'd made for her during her previous visit a few years before—a visit Mason still wasn't sure his dad had known about.

Mom had been friends with Junie's mom, Meg Harper, in college. In fact, she'd been the one to tell Mason about the chef position opening at the quaint inn. Mason knew his father would hate him working at a small place like this—that alone had been reason enough to take the job.

The Harpers had been so kind and welcoming, and Mason had quickly made a name for himself here. The inn had its fair share of fame, after all. Mason wondered if that was the real reason Dad wanted to come now. To see if the rumors about Santa's radio were true.

Conflict raged inside him. He wanted to tell his father not to worry about it. They hadn't been in the same room together for several years now, and he liked it that way. He'd grown accustomed to the distance between them. When it came to his parents, distance was preferable.

He exhaled and typed in a reply.

Mason: *Don't put yourself out.*

Dad: *I never do. We'll see you on Christmas Eve. I hear the inn puts on quite a show that night.*

So it was the rumors. Mason grimaced. Maybe he should have been more direct, but he couldn't bring himself to type out the words: *I don't want you here.*

He wasn't coming to spend time with Mason, not like any other family would. All Dad cared about was repute. Mason fought the urge to chuck his phone at the wall.

He gripped the device while tension built in his shoulders. The more he thought about it, the more he didn't want this. His parents coming to Harper's Inn was the worst thing that could happen right now. If Hyacinth made him an offer, he still hadn't decided if he'd accept it. Now the pressure of that decision pounded against him. Not to mention he could hear Dad's scathing shouts of disappointment at everything regarding the inn—especially since Junie had proclaimed she was changing up the bonfire this year.

Dad's anger was something Mason had tried to avoid at all costs. It flared within him at times, too. Another fact he detested in himself. The notion made him think of Junie—he thought of her more often than he would admit—and was all the more reason to keep his distance from her. He never knew when the anger his father let loose would manifest itself within him again as it had.

He couldn't do that to her.

Mason rose to his feet. The bonfire was special. There was magic on the mountaintop—not real magic, but a feeling nonetheless—and if anything were going to impress his stodgy father, it would be that bonfire. Not to mention the praise his spread of food received from guests every year. He put on a good show, dang it. Of all the years to change things, this wasn't it.

He had to talk to Junie. He had to convince her to do the bonfire as it was.

CHAPTER 3



A trampoline had lodged beneath Junie’s internal organs the moment she’d awoken that morning, making it feel as though every movement she took had a bounce and every beat of her pulse ricocheted. Mason had been gone for three days. For an *interview* in New York. Logan had told her the night before.

Mason had left that little detail out when they’d spoken in the attic. Was he applying for a job elsewhere? Why?

He was back now. She’d been stupidly eager to see him, thrilled at the prospect of hearing his voice. She’d thought she’d at least stop in and say hi. See why he felt the need to relocate. She was his boss, if not his friend. But he’d gone straight to the kitchen without a word to her.

She knew it was juvenile, but his avoidance of her and his inadvertent rejection reminded her of what she’d lost—what was making her hate Christmas—all over again. Stupid “get your hopes up only to crush them” holiday.

Needing a moment, Junie secluded herself in her office and stood there fuming. She was so tired of living here. She was tired of being expected to do the same thing she’d always done: watch on the sidelines for stuff to happen to other people.

A box sat on her desk. Junie threw it to the ground. She was half-tempted to kick it. It wasn’t just the bonfire she wanted to veto. It was the whole blasted thing. No more Christmas. She could get used to that. Run away somewhere,

pretend December twenty-fifth didn't exist. Was there anywhere she could go that didn't celebrate it?

Probably. She just couldn't think where.

She still hadn't decided what to do about the bonfire. Something had to be done, though. Christmas Eve was only days away. She thrust open her office door and stormed to the reception desk.

"Why can't someone else be in charge for once?" she grumbled. "All the more reason not to do the bonfire at all."

"Not do the bonfire?"

Junie's cousin Boone lowered the dolly, carting a long box to the ground, and rested a hand on the dolly's metal frame. She closed her eyes, knowing she should have kept the thought to herself. He tromped into the living room with his wife, Grace, trailing behind. Grace held their six-month-old son, Brecken, in her arms.

"Can you go away?" Junie said, knowing he wouldn't. Hearing the question would only make him chuckle. And it did.

"Everything okay?" Grace asked, pulling Brecken's hand away from her ear, particularly the earring dangling there.

Junie wished she could disappear. She wished she could melt like snow in the spring, drip down the gutter, and gush away with the tide. Boone had always been Junie's friend. They'd grown up at the inn together, but at the moment, Junie wished he didn't know her quite so well. Or care quite so much.

"I'm fine." Her tone betrayed her as the liar she was.

"You're never mad during Christmastime," Boone contradicted. "Come on. Tell us what's up." Boone had softened since marrying Grace, but occasionally his crotchety, demanding side reared its ugly head.

"I don't want to do it anymore."

"Do what? Christmas?" A smile tugged the corner of Boone's mouth. "Why are you backing down from it now? I

tried to get you to cancel the holiday for years.”

Grace elbowed him. Brecken reached for his daddy, and Boone scooped the little boy into his arms. It was no secret that Boone had indeed hidden away at his cottage on the outskirts of the property every year since his first wife had passed away Christmas Eve, doing his utmost to ignore the holiday until it passed. It wasn't until he'd met Grace that she'd been able to help him open up to celebrating again.

“Well, congratulations. Because you're finally succeeded. I'm not doing it. I'm tired of supplying towels for guests and dealing with their drama if that ridiculous radio decides to play. Like the year it made that one couple suddenly married, and she nearly bit my nose off as if it was my fault her room key no longer worked.”

Lacie and Jared had returned for their wedding, and all had been forgiven, but the drama hadn't been entirely pleasant at the time. Junie had to keep a friendly face while Lacie had gone nuts in her face.

“I'm tired of the happy joy that everyone comes here to bask in. I don't want the snow anymore, the baubles, the presents, the food. I don't want any of it.”

Boone passed Brecken back to Grace and took Junie by the arms. Junie kept her chin low, determined not to give in. But Boone stood there, holding her, staring her down, until finally, she lifted her face to meet surprising, tender concern in his eyes.

“What brought this on? Are you okay?”

She shrugged out of his grasp. “Don't ask me that.”

“This isn't like you,” he said. “You live for Christmas and everything it stands for.”

“Not anymore.” She fought the urge to fold her arms like a petulant child.

“Junie.” Based on the cautious strain his voice had taken on, Boone was treading carefully now. He inched in and lowered his voice. “Are you...is this some kind of... I don't

know. Faith crisis? You know Jesus, Junie. Better than anyone I know.”

Heat and wetness built behind her eyes. She should have expected he might think she was doubting the long-held beliefs she'd cherished her whole life. But this doubting of Christmas had nothing to do with its religious origins, which she believed in.

“It's not that. I know Jesus is my Savior and yours. Nothing has changed regarding that part of things. When I said I didn't want to celebrate Christmas, that's not what I meant.”

Grace moved closer. “Then what's wrong? Please, you can tell us. We want to help you.”

Junie squeezed her eyes shut. That she well knew. Not only was Boone her cousin and had been her closest friend since they were children, but once Grace had moved to Montana to take the much-needed housekeeping position after her Christmas stay at Harper's Inn three years before, she and Junie had become fast friends as well. That friendship had only blossomed since Grace had married Boone and settled in at his cottage too.

“It's the rest of it,” Junie said in defeat. “Santa, the radio, I don't buy into it anymore. I've clung to the lore my entire life, and I feel like I've been betrayed somehow. Like I've held onto this belief only to find out it's not really true. Like—”

Grace and Boone exchanged a look that was lovable and disgusting all at once. It was a look that would have made Junie swoon any other time. The radio had been the reason these two had gotten together at all.

“It worked for us,” Boone said, verifying her thoughts. “You know, I thought the radio's magic was complete garbage until it played and got me to notice Grace and give love a second chance.”

A becoming red flush grew in Grace's cheeks, and she gave her husband an affectionate grin.

Junie waited for her usual optimism to champion the situation, to sprout and take root within her, to win out the

inner battle she'd been fighting for months now. But she couldn't be positive about this. She couldn't find hope. She couldn't waste any more time or emotion letting the belief overpower her anymore.

“It didn't work for me.”

There. She said it. And it felt like Rudolph's nose dimmed at the statement, like she'd pulled the plug on Christmas lights, thereby darkening a once-brilliant street. Every sparkly thing in the world lost its luster.

CHAPTER 4



As a personal rule, Junie never liked to point out the things that were going wrong. Oh, she knew a happy outlook couldn't change things that were already off-kilter, but she believed focusing on the positive would draw more of that positivity to a person in any situation. She was a firm believer in silver linings, that there was always something good to be found, even in the deepest heartache. And maybe there was still some good in Christmas—peace on earth, goodwill to men, and all that.

But right now, she was as done with the Santa side of things as she could be. Santa Claus coming to town? He could stay right where he was.

“I’ve believed Great-Grandpa Harper’s story all my life.” Her voice sounded belligerent. Not defeated, but defiant. “I believed it so much that I insisted on being the one who told the story every year. It was my idea to start the annual bonfires, for goodness’ sake.”

“I remember,” Boone said. No chuckle this time. Good. He was taking her seriously. Not long after she’d written her list of expectations for her dream husband, Junie had come up with the skit she and her mom could perform at the bonfire, which guests had drunk up. Several had insisted they do the same again, and so they had. Word had spread, and Christmas had only become amplified at the inn.

Now Junie had nothing but regret. If only she hadn’t been so blasted naïve. So senselessly hopeful. Could she trust in anything after this? She’d always judged Boone, been so

inwardly skeptical about his bitterness. But he'd had it right after all. She'd been the one who'd been deceived. Stupid head in stupid clouds.

“I was so sure the radio’s magic was real—”

“It *is* real.”

She ignored this. “—I’ve always known it would play for me. That its magic would work the same as it did a hundred years ago, and I’d find the perfect man—or a man who would be perfect for me.”

Boone’s forehead creased. He peered behind his shoulder as if to make sure no one else was in earshot. “I thought you said it did. I thought the radio played for you and Mason.”

There was the loss she’d been waiting to feel. Hopelessness, wretched and awful, coiled its way behind her sternum and settled into the core of her chest with such alacrity it stung her eyes. “It did.”

“But?” Grace prodded.

Here came the tears. Junie didn’t want them. She didn’t need them. But they didn’t get the message.

“It played every day,” she said. “The same year the radio played for you. The same year it brought you two together, Mason and I found ourselves standing in front of the radio. Every night we got a little closer. He even kissed me, and I thought for sure this was it. This was the start of my festive fairytale.”

Junie hung her head in shame as if by not looking at Grace and Boone, they wouldn’t see her face growing splotchier by the second, as it surely was now that she was crying. She peered toward the window, taking in the newly falling snow, grateful to have somewhere else to direct her attention. Memories rushed through her. She’d lied to Boone at the time. She’d told him the radio had made it to Day Nine of the song, but it had really stopped at Day Six. She hadn’t wanted to admit anything was wrong.

“It’s like the instant Mason suspected I was hoping the radio playing meant more for *us*, he stopped talking to me. He

kept his distance. I mean, we talk now, but only when his crew is around, you know? It's like he can't stand me. And why should he? I never leave here. I live the most boring life anyone can have. And I'm not all that much to look at, either. I mean, there are plenty of prettier women in New York."

"What does New York have to do with this?" Boone asked. "And stop putting yourself down. You know you're beautiful."

"No, Grace is beautiful. I'm just plucky and quirky and freckled."

"And beautiful," Boone insisted.

"Boone's right," Grace said, stepping closer. "You're adorable, Junie. Any guy would be an idiot if he didn't see that."

"Mason's an idiot," Boone said.

Junie shook her head. "He's applying for a job in New York. I found out from Logan, of all people. Mason couldn't be bothered to tell me himself. Am I so awful?"

"Not at all!" Grace insisted.

"Want me to jump him outside the kitchen after school?"

"Boone," Grace reprimanded.

"Joking," he said. "Sort of."

"The point is, how can I go back up the mountainside and share the story of the radio again? I've always believed, with all my heart, that the radio brought people together. I can't face that again. I feel like if I can't count on this, I can't count on anything."

"The magic can only take things so far," Grace said gently, touching Junie's arm. "It can't force anything."

Junie was sure Grace meant for the statement to be helpful, but the reminder only made things worse. "I can't believe in anything anymore, not after that." She knew it was true. Mason was presented with the possibility of a life with Junie. He didn't want that life. He'd rejected the magic. Rejected her.

“What’s wrong with me?” Tears streamed down her eyes at full force now.

Before she knew what was happening, Boone’s arms wrapped around her. It reminded her of how her dad held her when she’d cried as a child. The way he’d held her before he’d passed away. Junie leaned into Boone’s embrace and let him comfort her.

“Nothing is wrong with you,” Boone said, stroking her back. “Except maybe you’re too perky when people are angry.”

Junie released a little laugh that was somehow therapeutic. She couldn’t count the number of times she’d irritated him precisely that way. “Maybe it wouldn’t be so annoying if you hadn’t been so grumpy.”

“Point taken.” Boone lowered his arms. Grace moved in for a hug of her own. Brecken kicked his legs in excitement at Junie’s nearness, and she tickled the roundest part of his belly with a smile.

“You are the kindest person I’ve ever met,” Grace said, squeezing Junie’s hand and offering a genuine smile. “Sometimes it’s not that anything is wrong with you. Sometimes it’s like a picnic where someone brings peanut butter, and another brings mayo. While they’d make good sandwiches separately, the two together would taste terrible.”

Junie released another little laugh at that, though the words only confirmed her worst fear. “So he’s mayo, and I’m peanut butter. Is that what you’re saying?”

“Maybe,” Grace said with an apologetic pout. “Maybe he just needs some time.”

Junie wiped her eyes. “It’s been three years. And now he’s leaving. He’s taking a job in New York, of all places, at a restaurant that can offer him more prestige than we can.” Or so she assumed. Why else would he have gone?

“Half the business we get is because he gives this place such a good reputation,” Boone said.

“He’s not the only thing giving Harper’s Inn its five-star status,” Junie argued with a snap in her tone.

Good grief, everything was making her cranky these days. There was nothing wrong with wanting a little credit, was there? She worked day in and day out to keep rooms furbished and guests happy, putting out fires and handling complaints. All the things her mom used to handle.

Junie had been managing everything—and this was all she had to show for it. A ringless finger and a bitter heart.

That didn’t mean she had to accept her status, did it? Another thought had been surfacing since she’d found the letter in the attic. Junie hadn’t given it much screen time, but maybe it was worth exploring.

“Now that we’re no longer going to do Christmas like we have before, we may lose plenty of clientele. Maybe it’s time to rethink things,” she said.

“Rethink what things?” Boone asked.

“Everything? I’ve thought about selling.” It was just a thought. But she might as well throw it out there.

Boone’s eyes widened. “You can’t sell Harper’s Inn.”

“What else am I going to do with it? I’m not up for maintaining what we have going. Not after this. It took you fifteen years to recover from your heartache, Boone. You can’t fault me if I need some time as well.”

“But Grace and I live on the property, Junie. I don’t want some stuffy manager moving in who has no connections to our family—someone who only wants this place for the money it can bring—bossing me around. What if they want to tear our cottage down? What if they do away with the sleigh or trail rides I lead in the summertime?”

Junie slipped her finger into Brecken’s chubby fist. As she knew he would, the little guy secured his fingers around hers. “You can’t tell me this is the only baby you’re going to have. Your family will grow. You’ll want more space than what that cottage can give you.”

Grace shrugged her shoulders. “She has a point. We’re almost too much for the tiny space as it is now.”

Boone scowled. “Whether that’s true or not, you can’t sell, Junie. This is everything you’ve known. What will you do instead?”

Junie released a sigh and peered out the window. She’d been trying to figure that out herself. “I’m good at writing. Grace sold her story. Maybe I could write something too.”

“Writing isn’t going to make you a living,” Grace argued. “We couldn’t live off the royalties I bring in.”

It was just as well. Junie didn’t think she could write a novel anyway, not like Grace did. She wrote plays and poetry, not fiction.

What else could she do? What else was she good at? Her whole life, she’d always known she would work at Harper’s Inn. It was all she’d ever wanted to do, so she’d never even attempted to pursue a college education for anything else.

The longer she thought about it, the more her life seemed like it had been tossed off its axis. She was spinning, rotating in a perpetual stupor of unhelpful paths while the lies she’d clung to about how she’d thought her life would go were unveiled and made known. Why couldn’t the truth have come to light sooner? Why couldn’t anyone have told her princes never came to rescue girls in castles, that Santa didn’t really exist, or that the romance she’d based all of her hopes on wasn’t real?

Not that it wasn’t real—that wasn’t the problem here. She knew full well how real it was. For everyone else.

No, the actual problem here wasn’t that fairytales didn’t exist. It was that they didn’t exist *for her*. She was the anomaly, somehow unworthy of receiving what had come so easily to others.

Boone and Grace had heard the radio. They’d married the following winter. That other couple, Lacie and Jared, had built a snowman outside that pronounced them husband and wife. And though they’d fought against the union, they had

eventually ended up marrying too. Not only that, but Santa Claus had appeared to Lacie at one point.

The notion made her want to thrust herself to the floor and kick up a good old-fashioned temper tantrum. Junie would give anything to meet Santa. She had so many questions for him. Had he seen the list she'd left for him in her stocking all those years ago? If so, had he taken note of her requests for husbandly traits, or was the reason he'd left the note in her stocking that he'd ignored her altogether? If so, why had he caused the radio to play for her and Mason in the first place?

Had he caused it at all? Did the radio have a mind of its own?

She could deny it the way Mason seemed to, but it *had* played for them. It had sequestered them in this room day after day. Why hadn't its magic worked for them as it had for so many others?

It wasn't fair, dang it.

"Don't make any rash decisions," Boone said. "Sometimes you have to go through the motions, even when you don't feel like doing something. I do it all the time."

Grace nudged him and gave him a reprimanding look before offering Junie a smile.

"It's a new Christmas," Grace said with encouragement. "You never know what can happen this year. Maybe the radio will play for you two again. You said it never finished *The Twelve Days of Christmas*. Maybe it will this year."

That bait wouldn't lure Junie any longer. She was done with optimism. She couldn't think that way ever again. "You know what? I will not wait for the radio to decide my life for me. I'm through with that."

She tromped over the boxes and even kicked the tote aside, only sort of caring that whatever was inside had been jostled and possibly broken. She lifted the radio from the table much as Boone had done in frustration three years before.

"You had it right, Boonie. This thing is a nuisance, and I don't need it around."

“Won’t guests wonder where it is?” Grace asked.

“No, they won’t.”

“It’s all over the website. It’s what you’re known for.”

Junie lifted it from the table and grimaced from the strain. “Then I’ll change the website. We’re not doing the bonfire. We’ll decorate for Christmas, but from now on, Harper’s Inn is just an inn, just like any other.”

Grace gave Boone a look.

“You can’t demote extraordinary to just ordinary,” Boone said. “That would be like trying to pretend a snowmobile is just an ice skate.”

“Maybe it is.” Junie struggled under the radio’s weight but readjusted it and made for the attic.

Boone had thrust the radio into her office when he’d been fed up with its interference, but she wouldn’t only go that far. She’d destroy the thing if that was what it took. Junie couldn’t bring herself there yet; the attic would suffice, for now.

Boone hurried after her and eventually took the radio from her, carrying it the rest of the way.

“So you can lower the ladder,” he insisted when she glared at him.

“Fine.” Junie trotted ahead to the old part of the house where the chain dangled.

She tugged, and the ladder lowered, and though she’d never admit it out loud, she was glad Boone would be the one to carry the radio up the stairs.

“Where do you want it?”

“Hide it. I don’t even want to know where it is.”

He quirked a brow.

“I’m serious.”

“If you say so.”

She planted her feet firmly where they stood and let him trail up the ladder with the wooden nuisance. She was tempted

to follow him up for a peek but refused to give in. Let the radio stay hidden for the rest of her life, for all she cared.

“There,” he said, returning to the hall empty-handed and raising the ladder to its folded position again, chain dangling down. “Hidden.”

“Thank you,” Junie said, lifting her chin.

“So. No bonfire?”

“No.”

“And you’re changing the website.”

“Yes.”

“If you need help coming up with other ideas to do instead, I’m sure we can think of something. Or what about asking that guest, the event coordinator who held her wedding here?”

“Lacie Kingston?”

“Yeah! I’m sure she has all kinds of ideas that could still appease guests in place of your usual charm.”

Junie shook her head. The radio had created a fake-marriage scenario for Lacie and Jared that the two had jumped down Junie’s throat for. Though she’d tried to be nice about the accusations laced in her direction over the radio’s interference, Junie still hadn’t much liked the accusatory way Lacie had gone about things.

There would probably be more complainers about her decision to change things up too. “No, thanks. I’ll figure something out.”

“Whatever you decide,” Boone said, clearing his throat. “You know who else you’ll need to run this by.”

“Mom won’t care,” Junie said. “She’s hardly here anymore as it is.”

Not since she had settled into snowbird status, living in southern Utah during the coldest months of the year. She’d opted to remain in the warmth during Christmas, and Junie had assured her it was okay. She would miss celebrating with her mom, but she also understood Mom’s difficulty traveling.

“I didn’t mean Aunt Meg,” Boone said. “I was talking about Mason.”

Just hearing his name was a barb. Her chest banded as if warding off oncoming arrows. She wanted to argue the point, but Boone was right. Any decision Junie made always had to be run past Mason. He was the head chef, the man in charge of feeding the guests. He’d already prepared everything they would need for Christmas meals and the personal tasting sessions guests always booked with him. The Christmas spread they provided at the Event Center during the bonfire, the morning Christmas breakfast that so delighted guests every year. Mason was a huge part of the inn all year round—but at Christmas? He was vital.

What would he do when she told him she was canceling the bonfire? Would he leave prematurely? Perhaps that would be all for the better. Maybe that was reason enough to do this. Let him leave. She didn’t care.

She needed him only long enough until she could find a chef good enough to fill his shoes. And she wasn’t sure anyone else could.

CHAPTER 5



Mason chopped the slat of green peppers with gusto and slid the cut greens into the awaiting oil in the skillet. He turned to find Junie entering the kitchen, and the sight of her lit a match to his blood. She'd been having that effect on him more and more lately, as though the air became a little more breathable and slightly charged with her around. Her pretty features were accentuated by the fact that her hair was pulled back. In fact, her curls were disheveledly appealing, piled in a coiled mess on her head.

Not only was she not smiling—a rare sight—but she didn't have a single festive article of clothing on. The sight of Junie downtrodden, unfestive, and gloomy didn't equate with who he knew her to be at all.

She looked as though she'd been the one chopping onions for an hour, and her tear ducts hadn't recovered.

“Can I talk to you when you have a second?” she asked without her usual chirpy, happy greeting.

Mason glanced at the others on his team. Sylvia was busily basting the chicken, and Logan was simmering the sauce they'd need to complete the meal. Dinner was in less than an hour. He nearly invited Junie to hang out and talk while they finished prepping things, as she sometimes did. But from her downcast demeanor, he suspected the subject might not be something she wanted the whole team overhearing.

“Can I meet you after eight?” he asked. That would give them enough time to serve dinner and clean up the kitchen

once it was over.

Junie released a little huff, and her shoulders sagged. She glanced around the kitchen as if coming to her senses and folded her arms over her chest. Finally, a smile made an appearance. A small one.

“Of course. Sorry. I should have waited until you were finished, but I wanted to make sure I caught you while you were here. Eight it is.”

“Your office?” he asked.

“Of course. See you then.” Without another word, she ventured out the way she’d come.

Mason frowned as he inhaled the scent of sizzling peppers and onions. What was that about?

Logan and Sylvia exchanged a glance. “Did something happen to Junie?” Sylvia asked. Her blonde hair was in a hairnet, and her cheeks were flushed, probably from the kitchen’s heat.

“Looks like her stash of reindeer antlers and Christmas socks was raided, and she’s not too happy about it,” Logan added with a snigger.

“Be serious,” Sylvia said. Her frown emphasized the wrinkles around her mouth and eyes.

By Mason’s guess, she was about ten years older than his twenty-eight.

She kept her gaze in the direction Junie had gone. “She looked really upset about something. She’s always bubbly and sweet, but that—that wasn’t our Junie. I hope everything is okay.”

The same concerns she’d voiced plagued Mason as well. He resumed meal preparations, stirring the sizzling vegetables before adding them to his sauce, but the motions didn’t get Junie off his mind.

Dinner passed in similar fashion as it did every other night, and he got quite a few compliments on the meal. After clearing his workstation, throwing away remnants, and placing

dishes in the sink for the dishwashers, Mason left Logan and Sylvia to finish cleaning up. It was nearing eight-thirty. Would Junie still be waiting?

He loosened the ties of his apron, wadded it into the laundry bag he kept in his tote and made his way down the hall where the old part of the inn was. Several of the family's original bedrooms were here. This was where Junie slept rather than living down in West Hills like Mason did. Even Boone used to stay in his old room here on occasion before he'd married Grace.

Mason knocked on her office door, and a tired voice responded, "Come on in."

He twisted the knob and found Junie sitting at her desk, staring at the computer screen as though it had done her some kind of injustice. What was bothering her? Though he'd seen her upset before, Junie Harper rarely stayed mad about anything. It seemed like some gloomy raincloud had settled over her head since he'd spoken with her in the attic a few days ago.

Since he'd told her he was going to New York.

Had she found out he'd had an interview and was considering a job elsewhere? Was she going to ask him about it now?

"Hey," Mason said. "Everything okay?"

"Why does everyone keep asking me that?" she said.

Okay then. "Because you're not acting like yourself."

She rose to her feet with a sense of unfairness, and he got a good look at her. It was the nineteenth, only a few days left until Christmas. Logan had it right. Usually, by the first of December, Junie was decked out as though she were the only contestant in an ugly sweater contest and was determined to win anyway. Huge, festive earrings, ostentatious reindeer antler headbands, jingling bells on the hem of her pants, he wouldn't put it past her.

She wore no bright colors. No shirts with Santas plastered to the front with fluffy cotton for the beard. No bracelets

declaring herself as a believer.

Instead, she wore a plain blue t-shirt. Something was definitely bothering her.

“Maybe. Maybe I’m acting like the self I’ve been hiding from all of you.”

He wasn’t sure what that meant, so he decided to bring her back to grounds he could stand on. He braced himself, readying his reply to the question she was sure to ask. It was normal to investigate other job opportunities. Didn’t mean he was taking it.

“You wanted to talk to me?”

“Yes.” She straightened her shoulders. Tossed her head. “I’ve decided not to hold the bonfire this year.”

Mason’s pulse rebounded off his lungs. “No bonfire? Why not?”

“Because it’s a mundane tradition that I’m tired of, and I don’t want to do it.”

No festive clothes, and now no bonfire? She couldn’t be serious. “Junie. Of all the years for you to decide not to host the bonfire, this is the worst one.”

A sniff. “I know this will complicate things for you food-wise, but—”

She had no idea how much this would complicate things for him. His stuffy, easily frustrated, unimpressed father would be here next week. Mason had been counting on the bonfire to be the one thing that might convince Dad to get off his case about the job in New York, for one, and make their visit go that much smoother, for two. He’d been counting on the bonfire to help him get through what was turning out to be something he dreaded.

His parents had kept their distance for years. Why couldn’t they stay that way?

Junie was his boss. That was true. But she’d also always been open to suggestions about decisions, and he didn’t think she’d mind if he made a few.

“This is the worst possible year to cancel the bonfire, Junie.”

“Why? I never thought you cared.”

Of course he cared. The truth was, he’d loved heading up the mountain every year. He loved the view, the feeling under the stars, Junie’s storytelling. He enjoyed seeing the guests devour his food and had planned a decadent spread this year. They would host a full-on dinner inside the Event Center, something they’d never done before. The guests were going to salivate over the offerings he had planned. They could serve the meal here, that was true, but it wouldn’t be the same.

Mason could just hear his father’s derision now over the plain, quaint décor and the simple but comfortable rooms. Harper’s Inn had no pizzazz. It had no style, no bright lights, or commercial appeal whatsoever.

People came here for the seclusion, for the charm. For the magic. Junie was part of that magic—she couldn’t take that away.

“Have you made an announcement so guests will know?” he asked. Several of the Christmas usuals had already arrived. “Because you know they won’t be happy about this. What about the Clementses? They come every year and gush all over the place about your performance.” And about his food, too, but he wasn’t going to mention that.

“I just changed the website,” Junie said with a sniff and a break in her voice. “The truth is...” She shook away whatever the truth was. “Never mind. The point is, it’s time to start changing things up around here.”

What had she been about to say?

Mason tugged at his collar. It had grown unexpectedly hot in here. “What was wrong with the website?”

Had his father seen the changes? Mason had been fortifying himself for their arrival, but the high point he’d been holding on to—the thing that he knew would tide them over and convince his stuffy parents he hadn’t completely thrown his life away—was the sleigh ride and bonfire.

He could try telling them about the radio and its history at the inn himself, but no one told the story like Junie. He needed her to charm his parents.

“Nothing was wrong with it,” she snapped before seeming to collect herself. “Look, I’m sorry. Maybe you can do something else in place of the spread you had planned this year. What about a Christmas breakfast? Or we can have the feast here instead.”

Here wouldn’t work. It wasn’t the same. “Guests who are expecting the bonfire won’t want to stay here. They’ll want a sleigh ride. They’ll want to spend Christmas Eve at the Event Center and hear you tell the story. It might be growing mundane to you because you’re so wrapped up in it, but it’s not boring to them. You can’t drop things and change them last minute. Things like this need careful preparation, and your guests will need time to make other plans if they decide to.”

Junie looked as though she wanted to keep arguing with him.

“You tell the story then,” she said.

“I don’t do it as well as you.” No one did.

“I’m not going to keep the inn the way it’s been.” Her voice grew in pitch. “It’s time to change a few things around here.”

Arguments dangled on his tongue. Telling her now to keep the bonfire for his sake sounded too selfish, especially because she didn’t owe him anything. It was worse since they’d had that small fling three Christmasses ago and had never brought the kiss up again. He’d sensed she was hurt by that, but he hadn’t known what to do about it and so had done nothing. Then the more nothing he’d done had made it easier to pretend the kiss had never happened.

He was a coward, plain and simple, and he couldn’t ask this of her. His other arguments, however, held true. The guests would be completely put out if she canceled everything last minute, and he and his team had the menu full-fledged and ready to go.

Really, though, when it all boiled down, she was his boss. He had to go along with what she said, food or no food.

“Fine.” He lifted his hands as if to show how much he didn’t want to debate with her. “Change them. Just don’t drop the bomb on everyone quite so abruptly. Have the bonfire, let the guests know this will be the last year. Give them time to process. And you might want to have a darn good reason for your decision other than you’re getting bored with it. How would that sound in the magazines?”

Changing things like this would injure the inn’s reputation, that was for sure. He stilled for a moment at the thought.

“This doesn’t have anything to do with...” He let the words trail off. How self-centered would that sound? She couldn’t possibly be throwing her livelihood down the drain because of what had happened—or what *hadn’t* happened, he should say—between them.

“With what?” Her eyes grew wide. Almost hopeful. Or fearful, he couldn’t tell which.

He swallowed and considered, but this wasn’t a conversation he wanted to have. He would have to explain why he’d pulled away. How could he admit to Junie he was scared of losing his temper around her? He didn’t want to be the kind of man his father was.

“Nothing,” he said with an exhale. “Everything is in play for the bonfire. Just do it, Junie. Please. Let the guests know this is the last year. Okay?”

“Don’t tell me what to do.”

“I’m not.”

“Yes, you are.”

He lifted his hands once more. “Forget I said anything. I was just throwing in my opinion because I thought you were asking for it.”

“Fine. Thanks.” Her gratitude sounded too much like a defensive jab.

Mason wasn't sure what, if anything, had been decided. He couldn't go home without knowing what was going on. "So... you'll have the bonfire?"

"Sure."

"Um."

"Yes." She gave him a resolved look. The storm clouds in her eyes doused, and her shoulders lowered. "I did want your opinion, and you're right. We have the guests to consider and your team's hard work. Of course, we'll have the bonfire, but I'll do as you recommended. I'll let the guests know this will be the last year."

Mason hesitated. "Only if you're sure about this."

"I—I am."

She didn't sound sure, not at all. She sounded as though talking to him had only made her more confused than she already was.

Mason didn't know what else to say. He waited a few more minutes, but Junie just gave him a little nod and turned back to her computer. He stalked out the door, leaving her to her thoughts so he could collect his.

CHAPTER 6



Junie wore gray sweats and a t-shirt to bed that night. The gingerbread-clad pajamas in her drawer practically screamed at her to don them instead and make for the pair of red and green pom-pom barrettes for her hair, but she couldn't give in.

Even her sheets were hum drum boring, and their monotonous gray stripe tugged at her heartstrings. It almost felt as if her bed was less warm—as though someone had slipped a piece of plywood beneath the sheets to keep her from sinking into her mattress as comfortably as usual.

She felt the urge to make for the bins in her office and bust out her Christmas tree bedding—but she resisted. It was time to show this holiday who was boss.

Junie nestled into her plain, cold bed, hoisted the sheets to her chest, and stared at the ceiling while blood skated through her veins. Mason's arguments wouldn't leave her, but that was the holiday speaking too. Since when did someone make a decision based on what others wanted rather than what they wanted?

Sure, holding the bonfire was good for business, but she wasn't just a business owner. She had a heart, Jack Frost it, and it was broken like a shattered Christmas bulb. She wanted to cry. She wanted to curl into the fetal position and hug her pillow, stare at the blinking numbers on her clock that she hadn't reset since the last time the power went out, and do her best to pretend not to exist.

Her heart blinked like that clock, trying to find a semblance of sanity, of time and space, and exactly what position it should take.

She lay on her back. She lay on her side. She flipped to the other side. Her thoughts raced. Christmas music flurried through, siphoning along the ridges of her brain and undulating with obnoxious repetition, taunting her with its peppy lyrics. “Just hear those—”

“No,” she said aloud, stopping the song. “No jingling. No ring-ting-tingling. No sleigh rides.”

She vaulted upward enough to punch her pillow a few times. The resulting rhythm sounded eerily like the “Dance of the Sugarplum Fairy” tromping through.

“Would you stop already?” she huffed, whirling around and slamming her head into the pillow as if to smother the rhythm that had settled in with every landing of her fists. She lifted her chin and began belting out words to the first random song she could think of: “Hello Goodbye” by the Beatles. Particularly the “goodbye” part. If only the music tramping through her mind would get the hint.

“The happiest season of all? What a joke,” she muttered. “We’re through, Christmas. Do you hear me?”

Resolve streaked through her as she barked the pronouncement. Junie sat up in bed as though a revelation, an epiphany, had clamored in with bells and gongs and the little tinkling ping of a triangle for good measure.

“You’ve been my favorite holiday since I could remember,” she ranted to her darkened room. “You filled my head with sugarplums and dreams and snow and wishes for a *Hallmark* romance, and now you’ve shown me that Christmas is nothing more than a sugar rush. A bad decision. Too much money spent on too much stuff. Just believe, you say? In what?”

A laugh escaped her throat. It was good that Mom had snow-birded out of here, that Mason lived down in West Hills, and that Junie was essentially alone in this wing of the inn. If

anyone heard her talking to herself, they'd pronounce her certifiably insane.

“Lies! It's all lies, and I'm done buying into your commercialized farce of twinkling joy. You got that? You hear me, Christmas? Santa?”

She peered out her window as though expecting an answer. For some reason, the silence only bolstered her that much more. That silence was proof that she was finally—*finally*—on the right track of this trainwreck. That silence meant she was right.

The Polar Express had derailed.

There was no such thing as Santa.

Christmas wasn't what it was popcorn-kernal-cracked up to be.

Junie rose to her feet and stood in triumph in the darkness, the carpet soft beneath her non-decorative socks, an aberration from the candy-cane-striped, fluffy, thick woolen wonders she usually donned to warm her toes this time of year. She felt abruptly, uncharacteristically rebellious. She felt the need to do something to mark this newfound stance she'd taken. Like, build a snowman only to knock it down or sneak into Mason's kitchen and swap the labels on his spice jars.

“That's right. I've officially placed myself on the naughty list.”

Except... that would mean there was a list. Nope. Nix. Nada. There was no list. Santa didn't check things once, let alone twice. No, he left perfectly good lists in young girls' stockings rather than granting any of their wishes.

“Scratch that. No list. I'm just naughty.” Except it sounded ludicrous even as she spoke the words.

Junie had always done the right thing and would continue to do so, she supposed. She'd just leave Christmas out of that equation from now on.

Resolved, she tucked herself into her bed once more. A load had been lifted. She was settled. She was a new woman.

She was—

The melody started slowly, a gentle hum hovering along the floor like smoke from a fire. This wasn't cool. She'd made a new resolve. Couldn't her mind get a clue?

Except this wasn't a melody on repeat in her mind this time. This was actual music drifting into her room from down the hall.

Uncertainty prickled over her. Boone had said he'd hidden the radio, and she'd thought he'd put it in the attic. Had he moved it?

She slipped into her robe to ward off the chill sifting along her arms and ventured into the hall of the original family wing. The more steps she took, the louder the music got. She passed Boone's old room only to pause and turn back to it again.

Slowly, Junie turned the knob and peered inside. His room looked like it always had—ribbons from his rodeo days hanging on the walls, the bed made with its old hand-stitched blanket, a dresser across from the bed. But the radio sat on top of the dresser. And a melody drifted softly from it.

“Oh, no you don't,” Junie said, throwing a blanket over the radio. She twisted the knob to shut it off. The music obeyed, stopping. She stared at the mound beneath the blanket. The radio hadn't been playing “The Twelve Days of Christmas” as it had the last time she'd heard it. She wasn't sure she recognized the song. And even though Mason had mysteriously found himself in the same room with her the last several times it had played, he was nowhere in sight now.

Of course, he wasn't. He wouldn't have bolted all the way here from his apartment in the basement of the gift shop down the hill anyway. Who was she kidding? He wouldn't have heard the radio from there in the first place.

For some reason, this made Junie all the more frustrated.

“Stop messing with me,” she told it. “I told you, I'm breaking up with you.”

She stormed back to her room, slammed the door, and nestled into her bed. It took much too long to fall asleep.

Finally, with thoughts of chucking the radio off the nearest cliff and selling the inn eventually soothing her enough to relax into sleep, Junie succumbed to slumber. One last question pelted her mind as she did so:

What was the radio thinking, playing now when everything was about to change?

CHAPTER 7



Mason didn't want to get out of bed. Ordinarily, he didn't mind rising early. In fact, he found he liked the early morning hours when he could listen to music or podcasts in his earbuds or talk to Junie while he began to prep the kitchen for the first meal of the day. There was something about preparing breakfast that made him feel alive.

But today, he was in the most comfortable bed he'd slept on in some time. He and the team had stayed at the Harper's Inn Event Center the night before Christmas Eve. Since this was the first year they'd be offering a full-fledged meal at the center, it made sense for Mason and his team to stay in one of the guest rooms on the upstairs level rather than preparing everything and attempting to haul it all up here as they'd done in past years when they'd only offered appetizers and a hot chocolate bar.

He couldn't linger in bed, not today. He rose and went through the motions. Showered. Dressed. Greeted his team as he stepped into the inn's pristinely cleaned kitchen.

His thoughts continued drifting to Junie. Wondering what was bothering her and if there was something he could do to help her. Maybe he should have allowed the conversation to drift to the kiss they'd shared. Would it make things better to mention the elephant present in whatever room they occupied every time they were together?

He didn't like that she was hurting. Mason couldn't figure out why her shift in feelings should bother him so much, but it did. He liked Junie. She was sweet, and her charm was

altogether appealing and was part of the reason he focused on her more than he should. He supposed he'd taken her chipper happiness for granted. Now that she no longer directed it at him, her lack of good-naturedness stirred his unease.

She was too sweet to be so upset, and he found himself wanting to help fix whatever was wrong.

"Today's the big day," Logan said, tying his apron into place and bringing Mason's thoughts back around.

He towered over Mason, a fact that made reaching the top shelf easy. Mason wasn't short by any means, but Logan was just *tall*.

He knew his junior chef was referring to the holiday they'd been planning and preparing for these last three weeks. But all Mason could think about was Junie's downcast expression, the sadness in her eyes, and what he could do to chase that sadness away.

His parents were also coming today. And he wished they were going to be anywhere else.

He wished *he* could be anywhere else. Maybe he and Junie could go somewhere and talk. Have it out like they should have three years ago. Would that help her?

It would do him no good to dwell on that. Maybe once Christmas was over.

Ugh. Christmas. That meant spending the holiday with his parents. Even though Mom had messaged how much she was looking forward to seeing him, Dad hadn't made any other attempts at communication. It was just as well.

Usually, Mason loved the bonfire, the heady consuming energy that went into preparing for such an important gathering. Now, he understood why Boone had sworn off the ride into the mountains yearly. Although, since Boone and Grace had gotten married, they'd begun coming again.

"What's first, boss?" Logan asked.

Mason shook himself. He pressed his lips into a line and gave his assistant a grateful nod. His parents were coming. So

what? He knew how to put on a good meal, and it was time to get things where they needed to be.

“We need to get the rolls rising and prepare the hams. Which of the salads are left to throw together?”

Sylvia gave him a reply, and the three of them dove into preparations. The idea to hold the Christmas meal at the bonfire had been Mason’s. He’d suggested making full use of the event center rather than having the guests spend the entirety of the time on the mountain around the bonfire and under the stars.

Junie wanted to do away with the Christmas Eve bonfire? What had gotten into her? At least he’d been able to talk her off that ledge.

He definitely intended to talk to her and see what was really bothering her. What had caused her to make such a drastic decision?

The team worked relentlessly the rest of Christmas Eve Day cooking, basting, and baking. They even decorated the center’s dining hall, making sure the fire was lit. Soft Christmas music streamed from the overhead speaker system just as the jingling bells of Boone’s and Troy’s sleighs could be heard.

“Sounds like they’re here,” Logan said.

“Yeah,” Mason said. “Time to get cleaned up.” Just because he’d been slaving away all day didn’t mean he had to look it. He took the steps to the upper level of the event center, where he’d slept the night before—and where guests typically slept in the summertime when they scheduled an event here.

He was glad for the shift in focus, for something else to do rather than stand around and simmer in the agony of not knowing what kind of greeting he would get once his parents arrived.

Mason checked his phone a final time. Still nothing from his parents. Had they made it to Harper’s Inn? Were they in the sleighs even now, preparing to arrive? He’d thought they

would at least text him when they got to the inn. Then again, maybe they had. Reception up here wasn't the greatest.

He changed into a black button-up collared shirt and jeans. The staff would be there to serve the guests. He'd done his part cooking the ham and Christmas foodstuff, and now he needed to be ready to meet his fate. Whatever it brought.



BOONE AND TROY LED THE HORSES TO THE SMALL BARN situated several feet away from the event center to get them sheltered, rested, and fed before the return journey down the mountain once the bonfire was over. Most years, the gathering, presentation, and consuming of cocoa and other mouthwatering treats only lasted about two hours, though sometimes particularly rambunctious guests were chattier than other groups usually were.

In those instances, Junie kept board games on hand for those less inclined to talk so they could pass the time as long as they wanted. Sometimes children even gathered outside to watch the moon for Santa's passing.

This year, Junie had taken a backseat to all the usual preparations, resorting to greeting other guests and answering their questions, or offering tours of the event center, so guests knew where to find their meal once it was ready or bathrooms should they need one. People seemed to be doing well enough without her showing them any of it.

Plenty of them were regulars; she recognized them and knew them by name from years past. What would they do once they saw she lacked her usual gusto this year? They'd either be concerned or annoyed she wasn't her usual jaunty self, considering they'd chosen to spend their money and holiday at her establishment.

The pressure that heaved on her at that thought only made things worse.

Junie paced, her boots crunching the already-packed snow. She barely noticed the bone-chilling cold threatening to eat its

way through the fabric of her pants. Her blood raced warmer than the hot chocolate she'd just downed, and the unlit firepit stood pinpoint in the center of the circle of camp chairs and benches.

What was her problem? She had never gotten this nervous before a performance, and certainly not enough to make her want to retract from the stage. The monologue she'd written thirteen years ago—the same year she'd written her husband wish list—was filled with charm and humor and had only been changed the slightest bit when Mom decided she wanted to parry quick wit with Junie during its presentation.

That was long gone now that Mom had gotten back surgery and passed responsibility for the inn over to Junie. Mom spent her winters elsewhere, claiming the cold made her pain worse. It probably did.

“Stupid responsibility,” Junie grumbled. “Stupid guests coming to the stupid inn.”

“Something wrong?” Grace asked, holding Brecken in her arms. He looked so cute, all bundled up in his fuzzy, full-body, blue snowsuit. Little bear ears poking out from the hood settled comfortably on his head.

“Yes,” Junie snapped, allowing herself the honesty for once. “All these people here. This tradition. It's all wrong.”

The inn. The radio. She hated it all. Even winter. Even snow! And usually, she loved snow. Ugh. Christmas was so overrated. Santa wouldn't really head out tonight because he didn't exist. Parents would be putting presents under trees. Reindeer wouldn't fly. And radios didn't pair couples with romance.

“I wish it would all go away. Or that I could go away,” Junie said.

That wasn't a bad idea. She needed a vacation. Come to think of it, she'd never taken a single break. She'd dealt with the stress of running the inn for years without taking a single one. Maybe once the holiday was over, she'd book a cruise. Meet a hot Latino guy, preferably someone who kissed with all

the ferocity and lilt of a salsa dancer, someone who'd never heard of Santa Claus or magic radios.

Exclamations rang out as flames licked the horizon. Sympathy lined the creases at the edges of Grace's eyes. That or pity, Junie couldn't tell which.

"Boone lit the bonfire," she said as if she didn't know what else to say.

He had. Guests were catcalling and whooping, chanting Junie's name, egging her on to begin her story the way she always did. For so many years, she had granted those requests, swooping in with glee and pleasure at having all eyes on her, their attention fixed and ready to drink in Great-Grandpa Harper's story just as she used to whenever she'd heard it as a child.

But no more. Junie's limbs locked up. The will to move, to sashay and prance for their attention like always now sent her wanting to cower in a corner.

She was standing outside in the open, fresh, and very cold air, but it felt like walls were closing in around her. Her lungs fought to gain breath. A pillow shrouded her brain, and the instinct to run as if from a predator overtook her as if she were being threatened at gunpoint.

"I can't do it, Grace."

Grace smiled. "Sure you can."

Fear seized Junie's chest. Clamped over her heart. She backed up a few paces, eyes pleading with her cousin-in-law. "I can't. I'm serious. I don't think I can go stand up there and pretend everything is okay."

Grace's eyes widened a fraction. "What are you going to do? They're all expecting this. They're waiting for you."

The spaces between her bones filled with lead. She couldn't move. She *couldn't* do this. In a last, grasping motion, Junie gripped Grace's elbow. "Stall for me."

"What?"

"Please, just for a little longer while I get it together."

“And do what?” Grace’s voice sounded as panicked as Junie felt. “I don’t know your routine. I don’t know any of this. What do you want me to do?”

“Tell a few jokes. Just stall them. Please.”

Grace’s rigid frame slowly relaxed. She nodded her head a few times. Brecken kicked his legs against her, grinning at Junie as though she’d offered him some kind of treat. “Okay. Go on inside. Take a few minutes. People will understand.”

Relief settled over her, though she knew it couldn’t last. “Thank you.” She dashed toward the event center as though a bear was tailing her heels.

Warm air engulfed her the moment she stepped inside. Junie marched into the main open area with its balcony overlooking every side from above, where rooms were situated for guests who booked summer events here. Fortunately, the seating area was empty of everything but its furnishings and the fire blazing in the ceiling-high stone fireplace.

Heat blasted over her, turning her entire body feverish. She tore the beanie from her head and unzipped her coat, swiftly suffocating.

“This is fine. It’s your last year,” she muttered to herself, trying to talk her anxiety down. Her anxiety wasn’t getting the hint. Honestly, why was she such a mess right now?



MASON WAS FROZEN IN PLACE. HE HADN’T BEEN IN THE SAME space as his parents in...he couldn’t remember how long. Since right after he’d taken the job here, probably. And now, his parents had made it to Montana. They were, in fact, standing near the bonfire. Mom had her hands outstretched toward the flickering flames, while Dad sneered at the snow as if he disdained the precipitation for daring to be colder than he was.

Mason steeled himself. He tried not to think of the last time he and his parents had been in one another’s presence.

It'd been when he'd announced he was taking this job. The lowly position of creating amazing food and offering one-on-one tastings for those who were interested in a decadent cuisine designed only for them.

Dad had yelled and raved about Mason's foolishness. He'd belittled him in every possible way, making Mason that much more eager to leave his home in Florida behind for good.

Honestly, how could his father not appreciate something like good food? Stephen Devries was the king of top quality. He ate at the best restaurants all over the world. That was the problem. It was the entitlement of having so much and always eating like that. Stephen Devries considered eating that way to be his right. But anyone who prepared food for people like him to enjoy was beneath him.

It was why Mason had been so surprised when Dad had told him of the opening at the Hyacinth and insisted he apply.

The way he looked at Mason now gave Mason the sense he'd shrunk in size. That he'd lowered a few rungs on his father's proverbial ladder. That didn't mean Mason had to sink to the same level. He inhaled, determined to show them exactly how much his position here meant to him.

"You made it," he said, forcing a smile.

Mom turned, and her face lit up. Her short blonde hair was covered by a red beanie with a puff on its end. The hat coordinated with her gray ski jacket, which had streaks of red on the sleeves. "Mason," she said kindly, opening her arms to him. Mason dipped in for the hug, warmed by her welcome.

"There isn't much to the place, is there?" Dad sniffed and looked down his nose at the event center feet away. The structure was all logs. It reminded Mason of a ski lodge with a large porch made of wooden beams. The center was newer than the inn and quite a bit more posh..

"It's beautiful to me," Mason said.

"I agree," Mom said, squeezing his arm and slipping hers through it. "So, the rumors about this magic radio? I read all about it on the website."

Mason exhaled in relief. Did that mean Junie had changed it back? Dad fell into step beside her. He was bundled up, with a woolen hat covering his balding head and a stoic gray ski jacket that matched his wife's.

“Clever gimmick. They'd have to come up with something like that to get people to come to a place like this.”

“Harper's Inn has its own charm,” Mason said, ignoring the grinding in his jaw and the temptation to snap at his father. They didn't need one of their arguments, not here with all the guests around.

“We're looking forward to the meal, Mr. Devries,” a woman said kindly, greeting Mason as she passed.

“I'm glad to hear it,” Mason said, smiling at her, feeling a slight increase in height.

“You've really made a name for yourself here,” Mom said. “Many of the guests were talking up how happy they are that you're serving a full-fledged meal for this. They couldn't stop raving about your food, hon.”

Mason smiled at her and again thought of Junie's sadness. Had his parents met Junie when they'd arrived? What would they say now if things had gone differently? If he hadn't severed the connection he'd been feeling with her? Would he and Junie still be together today? Would he be introducing Junie to his parents as something else besides receptionist and owner?

He hadn't wanted to consider it at the time. Worries over his temper flaring aside, once he found a girl, it would be a girl he chose. He would be in a relationship with someone because *he* wanted it. More and more lately, he wanted a relationship with Junie Harper.

With the thoughts flaring, he found himself longing that things with Junie had gone differently than they had. Nothing he could do about it now.

“You promised this bonfire would be worth it,” Dad said. “When does everything start?”

The crowd clustering around the bonfire was a solid indicator. “Looks like they’re gearing up for the story now. Junie Harper owns the inn now. She inherited it from her parents, and she puts on the show that many guests return every year to witness. She’s a natural actress with this vivacity and energy that really brings the story to life.”

“So she monologues?” Dad’s disdain was evident.

The need to defend Junie flared like an angry lion in his chest. “It’s more than that. She’s a natural storyteller. Just wait, you’ll see what I mean when she—Grace?”

The crowd around the bonfire began shuffling uneasily. People called for Junie to start the story. Any minute now, Junie would take center stage and open her hands to them. Her face would light up with delight and branch headfirst into the story he knew all too well. About the Christmas Eve over a hundred years ago when Santa had forgotten to deliver presents to the Harpers. About how Santa had stopped by to deliver one of his own possessions to make up for the slight. He’d brought a radio that had once belonged to him. Then Junie would delve into the antics and romance that ensued from the radio since.

“Did you ever hear the one about the reindeer who lost his way?” Grace was saying. She wrenched her gloved hands, chewing her lip and peering at Boone—who held their baby—with awkward nervousness in her expression. Grace wrote books and had even had one published, but clearly, she wasn’t an orator.

“He was no Rudolph, so he meandered through the woods and fa-la-la-ed all the way.” She grinned awkwardly at her ridiculous joke before grunting at the stagnant crowd who stared at her as though wondering who she was.

“Where’s Junie?” Thelma Clements asked. She and her husband were regulars.

“She...needed a moment,” Grace said. Her face was struck with fake enthusiasm. “But I’m sure she’ll be right here as soon as she can.”

“It’s already been fifteen minutes,” another guest said.

“Anyone else have any good stories to share?” Grace said in desperation. “We need some way to pass the time until Junie gets here.”

Unease sank into Mason’s gut. He didn’t have a good feeling about this. Was Junie okay? She hadn’t decided to back out on everyone, had she? Why had she thrown Grace to the wolves like this?

Apparently, Boone wondered as much too. He pulled Mason aside, looking frustrated. In his arms, Brecken gave Mason a toothy grin from within the hood of his snowsuit, oblivious to the disaster unfolding. “Have you seen my cousin anywhere?”

Mason glanced around. Dad glowered at him as if to say, “This is magical?” before treading to an empty section in the seating around the bonfire and the ever-cringing Grace Harper. A few of the guests began calling out and sharing their favorite Christmas memories. There was that, at least. One person rose and suggested they search for Junie and make sure she was okay.

Mason had to do something, if for nothing else than to help Junie save face once she returned from wherever she’d gone.

Forcing confidence into his gait and posture, he strode to Grace’s side. The embarrassment and discomfort in her eyes were unmistakable.

“Thank you, Grace, for tiding things over.” Mason clapped a hand on her shoulder and then faced the guests. Cheeks were red with cold. Breath exhaled from open mouths. Eyes looked at him with worry. He had to do what he could to assuage that.

“I’m sorry you’ve all had such a delay, but I wanted to introduce myself while we have a minute. My name is Mason Devries. I’m the chef here at Harper’s Inn—” From the corner of his eye, he noticed Dad close his. Mason ignored him and went on. “And I thought you’d all like a rundown of the meal we’ll be having just as soon as Junie gets here.”

“Any idea where she went?” someone asked.

“Is she okay?”

“I’m sure Junie is fine. You know her. She lives for this bonfire.” He added a grin to the statement, hoping to put them at ease. Several guests nodded and smiled. “Junie’s bloodstream spikes with sugar just talking about the story of her great-grandpa’s radio,” he added. Several guests laughed and bobbed their heads in agreement.

Boone gave him an encouraging nod as well.

“Everything is just fine. As for dinner, we’ll soon be enjoying a flavorful spread of honied ham, savory prime rib, sweet potatoes, butternut squash, the creamiest pasta salad, and all the dessert you can get your hands on. For those interested in more of a plant-based selection, the team and I have put together my specialty chicken-fried mushrooms, vegan green bean casserole, and fruit sorbet.”

Several in the crowd released grateful cheers.

“Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’ll check with the staff. We weren’t going to serve the meal for another half an hour or so, but if everything is good to go, we might shake things up a bit and eat first. How does that sound?”

Numerous people cheered so that by the time Mason smiled and circled around the gathered guests, the concerned tension that had been building as Grace had been doing her act had all but dissipated once more. Food had that effect on people. It was calming. It was soothing.

If only Mason felt the same inside. Right now, he had to find Junie and make sure she was okay.

CHAPTER 8



Junie hid behind the tall stone fireplace that climbed into the middle of the event center's massive living room. She dug her fingers into the stone and attempted to regain control of her breathing. She was taking too long. But no matter how hard she tried, she couldn't bring herself to face the crowd.

They would see right through her. A person couldn't fake that a relationship was still what it once was, not after they'd broken things off with that person. And she'd dumped Santa and his radio and his holiday. That fact hadn't changed. No amount of play-acting and storytelling could alter it.

The event center's door opened, letting in a gust of cold air. Mason marched in with purpose and concern in his features. His worry wasn't regarding the food he had waiting in the center's dining hall; she knew he was as careful as it came to prep work for this particular event and any he catered to. No, he glanced around the lobby and called her name.

Her name. Junie's. He was looking for *her*.

"Junie? Are you in here? Everyone is worried."

She cringed at that. She couldn't remain in hiding. Not anymore. Bolstering what was left of her courage, Junie lifted her chin and stepped out from behind the fireplace's stone chimney.

"There you are." Patches of red marked his cheeks and accentuated his handsome features. "Everything okay?"

“Will everyone please stop asking me that?” she cried, slamming her eyes shut. Logically, she knew it wasn’t fair. She couldn’t help her small amount of outrage at being coddled like this. Wasn’t it okay that she got upset sometimes? Couldn’t she be allowed to feel things that didn’t elicit a smile now and then?

The time to head back out was now—if only to get away from the way he stared at her. Like she was losing her mind. Maybe she had lost it.

It’s only a performance, Junie told herself, turning the chant inward. *Only a performance*. There was no business like show business, apparently. The show must go on, no matter what the actors were going through in their personal lives.

This was the last time she would perform her little skit for the Christmas Eve bonfire, yet somehow, that thought wasn’t making her feel any better. Having a breakdown was terrible enough. Having one in front of the man she’d fantasized about marrying for the last three years was the epitome of embarrassment.

Junie wanted to sink into the floor, to melt like snow under fire. She’d rather be doing anything right now. Selling vacuums door to door. Donating both kidneys and a lung and maybe a few toes to research facilities while she was at it.

She waited for Mason to turn and head back outside. To write her off as psychotic and leave her to her panicky devices. But he only stood there, staring at her, his handsome face displaying more and more concern as time passed.

“Can you go away?” she finally said, voice wilting. “I just need a minute.”

Mason hesitated long enough that she thought he might actually listen. He opened his mouth, but the only sound that sailed between them was the soft strains of... music?

The sound made every hair on her nape stand on end.

“What was that?” she asked.

Mason’s jaw snapped shut. He pivoted and glared up at the balconies overhead—as if searching for the source. “It sounds

like...”

It wasn't anything up to date and recorded recently. This sounded too much like music with interference, like something coming in through static from a poorly channeled station.

Like music from Santa's annoying, dream-killing radio.

“The radio,” Junie breathed.

“The—*the* radio?” Mason's voice was incredulous. “What's it doing here?”

“It's *not*.”

Junie scowled at the incredulity he displayed. Of course he wouldn't be happy to hear anything like that again. He'd only ignored her for months after that very radio had guided them into the same room to embrace and even kiss.

Did he remember kissing her? Did he regret it? Was that why he'd pulled away?

If so, it begged the question of why. What about her was so repulsive that he hadn't been willing to pursue anything with her the way Boone had done with Grace?

“Did you have it moved here?” he asked.

“Like I would.” She didn't care if she sounded rude. She didn't. “I had Boone tuck that thing into the deepest, darkest corner of the attic. He'd moved it into his old bedroom, and that was the last place I saw it.”

Had Mason not noticed the radio had gone missing?

Chills tumbled down her arms, instantly cooling the heat that had suffocated her moments before. The music didn't stop. In fact, she recognized the strains of an unfinished song, a song that had only played halfway through, one line each night, two years ago. The seventh day of Christmas tinkled between them.

Mason must have recognized it too. He groaned out something that sounded like, “Not again.”

Junie stormed in what she thought was the music's direction. It sounded like it was coming from the prep room

just off from the kitchen—where brides and grooms changed for their receptions—and stopped. Sure enough, there, on one of the side tables, sat the radio.

She'd recognize it anywhere. Rounded top that came to the slightest point in the center like a gothic archway in a cathedral. Long, scrolled speakers on either side. And a pair of wide, dark knobs.

“No way,” Junie breathed. How had it gotten here?

“You're taking this a little too far, don't you think?”

She let out a squeal, clamped a hand to her chest, and did a sort of hop-turn. She hadn't expected Mason to follow her here. But there he was, looking devilishly handsome, despite the thunderstorm blazing in his dark eyes.

“I didn't do this.” She shot a hand toward the radio.

He let out a disbelieving scoff and began to pace the room. “I didn't want to say anything. I didn't want to make things awkward or make any assumptions, but this reluctance about the bonfire...”

“What about it?”

“It's about me, isn't it? I mean, it's been three years.”

Junie's mouth dropped. It took her several beats before she could formulate a response. “It has nothing to do with you. And I *didn't* do this.”

Mason frowned, and the slightest traces of remorse crossed his features as he tried to figure out what to say this time. Before he could manage it, Junie lifted her chin. She'd been looking for motivation to face the crowd? This was exactly it.

“I'd better head back out there.”

Poor Grace. Who knew what lengths she'd had to go to in order to stall. Grace was a storyteller, sure, but on paper. She wasn't theatrical like Junie was. Junie didn't bother zipping up her coat. She could use a good dunk of winter right about now. There was enough cold out there to clear her head for an entire year.

Her excuses and apologies for the crowd ready on her tongue, she smashed through the event center's main door and staggered.

“What in the—?” The question died on its way out.

In place of the clear, night sky that had glimmered with starlight so close she felt she could touch it, white clouds had rammed in, gusting wind and snow in every direction. Junie's hair whipped around her face, and snow flurries eddied in cold clusters.

She felt Mason come up short behind her.

“What the heck?” he asked, pushing past her and storming down the porch steps, halting at the collection of snow piling higher by the minute.

The bonfire was out. The guests that had bunched and laughed and chanted and cheered were gone. Even the seating that had been around arranged around the firepit was vacant and piled on with snow, as though no prep work had been done, as though no one else but Junie and Mason were there.

Junie took a few steps, not quite leaving the porch. “Where is everyone?”

Mason lifted an arm, warding off the swirling snow. “I was going to ask you the same question,” he shouted over the howling gusts whipping through his dark hair. He peered toward the barn where the horses and sleighs would have been situated to recuperate before returning the guests to the inn.

For a moment, Junie's breath hitched with worry for Hazelnut and Cashmere, but the horses and the conveyances they pulled were just as gone as the guests were.

Mason stomped up the steps and into the event center, tracking in the snow along whether he meant to or not. The swirls followed him in. Junie let the cold flurries smack her cheeks and maybe bring some sense in along with them, but no explanations or clarity emerged. Her jaw chattered, but she couldn't follow him into the warm building. Not when another disarming thought struck:

Only minutes ago, she'd wished for this.

Or—for something like this.

Junie had wished that everyone would vanish. She'd wished all of this, the bonfire, the awkwardness, her position of being in charge, would end. She wished she had never started the bonfire-story tradition in the first place.

Santa's magic didn't grant wishes, did it? Not that it was real. Not that she believed anymore. But what other explanation was there? Where *had* everyone gone?

Junie recalled with absolute clarity the fury Lacie Kingston had when she'd wound up sharing a room with her best friend, Jared, and everyone had assumed they were married before they'd actually gotten married. Lacie had accused Junie of doing a background check on them and staging the whole scenario, going so far as to change her driver's license to display Jared's last name as Lacie's own.

She could understand that fury now as she scrambled to explain how an inn full of guests could disappear from the mountainside in minutes. Similar suspicions coursed through her. Boone and Grace. Had they planned this? Planted the radio, timed it to play, gotten the guests to bolt and hide in the trees?

She could maybe buy the story if it wasn't for the lack of not only a bonfire, but the logs that had kindled it. And what about the snow? The sky had been clear ten minutes ago. No cloud in sight. How had a storm this severe blown in so rapidly?

Shivering, getting no answers, Junie pivoted and made her way back inside to where a different kind of storm awaited her.

CHAPTER 9



Mason should feel relieved. His parents had quite literally disappeared. Wasn't he hoping something like this might happen?

Even still, all of the confusion he'd battled three years ago resurfaced again with sudden force. He wasn't sure what to think. He had a strong aversion to anyone telling him what to do. He wasn't going to let a mythical, nonexistent person have a say in anything he did. It was why he'd refused to let the radio dictate who he should love.

Falling in love—choosing a spouse—was one of the most important decisions a person could make, and doing so on a whim of magical sound was not the way to go about it.

Sure, his thoughts had been veering increasingly in Junie's direction lately. He'd been noticing her beauty, her smile, her fetching personality, more than usual. His heart had been reacting to her nearness. She'd even made appearances in his dreams—dreams that had included kissing her senseless. He'd been fine with all of that, because it was what he wanted. No radio involved.

But now?

He hadn't held Junie three years ago because it was what he'd wanted. He hadn't kissed her because she was so charming and he'd fallen so in love with her he couldn't help himself. He'd done it because he'd been overcome by some kind of lunatic magic. He'd sworn that would never happen again.

Junie stepped back inside the event center and stared at the couches, the fireplace, and the open room, but her gaze was so vacant he suspected she wasn't really seeing anything. After several moments, she sniffed.

"This was unexpected," she finally said. "I'm not sure what's going on."

He wasn't sure he could accept that. How else had the radio gotten here if she hadn't brought it herself? Had she staged it to play? Scheduled the song to start on the seventh day, right where it had left off years before?

The fact that she was still trying to force this on him was a shame, especially since he'd welcomed the idea of dating her alone, without any interference.

His frustration from before simmered the way it always did when his anger began building. Mason hadn't allowed himself to lose control in so long. Against his better judgment, he'd snapped and been rude to her when the radio had played here on the mountaintop—he didn't want to do that again.

"I need a minute," he told Junie, hoping she would understand. Mason took the stairs two at a time and made for the room he'd stayed in the night before. He needed some time to process and recalibrate—and he didn't want to come unglued around Junie any more than he already had.

His anger and the exacting side of his personality made him more like his father than he wanted—and he had to get away from Junie before the monster reared its head.

The problem was—even with his door closed—he could hear Junie's frantic ranting below.

"Oh, sure, walk away," Junie snapped, her voice muffled. Her footsteps pounded up the stairs, and then she knocked on his door. Mason withheld a groan.

"Talk to me," she said. "Please?"

He wasn't calm enough for that. He inhaled through his nose, working to keep his cool, but she knocked again and turned the handle.

“Mason? I know you’re mad. Let’s talk and figure out what’s going on.”

He attempted to curtail his anger, but there it was. Frustration coursed through him, steering his blood to his hands and urging him to lose control. Mason gritted his teeth, pushing the urge back down again.

“I don’t want to talk just yet, Junie.”

“I know, but—”

How could he help her understand? He wasn’t happy about this. His parents were who knew where and this was just one more thing he’d have to explain to his dad.

Besides that, how could the radio have gotten here if Junie claimed she hadn’t been the one to move it? She’d told him this was the last year she was doing the bonfire. He also knew she bought into every word of the story she told about the radio’s matchmaking history.

He’d had to pull away. He knew it had hurt her, but eventually, she’d begun talking to him again. Eventually, she’d been able to act the way they once had before the radio’s interfering nonsense.

And here they were, snowed in together on the mountaintop. What other explanation was there? Briefly, he remembered the feast in the kitchen below, waiting to be served. Had a Grinch swept in and stolen it—roast beast and all? He’d have to check, but at least he could take a few minutes.

“Please, Mason,” Junie insisted. This time, she entered the room. He pivoted away from the wall and faced her. The sight of her worried expression stilled him just enough.

She wanted to talk? He supposed it was beyond time for that.

“I can’t believe you’d do this,” he said.

“Me?” she said, gesturing in shock at the blizzard that had swirled in out of nowhere. “I can’t make it snow, Mason.”

He worked to tamp it down, but his frustration got the better of him. “No, but you had that radio brought here. Did you decide to throw all caution to the wind since this was your last year doing the bonfire? You threw Grace under the bus and now pulled this stunt?”

“I didn’t,” she stammered, her cheeks reddening.

“You could have at least tried,” he said. “You could have given the bonfire a chance.”

“Oh, sure, Mr. ‘I Make Perfect Food So Everything Else Has to Be Perfect.’ I’m sorry I don’t fit into that scenario. I’m sorry I don’t live up to this *perfect* standard you’ve set for yourself.”

That stunned him. He supposed she was right. He kicked himself and turned his back to her again, working to cool the fire in his blood. “This is why I came in here. I need a minute to myself, Junie.”

He wasn’t looking at her, but he could picture her lower lip quivering, her eyes as big as gumdrops in the resulting silence.

“We—you—” She paused, and that pause was filled with tension. “All right. I’ll give you some space. *Again.*”

Moments later, the door to his room slammed shut, and he heard her footsteps storming down the stairs.

Mason cursed himself. What was his problem? This was exactly why he’d come up here—for a few moments to cool down before he did something stupid like hurt her feelings again. He marched to the door, thrust it open, and stepped out onto the landing. “Junie, don’t take it like that. I just meant—”

She was in the open area below. Junie glared at him and snatched her coat from the couch across from the fireplace, stuffing her arms into the sleeves.

Mason strode to the railing along the landing’s edge and rested a hand on the banister. “What are you doing?”

“I’m not staying here with you. I’m not sharing the same space with someone so egotistical and selfish for another

minute. I didn't bring the radio here. And I've sworn off Santa."

"You can't go out in that storm." He pointed in the direction of the center's double doors through which they could see the storm ransack the mountainside. If anything, the snow had gotten worse. It whirled in white tornadoes past the doors' glass.

Junie zipped her coat. "Don't you see? It's not real. It's made up. Spoof and nonsense."

"And the disappearing guests?"

"For all we know, Boone led them to the sleighs in the barn to give them something to do while they waited for me," she snarled, cramming her beanie on her head and wrenching open the door on the right.

"Where are you going?" Mason said. He flew down half the steps before she answered.

"To the barn. To where the guests are probably all hiding and having a good laugh. I'd rather be there than with you."

"Come on," he said, but she shut the door behind her, drowning out his protest.

Mason gaped. Her pain-stricken words marched in his brain. Why—why had he accused her of bringing the radio here? What was his problem? She was right. Did he really have to be so nasty about everything? He cursed himself for letting his temper get the better of him.

The wind gusted, hurling itself against the windows. Snow tinkled with soft nails against the glass, and worry clawed inside him. Junie had gone out in that mess.

He hurried down the rest of the stairs for a closer look outside. He was certain to find her standing on the porch, a dark form against the snow's whiteness. But she wasn't anywhere in sight.

"She's in the barn by now," he told himself. "She's fine."

Junie knew this mountaintop better than anyone did. She was raised here. She'd spent every second of the summer

romping through this mountainside and its meadows; she'd been up here when the event center had first been built. She went on trail rides up here with Boone in the summertime. Surely, she still knew her way around in the blustering snow. Didn't she?

He couldn't help pacing. He peered out the window. A few minutes had passed, and there was no sign of her. He'd fully expected her to stomp through the door any minute.

"Where is she?" His panic heightened. He stared out again but saw no staggering, curly-haired brunette lumbering along in the snow. She couldn't last out in this. She hadn't tried going back down to the inn on foot, had she? Headstrong woman.

He couldn't help but feel responsible for her running off. If he hadn't been so belligerent, so hard-headed and argumentative. What was he going to do if she didn't show up?

Mason bundled up: in a hat, coat, gloves, and boots, hoping it was enough. He sent out a little prayer for help in finding her, and then, not knowing if she were hurt somewhere, or lost, or worse, he set out into the cold.

Frigid air slapped his face and whipped against his coat. He fought through it, pushing into the knee-deep snow at the base of the porch steps. *Please help me find her. Please let her be okay.*

Mason trekked toward the firepit, panic hitching higher. The benches were covered with piles of snow. If she'd collapsed, it'd been long enough, snow would have covered her, and was so deep she would have sunk into it regardless.

He veered toward the barn, but there was no sign she'd gone there either. Where was she? Mason lifted an arm to shield the snow from his eyes. Fortunately, the full moon offered enough light to give him a fine view of the clearing, but Junie wasn't anywhere in sight.

Disgruntled with worry, he continued onward, trying his best to remain oriented so he could find his way back to the

event center when the time came. Mason plodded through the snow, searching around trees, wishing he had a flashlight.

At one point, he became so turned around, genuine fear overtook him. That would be just what he needed—to freeze and die out here as a result of his failed rescue attempt. Backtracking, he caught sight of the event center in the distance and breathed in relief. Not only for shelter but especially because he spotted something else.

Junie. She had collapsed against a tree several feet past the barn, exposing herself completely to the snow's whirling flurry. A drift created a kind of moat around the base of a different tree several feet away, but Junie must not have seen the shelter the wall of snow provided and had abandoned her escape attempt at the side of this tree instead.

How he saw her there, he'd never know. It had to be divine providence guiding his steps because the logic of seeing her against this tree, out of all the trees she could have been propped against, was unthinkable. How she wasn't buried by snow, he didn't know.

“Junie!” Mason cried, pushing his steps through the snow with effort. He edged to the cliff of the little bank of snow. She didn't startle. She didn't respond to him at all.

Mason leapt into the other side of the drift near the tree's base. Junie had passed out, whether from cold, or fear, or other reasons; he couldn't be sure. He couldn't leave her here, and he couldn't stay out here with her. They had to get back to shelter.

CHAPTER 10



Mason excavated enough snow that he could climb his way back out again, and then he bent for Junie's limp body. She remained unresponsive. He hefted her against his chest and made for the ridge he'd created, praying with every step that he could find his way back in the direction he'd come.

Adrenaline added strength when his muscles might otherwise have given out. He stared through squinted eyes. Looking now, he could see how she might have gotten turned around. The snow cleared just enough to provide a view of the event center. Mason gritted his teeth. His arms burned, and his muscles screamed at him. But he made it up the porch steps and breathed with gallons of relief the instant he stepped inside and shut the snow out.

Relative warmth encompassed his cheeks. He carefully placed Junie on the couch nearest the door and sank to his knees in exhaustion. He exercised regularly in the inn's gym—a fact he was grateful for now. Lifting pots and pans didn't exactly get him in as good of shape as running on the gym's elliptical machines did.

Moments later, when he'd regained his breath, and his limbs had stopped trembling quite so much, he couldn't help but notice the room was not only significantly dimmer than it had been before, but the heat seemed to be shut off. Though it was significantly warmer inside than it had been outside, the heat that had filled the room before was gradually dissipating.

He'd left lights on before he ventured out, knowing he'd need the guiding light to find his way back. Now no lights glimmered. Had the power gone out? This wasn't good.

Mason shot a glance out the large main windows. The snow wasn't letting up anytime soon. With this weather, it wouldn't take long before the heat they'd managed to entrap in here would give out. Who knew how long the storm would go on or how long it would be before they had power again?

He kicked off snow from his boots and pants, took in Junie's unmoving form, and listed their options. The event center had bedrooms on the second level, readied for guests more in the summertime than in the winter. At this point, Junie's blue lips and cold skin rivaled an ice cube; he'd have to use his own body heat to warm her. He could get some blankets from the rooms upstairs to help with that.

The fireplace seemed to be vacant now. The fire that had blazed before dwindled to coals since the snow had started. This was probably their best chance—to rebuild a fire and bunk out here. The room was too big, but if they stayed close to the fire—if he got Junie as close to it as he could—that would surely help.

With an action plan in mind, he took her by the shoulders and shook her incessantly. "Junie? Wake up. Junie, are you okay?"

She wasn't responding. "Why aren't you waking up?" he asked desperately.

Whatever was bothering Junie had to be bad if it sent her stomping out into a storm on her own. She was mad at him—had it been because he'd told her he needed a minute? He suspected her frustration went deeper than that. Had she felt this way for a long time, and it was only manifesting itself now?

He had kept his distance from her. That was true. The act had been difficult at first. After their kiss in front of the radio, he'd managed to disregard Junie's dancing green eyes and contagious smile. But as of late, her features and friendly sweetness swarmed in his mind every second of the day. Many

times, he'd been tempted to abandon his duties in the kitchen and find her, to sweep her away to a secluded corner so they could share another moment just like that.

Why hadn't he? What had caused him to distance himself from her?

He knew. Unzipping her coat and blowing warm air onto her frigid fingers, he knew. He was characteristically stubborn—a trait he inherited from his father, he supposed. And he'd been shocked by his sudden interest in Juniper Harper.

He hadn't really noticed her physically before that day three years ago. She was more cute than beautiful, and he hadn't been looking for romance, especially not with his employer.

The last woman he'd dated any kind of seriously, he'd lost his temper in a moment of weakness. He couldn't be that man—the one who attempted to control everything with everyone. He tried hard not to manage his kitchen that way, and he couldn't manage a relationship that way either. Especially not with everyone watching with some expectations of perfection, expectations he couldn't follow through on.

And by everyone, he mostly meant Boone and Grace.

Mason had overheard a conversation where Junie had reprimanded Boone for his displays of affection with Grace after she'd started working at the inn. Boone had said something that had riled Mason:

“Now that the radio played for you and the chef, you two won't be far behind. No one can argue with that radio.”

That had been enough for Mason. He'd always been a master at self-control. As the son of Stephen Devries, he'd had to be, to put up with the constant criticism that had barreled in his direction his entire life. Mason had learned a long time ago that arguing with his father would only make the situation worse. So he'd mastered the art of holding his tongue. The art of self-restraint.

Junie had sought him out, and he'd ignored her on purpose, turning to his meals and making excuses for not

meeting with her on the porch, the barn, the woods, or her office. Every time he'd rejected her, it had ripped him apart, but he'd determined to be strong. He'd been determined to be the master of his own life.

He hated that he'd hurt her. But wasn't it better to withdraw so he didn't continue to do so and in even worse ways later on?

Despite his efforts to warm them, her hands were still solid ice. He stroked his fingers across her face, leaning in closer and looking at her—really looking at her. Her lips were turning blue. Her body was shivering, and she was unresponsive. A knot of worry clustered in his chest. There was nothing for it. He had to build the fire and get more heat in this room. And he had to get her out of her chilled clothes.

Mason wasn't sure which option to do first. He decided having the fire and some blankets to cover her were the first step.

"I'll be back as quickly as I can," he said, stroking her hair from her face. Her jaw shuddered, and her body trembling, she rolled onto her side. He couldn't tell if she heard him or not, but there wasn't time. He didn't know how quickly frostbite set in, but he had to get her warm again.

Still in his coat and boots, he dashed out through the kitchen, startled to realize the food he and the team had assembled and prepared had completely disappeared.

That took care of that problem, he supposed.

He couldn't worry about that now. He pushed hard against the blitz of wind at the center's back door and stomped through the brief trail to the wood pile. He swept the snow from the top level of logs and filled his arms with as many as he could manage before trudging back into the kitchen's relative warmth and shutting the storm out again.

Mason kicked the snow from his boots and shook it from his hair. Junie was still in the same place he'd left her, on the farthest couch from the fireplace. She was rigid and trembling hard.

“I’m back,” he told her, hurrying to set the logs down on the hearth in front of the dying embers. Urgency sprang him into action. He couldn’t let the cinders die away—it’d be much easier to stoke and reawaken a fire than to start a new one altogether.

“At least this will hold up until the electricity comes back,” he said, waiting for flames to manifest themselves.

The deafening silence sent shivers up Mason’s spine. He rotated and dashed to Junie, thrusting his arms beneath her and lifting her into his arms again. He had to get her as close to the heat as he could.

Her trembling body was still ice cold. Her head and arms were limp. Not good.

“Don’t worry,” he said. “I’m on it. I’ll get you warm and keep that fire going. I know you like to keep things running as they should be.”

He set her gently onto the rug as close to the fireplace as he dared and added two more logs—the drier ones than had been lower down on the pile—and blew some flames. He took some of the kindling available and added it to the stack, blowing gently, waiting for the embers to catch.

“Anytime now,” he muttered.

“M-Mason,” Junie mumbled behind him. The thinness of her voice gave him pause. Every time she spoke, it was with ease and certitude, with enthusiasm and excitement. The sound of her voice like that frightened him more than the prospect of being up here without electricity. What were they going to do?

Earnestness catapulted his heart against his chest. And finally, the flames began to gnaw into the log, increasing their dance and displaying their brilliance. And especially their heat. It blasted toward him with a welcome gust.

“There we go,” he said, turning back to Junie.

He wasn’t sure how to go about this next. Would she flay him alive if she knew he’d undressed her without her permission? The prospect sent a tiny flicker in the middle of his belly, but he pushed the thought away, chastising himself.

It's only to help her. I wouldn't do it if I didn't think it would help her.

Still, Junie was finely formed and beautiful to boot.

Keep it together, he told himself. He wasn't a neanderthal. He wouldn't ogle her and take advantage. Doctors did this kind of thing all the time, didn't they? He would keep his eyes away. He would make sure the act was as respectful of her as possible.

"Blankets," he said, voicing his solution aloud.

He knelt by her side, brushing her hair from her face. The locks had begun to thaw—there was that, at least—but her skin was still chilled and pale. Every freckle had paled too, and he somehow didn't like the look of her without them. Her freckles gave her personality. They were part of her.

She didn't respond, sending a new shiver of fear into his heart. The fear was not unexpected, but his additional possessiveness over her really threw him off. He would worry about anyone who was suffering. This additional ache in the center of his chest, the notion that he couldn't forgive himself if anything happened to her, was new.

The sky outside was dark. That darkness had also affected the event center, making him feel as though he were a ghost there.

As he dashed up the stairs in the darkness and felt his way into the first bedroom on the left, the fear and urgency increased. He couldn't imagine anything happening to her. Junie was the backbone of the inn, that was true, but other memories surfaced as he made his way into the darkness and used the light from his cell phone to find the bed. He wrenched the blanket free and snatched the extra kept on a low shelf behind the door.

Whenever he finished a menu, he sought Junie's approval. He'd always told himself it was because she was his boss, but he realized now it was because he wanted her approval for *himself*. He'd sought out other ways to be near her too. Staying late after the team left. Helping her with duties when her mom

had left. Practicing private tastings with her before sampling the food with the guests.

He came early to the inn as well, and he'd always told himself it was because he liked to prep the kitchen before his team arrived. But often, Junie was there in the kitchen with him, sitting on the counter and reviewing the food and laughing over things or talking to him and the team.

He paused in the darkness, letting the realization crash over him as subtly as an avalanche.

“Oh man,” he said, hugging the blankets to his chest.

Junie was his boss. But he was starting to grasp that she was so much more than that.

The realization gave him the impulse to hide from his feelings as he usually did. But here, with her in this event center, with her relying on him, and with the worry for her wellbeing, her earlier worries, and safety—for her *life*—he couldn't deny it any longer.

Why had he pushed this away for so long?

Phone in hand to help him see the descending stairs, he made his way toward the fire's glow and to where she lay.

“I'm back,” he said, kneeling, gratified at the heat spurring from the fire he'd rekindled. The orange flames' heat was affecting a decent circumference of the rug he'd left Junie to lay on.

This fire wasn't the only heat that was rekindling tonight. As he looked at Junie, new flames were rising within him, too. Feelings surged anew for her, feelings that threatened to overwhelm him.

“Junie?” he said.

She shivered. Her eyelids fluttered. He'd hoped the fire would help her more than this.

He made quick work of it, averting his eyes as he could as he slipped her shirt and pants free. He laid the blanket over her the instant he could. And then he gathered her into his arms, moving as close to the fire as he dared. With Junie wrapped in

the blanket, he lay alongside her, rubbed his hands along her arms, pressed his cheek against hers, wrapped his feet around hers, and prayed it was enough. He pulled the second blanket over himself and kept her close to him.

“Warm up,” he said in her ear. “It’s time to warm up.”

Strangely enough, the longer he held her, the more he found his heart responding to the request.

CHAPTER 11



Someone's arm was draped across Junie's stomach. Her eyes fluttered open, her gaze climbing the towering stone chimney of the fireplace in the event center's lobby. Flames had diminished to embers in the grate, leaving only glimpses of orange in the ashes. Though a chill had taken over the vast room, she was warm beneath a thick sherpa blanket.

Confusion settled over her. The last thing she remembered was the radio playing. The storm swirling in. And—

“Oh my gosh,” she said to herself, taking in the owner of the arm draped across her stomach. Mason, wonderful, gorgeous, mouthwatering Mason, was sleeping beside her in a blanket of his own. His arm had escaped the blanket, however, and was nestled over her, pulling her tight against his chest, keeping her close.

She adjusted as a new realization shocked her like a bolt—she wasn't wearing anything but her underwear. Her eyes flew to him. What in the world had happened? And why didn't she remember it?

“Mason,” she muttered, hating to wake him. She wanted to stay like this, to drink in the restfulness in his expression or gawk at the incredible length of his dark lashes against his cheeks, but this was no time for gawping and stewing. Something had happened. What—

A new memory filtered in like drifting snow. They'd argued. Mason had been so angry. He'd accused her of setting him up and staging the radio to play so she could trick him

into being here with her. Mortified, Junie had defiantly ventured into the cold in frustrated defiance to find her way to the barn, get a horse, and make her way back home.

And here she was with him in front of the fire...in her underwear?

Junie had imagined scenarios just like this. Being rescued by the handsome chef and forcibly locked away with him, so the two had no choice but to spend time in one another's company. Was this really happening?

She blinked a few times. Sometimes in her sleep, she got the sense that she was dreaming but couldn't control any of the dream's events. Weird things, like planting flowers in the sink or walking through a house full of cats. All of her dreams of Mason were weird, too, like seeing him through a crowd and shouting for his attention while he looked everywhere but at her.

The dreams of being secluded with him were mostly daytime ones. Fantasies. But she had no other explanation for this.

He stirred and regretfully removed his arm from around her. After a deep, sluggish inhale and stretching his arms out over his head, he relaxed beside her. Junie almost didn't want to meet his gaze, but when she opened her eyes, she found herself staring straight into his.

His eyes were the most beautiful shade of brown. His nose was straight, and don't even get her started on the shape of his mouth. She was tempted to trace her fingers over his eyebrows, to acquaint herself with the cut of his jaw, to run her fingers through his dark hair.

She could get used to this. She could *so* get used to this. He could toss his arm over her again. She could nestle into his chest and breathe in the smell of the baking powder on his skin.

"Hey," he said, his voice slightly groggy. "You're okay."

His eyes traipsed over her, filled with an expression of admiration that ensnared her and made it impossible to look

anywhere else. Her entire body turned supple. Was this really Mason here with her, looking at her as though she were precious to him?

“Am I dreaming?” she asked.

“Don’t you remember where we are?” His voice was soft. Kind.

“Are we...” She glanced around again as details began to shuffle back into her foggy brain. That’s right. The bonfire. The music. The disappearing guests. Arguing with Mason and then storming out into the storm just to spite him. “Oh,” she said. “Did I get lost?”

“As far as I know.”

“And you came to find me?”

“Mm-hmm.”

She curled her hands to her chest beneath the blanket. “And how...” She glanced down her lumpy, blanketed form, not wanting to form the words.

Mason cleared his throat. Patches of color climbed his cheeks. “You were frozen to the bone. You weren’t responsive. I tried just removing your coat and warming your hands, but that didn’t rouse you, and I knew you would fare worse with wet clothes. Don’t worry; I closed my eyes as much as possible.”

Junie wanted to hide her face in the blanket. She dipped her chin in its warm folds so only her eyes remained, and said, “Thank you.”

“Junie.” He brushed her hair from her face. She shivered at the touch. “I’m so glad you’re okay. I can’t tell you how worried I was.”

“You were?”

“You thought I wouldn’t be?”

“Actually, I—” She didn’t know what to think. Of him. Of this. He was looking at her like a boyfriend would, like she

was his heart's desire, like she was all he ever wanted to look at. How was that possible? "I don't know."

"I was worried," he said. "Now tell me what you were thinking."

"Excuse me?"

"The storm. Why did you go out in that?"

She blinked her way through this. "You're—you're mad at me for going out in the snow?"

His voice remained soothing and low. "It was dangerous, especially in a storm like this. The snow out there offered zero visibility. What if I never found you?" This last question hooked onto an air of desperation.

Oh, jingle bells, he *had* been worried about her. The idea and the receipt of his undivided attention curled inside her stomach.

"But you did," she said. "You found me."

"I did."

"I—" She wanted to sit up but thought better of it. Instead, she kept the blanket tucked tightly over her, trapping in the heat he'd helped her retain. "I'm sorry."

Her shirt and pants were hung up on a grate near the flames. Though she didn't remember the rescue, she could imagine the toll it must have taken on him.

He rolled onto his back, rested his hands on his chest, and stared at the ceiling. "Don't be. I'm just glad I found you."

"You—you are?"

He rolled to face her again. "Why does that surprise you?"

"You don't hate me?"

He propped himself on his elbow and gave her a look of incredulity. "You thought I did?"

Despite herself, a little laugh crept out. When was it a choice between laughing or crying? Junie laughed. Plus, she was happy. Even with his sad news—which she felt awful

about, and she'd get to that—Mason came after her. Mason had helped her, saved her. Saving someone's life was the opposite of hatred.

“You pulled away so hard after the radio played. I thought I repulsed you. I thought you were disgusted by me and that you couldn't stand to be anywhere near me. That you only talked to me out of obligation because I was your boss, and it was your job.”

“You thought I hated you?”

“Why else did the magic not work on us like it was supposed to? Like it did for everyone else? It had to be me. I'm awkward and quirky and weird and freckled.”

Mason's laughter wasn't the mean, making-fun kind of laughter. There was light in his eyes when he laughed. A light that told her she was adorable, a light that suggested he hadn't had reason to laugh in a long time, and now she was the cause of it.

“I like your freckles,” he said. He lifted a finger and trailed his across her skin.

Junie's eyes widened. The moment quietened, filling with the sound of the fire crackling and the pounding of her pulse. Awareness dawned in Mason's eyes as though he hadn't meant to touch her the way he had. His throat worked through a swallow.

Clearing his throat, he pushed to his feet and placed another log on the fire, stoking it a few times. Then he checked her clothes.

“These feel dry,” he said. “I'll head to the kitchen for a minute to give you some privacy.”

She couldn't wrap her head around this but nodded in agreement, watching him make his way across the lobby to the kitchen's entrance. As soon as he was gone, she lifted the blanket. Yep—sure enough, underwear. Holy Hannah, Mason had undressed her. He'd seen her in her *underwear*.

And he'd stroked her face.

She couldn't think about that now. Junie's clothes retained some of the fire's warmth, and she hurriedly slipped into her shirt and pants. She took a moment to gather herself—thoughts, feelings, and all. Junie had the distinct whirling sensation that something had shifted between her and Mason, but she wasn't entirely sure what that was. And she didn't dare trust it yet.

That didn't mean the jittery tap dance inside of her got the message. Every step she took to the kitchen was crammed with anticipation and newness.

The event center kitchen had more stainless steel than the kitchen back at the inn did. The cabinets were made of darker wood, with several floating shelves exposing the pans and dishes in attractive ways. A line of hooks made space for spoons, tongs, and spatulas to dangle beneath those floating shelves. They were ready to be used at a moment's notice. Everything appeared crisp and workable.

That was something that could be said in Mason's favor. He kept things orderly.

He stood on the other side of the center prep table, his palms flat against its dark wooden surface. He was in jeans and a t-shirt, his socked feet a rare sight. She'd never seen him without shoes before.

Junie shivered at the chill in the air. It was much colder in here, away from the fire. "Got anything for breakfast in here?" she asked.

He stared across the table. "I meant to check last night, but I guess I fell asleep next to you," he said.

Did he have any idea how a statement like that—or the reality that came along with it—made her fizzle inside?

"I'm not sure what we'll eat," he added. "The food disappeared along with the guests, and I'm assuming it's still gone."

"Still no electricity?" Junie asked, peering into the industrial-sized fridge. The shelves were mostly bare except

for a bottle of salad dressing, and the cold air she knew should have been circulating inside wasn't there.

"Still no electricity," he said.

The two stared at one another, tension tethering between them, hooking Junie from the inside and luring her in his direction. Mason broke the connection, pivoting around to the kitchen's back door. He thrust it open, allowing in a burst of frigid air and snow. It was still dark outside. Junie wondered what time it was.

"Looks like we're pretty stuck here," she said. There was so much snow—and no sign of any kind of transportation in sight. With the fog hanging low, she couldn't even discern the barn, which should have been visible. What were they going to do?

"No cell service, either," Mason said, lifting his device. "I've tried a few times."

Junie chewed her lip in thought as he closed out the early winter morning. No food. No phones. No way down. Were things okay at the inn? Boone was probably worried—not to mention he would be none too happy at managing the guests on his own. Grace would help, but Junie still needed to get back.

"I think we have some emergency contact equipment," she said. "Boone set it all up in case things like this happened. In case guests got stranded up here, I mean."

"Great," Mason said.

Was it just her, or did he sound like he didn't mean the sentiment? She wasn't exactly all that eager to leave just yet, either. "Morse code?" he suggested.

Her brow quirked. "Do you know Morse code?"

"Just like I know how to read Braille? You bet."

Bemused, the two of them shared another moment packed with awareness. Snowed in with Mason Devries, and this charge in the air? How was she going to make it out of this unscathed?

Junie led the way to the office at the back of the event center. They kept a computer here, not only to allow guests who needed to check their email or search for things, but also for the staff. On the back counter, beneath a row of cabinets, Boone had installed the old-fashioned walkie-talkie system their parents used to use before cell phones hit the scene.

“Do you know how to use it?” Mason asked, staring dubiously at the receiver and the box.

“Flick that switch,” Junie said. She and Boone had played with this thing plenty of times. “And work the dial.”

“Will Boone have his end open to receive a signal?” Mason asked.

“I hope so.” If not, she wasn’t sure what they would do. Boone tended to turn the emergency equipment on during storms, and she hoped his carefulness would come into play that morning as well.

Sure enough, Boone responded to their call. “I’ve been wondering about you two,” he said through the static. “Everything okay?”

“We’re both good,” she responded through the receiver, though her words faltered at the intense look Mason was giving her. He watched her with an intensity he’d never had before. What was going on? What had shifted?

He edged in closer, making her thoughts scatter. Junie could only focus on him, on his nearness, on his firm chest and its call to rest her cheek against it. He smelled of cinders and snowstorms.

“We’re up here without food or electricity. Can you come get us?” Her question came out embarrassingly breathless.

“Grace and I’ll fire up the snowmobiles—”

That jerked her out of Mason’s spell. “Don’t you dare.”

She remembered all too well the many conversations she and her cousin had had about riding snowmobiles on the property. Junie had been explicit in her refusal to let him ride the sleds back and forth from his cottage to the inn. The time

he'd done it to talk to Grace—after they'd been snowed in at his cottage together—had been a sore spot for a while.

Boone laughed. "I knew that would get you."

"What are you talking about?"

"His mission was to get a reaction out of you," Mason said, chuckling. "It worked."

Was it a man thing that they both got Boone's joke and she didn't? Junie's cheeks heated. She was prepared to find incredulity in Mason's expression, but she froze, finding something else there—admiration.

Junie was mesmerized by that look. The room around them shrunk, giving her the sense they were the only two people in the world.

CHAPTER 12



“Junie?” Boone prodded through the static. “Did I lose you?”

Eyes locked to Mason’s, she shook her head and coerced sense to her tongue. “Don’t make Grace come. Who will watch Brecken? Just rig up the horses. Can you do that?”

“The storm is still raging out there. It’s still too dangerous to travel and would be better to wait until it calms down.”

“When do you think it will calm down?” Junie asked.

“The forecast says it should slow by this afternoon. Can you two hold off until then? I’ll be there as soon as I can,” Boone said.

“That will work,” Junie said. Or so she hoped.

“What about the guests?” Mason asked. “Are they—they made it down from the bonfire okay?”

“What bonfire?” Boone asked.

Mason and Junie exchanged a look. “The bonfire. Everyone was here for it, and then...”

“The bonfire is tonight,” Boone said in confusion. “It’s Christmas Eve.”

Christmas Eve—again? How was that possible? How could they have gone back a whole day?

“The guests are fine, but everyone is missing you. And your food, Devries.”

Mason chuckled. He placed a hand on the small of Junie's back and shook his head. Junie stilled. A thrill coursed through her. Maybe the prospect of resting her head against him wasn't as impossible as she'd thought. He'd leaned in closer to speak into the receiver, but did he know he was touching her like this?

"And it looks like you might get your wish, Junie," Boone said. "I don't think hauling everyone up to the mountaintop tonight is going to happen."

Her stomach dropped to her feet. While she knew she shouldn't, Junie couldn't help reading into that. Two of her wishes had been granted. First, the guests would all disappear—and now she wouldn't have to host the bonfire. What was going on?

Three wishes, she thought to herself, only to dismiss the fleeting thought. She'd wished for the last three years that things with Mason would rekindle, but this was nothing. He was just acting interested because... because... She couldn't find a reason strong enough to dispel the burning in her stomach.

"Thanks, Boonie," she said.

"See you soon. Hang tight."

She lowered the receiver and stared at Mason.

"This afternoon," Mason said.

"Yeah." That meant she and Mason had an entire day to spend together. And if he kept looking at her the way he had been—and touching her like she was special—she wasn't sure she'd survive until then.

"Guess we wait it out," Mason said as they made their way back to the couches. He sat on the one across from the fireplace, patting the space beside him. Uncertain, she took it and stared at the flames. Mason rose momentarily to stoke the fire and add another log. When he sat down again, he positioned himself closer to her. Close enough for their legs to brush.

Junie's entire frame ignited. What was going on?

“How do you think the radio got up here if you weren’t the one to bring it?” Mason asked, acting as if sitting so close to her was completely normal.

“I don’t know. But thank you,” she said, trembling, working to keep herself together. “For doing what you did. I would be in a much worse condition if it weren’t for you.” Not just bad—she could have died if it hadn’t been for him.

“Happy to. I’m glad you’re okay.” His throat worked, and then he reached for her hand.

The touch sent ripples all the way through her arm and up to her chest. A little gasp snagged in her throat, and she caught him staring at their hands the same way she did, as though surprised he’d reached for her and happy she didn’t pull away.

Yep. Wish number three.

Junie swallowed, body humming as it charted completely new territory, territory she’d dreamed of traversing and exploring and thought would never be possible. Mason was holding her hand. Without being coerced by music. Of his own volition.

“You’re holding my hand,” she said.

“Yeah. I am.”

She half-expected him to pull away, but he stroked the back of her hand with his thumb.

“Why?”

He frowned at her. “Why what?”

“Why are you holding my hand?”

“I’m...Do you not want me to?”

She gripped his arm. “It’s not that. I’m confused, I guess. I thought...”

“I’m holding your hand because I want to. I was worried about you last night, Junie. If something had happened to you, I’m not sure what I would have done.”

“How can that be? You—”

His hand tightened around hers. “I didn’t like the thought of you getting hurt. It made me think. It made me...” He sorted through his words. “Is this okay with you?”

Hand-holding was harmless enough, wasn’t it? She didn’t want him to let go, but she had too much self-respect to let him mangle her heart all over again. They needed time to sort through everything that had happened. She wasn’t sure she’d recover after he pulled away from her once this was all over.

“I should have known he’d try to kill me,” Junie said, freeing her hand. It was her turn to pull away.

Mason seemed to accept her withdrawal as the answer to his question. “Who?” he asked.

“Santa.”

“Be serious.”

“I am! Just another reason for me to be mad at him.”

Mason rested his fists on his knees. “You’re mad. At Santa Claus.”

“So what?” Junie huffed.

“Nothing,” he said. “I just didn’t know you could be mad at someone who didn’t exist.”

“He exists.”

“It’s a radio, Junie. It’s a radio and a clever story you’ve been told your whole life. People get together because they want to, not because some magical radio played.”

“How else do you explain—” She pressed her lips firmly closed.

It was time they had this out. They needed to clear the air, especially now that he’d tried holding her hand.

“Explain what?” he said, sounding kinder than she thought he would. His tone was encouraging. “Go on. You can say it.”

“The kiss,” she blurted, flames searing her cheeks at the mention of it. “We *kissed*, Mason. Are you going to keep pretending it never happened?”

“It happened, but not because of a radio.”

“Are you trying to convince me or yourself?”

“It’s not magic,” he insisted.

“It is,” she said, her voice rising. “And I hate its guts.”

He stared at her. The corners of his mouth quirked. He relented and settled next to her again. “So...you’re mad at Santa because we kissed and didn’t get married?”

She covered her face to hide the chimney heat in her cheeks. Mortified, she turned away from him. She’d wanted to marry him. It had happened to everyone else the radio had played for. Why hadn’t it happened for her? For them?

“Junie,” he said, his voice kind but pointed.

She shook her head. She couldn’t do this. Her eyes filled with tears. How could she tell him yes, she had wanted to marry him? This hurt on such a personal level, a level she wasn’t sure she could confront. Not when he clearly hadn’t felt the same.

“Hey,” he said. He gripped her shoulder and attempted to turn her to face him. Junie fought it. She wanted to rush back out into the snow. Freezing to death would be better than this humiliation.

“I liked kissing you,” he said, stroking her hair.

“Don’t.” Her eyes slammed closed, and she kept them that way, wishing it was enough to keep him from seeing her like this. But he saw her. She could feel his eyes on her. She could feel the pity swarming from him, and she hated that he pitied her. Pity only made her feel that much more pathetic.

“Don’t what?”

“Don’t say things you don’t mean because you feel sorry for me.”

“I’m not.”

She smeared a hand across her face, wiping the tears there. She’d opened her heart to him. She’d given him more than her mouth that Christmas. Every single one of her childish hopes,

both girlish and womanly fantasies alike, had centered on Mason that year. The worst part of it was they hadn't relocated since. She was still unwise enough to hope he might someday return her feelings. He didn't. Wouldn't. Couldn't.

It hadn't only been the radio. She'd liked him before that. She'd thought he was handsome, kind, charming. She'd daydreamed about him and loved talking to him, and when the radio had played, when Mason had been the one to answer its call, that had made her heart plunge that much harder for him.

She'd thought his had taken the same plunge—but it hadn't.

“I'm not very good at communicating,” he said.

She sniffed. That much was obvious. “I guess I'm not either.”

“Will you look at me, please?”

She shook her head. Looking meant opening herself up to more of his rejection. His warm fingers found hers and pried her hands from her face. He didn't pull his hands from hers but kept them both in his, releasing one only so he could wipe her tears and coerce her chin upward. He stroked her eyebrows with his fingertips, something she hadn't expected, and despite herself, she opened her eyes.

Rather than displaying pity, something else swarmed in his expression. Something warm and underrated and...defeated?

“My father is very controlling,” he said, swallowing as though the admission were difficult for him. Junie wasn't sure where this segue had come from, but this was clearly difficult for him to admit, so she bit her tongue and decided to see where he was headed. “Every aspect of my life was planned before I got to it. Where I would go to school. What sport I would play. He intended for me to follow in his footsteps and pursue a career in medicine.”

Junie fidgeted. She hung on every word, waiting for him to elaborate. “Did you want to be a doctor?”

“My mom signed me up for a cooking class when I was twelve. Chances were, she intended for the class to only be

something to pass the time during the summer, but I was hooked. I drank in everything I could about it. I watched every cooking show out there. I envisioned myself doing all these incredible things and started helping with the meals at home.”

“I bet she loved that.”

“She did. My father, not so much. He insisted I stop cooking; that I focus on my studies and on the golf team he wanted me to join—”

“Golf?”

“At his country club,” Mason explained.

“Let me guess, you didn’t want to golf either.”

“I like golfing,” he said. “But I grew to resent it because it wasn’t what I’d chosen. In fact, I resented everything he had selected for me. I went out of my way to pave my own path—only for him to tighten his reins and reel me back into submission, threatening my trust fund, threatening that he wouldn’t pay for me to attend college.”

Junie exhaled. “That sounds awful. I’m sorry he didn’t give you more of a say.”

Mason nodded. “I did what most people do. I paid my own way through cooking school, working part-time, you know? I left home the instant I could, and I swore I would never again let anyone dictate any aspect of my life for me again.”

The knot in Junie’s stomach doubled in size.

Mason stroked her fingers with his. The touch went under her skin and sent tingles down her every fiber. He was still holding her. He wasn’t letting her go. That was a good sign, wasn’t it? If so, why did she feel like he was preparing himself to retreat?

“I loved those moments we had together. I loved laughing with you, and there was magic in meeting you in front of the radio, Junie. And kissing you—” He swallowed again, shaking his head as though he didn’t want to elaborate.

She hoped he would. She wanted to know if their kiss had impacted him like a rolling boulder the way it had to her. Like

a bowling ball spinning its way to crash hard against the pins and knock every single one of them down.

He stared at her fingers, but she sensed his struggle from the crease in his forehead and the tension in his hands. “Kissing you that night had every ounce of magic in it as the rest did.”

“Really?” she said.

His head was bent, but he lifted his eyes to peer at her through his lashes, and the expression was steam in a sauna and a hidden invitation. It was crooked, and enticing and tantalizing. “Really,” he muttered low.

And then, not taking his eyes from hers, he lifted her fingers to his lips. Junie’s mouth went dry. He pressed a kiss to her knuckles. The impact sent a charge into her arm, rendering her whole body warm and pliant.

“Then why did you pull away?” she asked.

He lowered her hands and opened his palm. Junie watched as he matched their fingers, pressing his hand flush against hers. His fingers were longer than hers in general, but she was fascinated by the movement, by the feel of skin against skin. He cupped her hand between both of his, holding it aloft a moment before lowering their hands to his lap.

“I swore I’d never let anything dictate my life again. Nothing,” he said, his tone growing more fervent. “Not my father. Not magic radios. I’m sorry that it hurt you, but I wasn’t going to let a radio tell me who I should care about.”

So he took charge like he always had with his father.

“I always thought you were repulsed by me,” she said, bringing her fingers to her face before clasping his hand again. “I thought you couldn’t stand kissing me, that you’d hated it and wanted nothing to do with me because I was so repugnant.”

“Junie, you’re not repugnant. People can’t help liking you the instant they meet you.”

“People?”

He lowered his head. “From what I’ve seen, anyway.”

“Just...others?” she prodded. She had to know. Why wouldn’t he be straightforward with her and tell her how he felt?

The corner of his mouth lifted. “I know the team loves working with you. You’re cool with them and accept their ideas. You’re easy to communicate with. People like that.”

This was getting them nowhere. She shoved his shoulder. “You, Mason. I want to know what you think, idiot.”

He laughed, catching her hand. He reeled her closer, lifting his other hand to brush his fingertips against her jaw.

“I like you,” he said. “You are beautiful. There’s something striking in the way you drink everything in, Junie. You live life as though you’re seeing everything for the first time. Your delight over simple things is endearing. I’ve watched you for years. You were so patient with Boone when he was struggling. Patient but persistent in helping him overcome his heartache. You’re friendly and the perfect person for people to greet when they first arrive.”

Junie couldn’t help the smile that blossomed on her face the more he spoke. She was a sucker for compliments and ate up every single one he dished. She leaned into his touch, basking in the warmth his words were detonating in her.

“So you pulled away because you were scared,” she said, keeping her voice soft.

“Scared? Of what?”

“Me.” She grinned.

Something flashed in his eyes. He skimmed her face, seeking to understand her words. In a brash move, she brought her fingers to his jaw, tracing the stubble that grew there. She allowed her fingers to graze a moment before pausing.

“What if this *between us* is something that you choose?” she asked. “Would you give me a chance then?”

CHAPTER 13



Mason sucked in a breath, but he didn't move. He was riveted to her, his entire focus centered on her. He pressed a soft kiss to her thumb, sending a trail of heat into Junie's limbs. She took that as a good sign and inched closer to him.

"My choice?"

"Yes," she said. "No radios. Nothing else but you...and me."

In a moment of deliberation, he paused. His contemplation lasted the length of a snowflake melting. "You're right—you are terrifying," he said, taking her hand and turning her wrist outward.

He began to trail kisses along her wrist, spearing heat through Junie. His hand settled onto her waist, and he redirected his kisses at her collarbone, spreading them along her throat with tantalizing touches. Junie's body throbbed, and she dug her fingers into his shoulder and lifted her chin to allow him easier access.

His mouth made its way to hers and feathered itself into place. The fusion of their lips was better than she remembered. She drank in his movements, the way he guided her closer to him as he settled into the couch, the way his hands rested at the small of her back, and the avid capture of his lips.

"I'm scared too," she said as his mouth skimmed her jawline again.

“Oh?” His mouth didn’t stop its exploration of the skin below her ear. Junie’s lids fluttered. She had to pry herself free. There was more to discuss before they got too carried away. “Of me?”

“Definitely,” she said, her voice breathy.

A chuckle rumbled in his chest, and he coaxed her mouth back to his for a few more luxurious moments, deepening the kiss, fervent and insistent. Junie could get lost in him just as easily as she had on the mountaintop. He was a storm all on his own, one she was fully ready to allow to distract her for a good long while.

That was the problem, though. They were trapped here, alone on this mountaintop, under a spell created by the radio. Was Mason merely caught up in the moment and the attraction flaring between them? He’d acted as though this was something he was choosing between them, something he accepted, but would he reject her again the minute they got back down the mountain again? She wasn’t sure she could handle a second negative response from him.

Junie did what she could to slow the pace of their kisses, even though she wanted to keep up with his tempo. Mason cottoned on and let his passion dissipate, though Junie was flustered to realize it lingered in his gaze when she met his eyes.

“How long will this last?” she asked. “That’s what scares me.”

She knew it was probably a great way to kill the mood. What was wrong with her? Why couldn’t she simply enjoy the moment and have some fun with him?

She didn’t want only this moment with him. She wanted the white dress, the tux, the vows, and the forever that was supposed to go along with it. If Mason didn’t, that needed to come out before any more hearts were broken.

They’d known one another long enough and had been through enough together that she didn’t think marriage was a far-fetched notion.

“I could keep going all day,” he said with a smirk, placing another tease on her mouth. She lost herself again until he pulled away.

“I can’t,” she said. “Since we’re having everything out right now, you know what I want, Mason.” A wedding. A forever. “I’m not saying we have to get married the minute we get back or that you even have to know that’s something you want with me, but what I’m saying is—I’m all in. I’m—”

How could she finish without sounding completely psychotic—like she was forcing him to make such a huge commitment off the bat? “I want to get married. It’s what I’ve wanted since I could remember. Maybe that won’t happen with us—we can see where life leads us, but I need to know before you kiss me anymore. Before we go any farther in any kind of direction...”

She still didn’t know how to say it. *What were his life plans? Was marriage something he wanted?*

Fortunately, he seemed to get the gist of what she was getting at. He stroked her jaw and trailed his fingers along her cheeks, her forehead, and her brows before cradling her face in both of his hands. Junie’s lids fluttered closed as he brought her face closer and pressed a kiss to both of her eyelids.

She really had to get some distance from him, or he would kiss her senseless.

She opened her eyes, trembling and unraveling under the tender softness in his expression.

He gave her a gentle smile. “Marriage is something I want too. I’m willing to see if that might be a possibility for us. I was angry before. I felt like the radio was trying to control me. I felt like there was this expectation for me to behave a certain way instead of making my own way in our relationship like I ordinarily would have done. But this time, this is something I’m choosing, Junie. *You* are something I’m choosing.”

She grinned at this, and he reciprocated it, fairly beaming with shades of joy.

“You too,” she said. “I’m choosing this. You. Us.”

“Us,” he said. “I’m willing to give it a try, especially after...” His gaze flicked to her mouth. She giggled and buried herself into his chest. His arms wrapped around her, keeping her there, nestled and safe against his chest. While snuggled there, along with the thrum of his heartbeat, she also heard something else.

Junie pried herself back. “I’m hungry too.”

“You heard that?”

“Your stomach sounded like it’s eating itself. I’m disappointed in you, chef. Take better care of yourself.”

He chuckled. “I had all that food in the kitchen. Too bad it disappeared.”

“We didn’t check the freezer,” Junie said. “Do you think there might be something in there?”

Mason considered for a moment. “Logan brought a few of those awful plastic dinners, now that you mention it. There’s no power to heat them up, but maybe they’ve melted enough. Or we could find some way to heat them over the fire.”

“It’d be a shame to let it go to waste,” Junie said, taking his hand and leading him to the kitchen.

He opened the freezer and, sure enough, found several microwave dinners. Junie was surprised the magic hadn’t wiped these away when it had the rest of Mason’s feast, but then again, she wasn’t sure when Logan had brought the meals up here. They may have been in there longer than everything else had, so they weren’t part of the transformation.

“When are you going to tell me about the interview?” Junie said, tearing the plastic from her microwave chicken and potatoes. They had indeed thawed. Cold food was better than no food.

“I went to appease my father,” he said. His face disgruntled, he removed the plastic from his as well. Clearly, this food wasn’t up to his usual standard.

“So...” She wasn’t sure she wanted the answer—yet she was dying to know at the same time. “You’re *not* interested in

a new job?”

Mason pegged his brown eyes on her. “No,” he said without any guile or hesitation. “You were never supposed to find out about that because the only reason I went was to get my father off my back.”

Junie leaned her hip against the counter. That didn’t make any sense to her. Mason had said his dad was controlling, but he couldn’t be that bad, could he? “You can’t tell him you don’t want to take the job?”

Mason stared at his food tray for several seconds. “I’ve disappointed him in so many other ways. I thought by going to that interview, it would be a way I could show him I didn’t always blow off his advice.”

“Trying to keep the peace,” she surmised.

“Exactly.” He delved into the drawer near his legs and handed her a fork.

Junie took it. “So...you’re not taking a job in New York?”

“Not anytime soon,” he said, stirring his meal. The pieces of roast beef and kernels of corn responded without any of the little crunching noises they would have made if they were still frozen.

“This could use some improvement. I wouldn’t mind cooking for just one person, sometimes.” His eyes slid purposefully to her.

Junie’s heart wedged in her throat. “I get that.”

“When we get back, I’m making a meal for you, Junie,” he said, taking a bite of his meat and choking it down.

Junie simmered. It felt as though a glow was emerging inside her—like she was being illuminated from the inside. “I’d love that. But why now? I mean—” She still couldn’t make sense of this. What had made him act so interested in her?

“I’ve been into you for a long time now,” she continued.

“Yeah?”

She ducked her head. “All I could think about was you and how there must be something wrong with me that not even Santa magic could get you to like me.”

“I tried to let my feelings for you go too. It worked for a while, but lately—” He paused. “Lately, you’re all I’ve been able to think about.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

She took a step toward him. His openness invited her to do the same. “I was sure you could hear the ‘1812 Overture’ blasting off under my skin every time you were around.”

He rested his hand beside his tray. “The what?”

“You’d know it if you heard it. It’s an orchestral piece. In the finale, all these drums and bangs blare to signify cannon fire. That’s what I felt going off every time I saw you. Booms and blasts and electricity.”

“I’ll have to listen to the song,” he said, fixated on her.

Junie didn’t quite know what to do with herself. She’d never crossed fantasy with reality before. Even when the radio had played for them before, she’d been in a kind of trance until it ended with her already in his arms. She’d missed the building-up to the interlocking.

She decided that the building-up-to-things was almost better than the actual interlock because the anticipation was so dizzying. The wanting was mouthwatering. With him standing so close, his brown eyes glinting, and the side of his mouth making her look at it far too often, there was plenty of wanting.

“I thought it made sense for you to pull away because you weren’t what I wished for,” she finished and then took a cold bite of her meal. The taste wasn’t bad, but she couldn’t stomach the cold food and slid it away.

Confusion furrowed Mason’s brow. He’d finished his meal and delivered the empty tray to the garbage can before returning to her. “What do you mean by that?”

She stared at her tray, trying to think of how to explain—all the while questioning why she'd brought it up at all.

“I’ve known about Santa’s radio my whole life, you know?”

A nod.

“When I was twelve, I knew it would play for me. It *had* to. I thought, if it did, I’d make sure Santa knew exactly the kind of man I was looking for. So I wrote him a list of what I wanted in a husband.”

“At age twelve?”

“Don’t judge.”

She waited for him to do just that, but to her surprise—and relief—he snorted in laughter. She laughed, too, delighted at how his hand stroked her arm.

“You were a hopeless romantic,” he said.

“Oh, believe me, I had plenty of hope.” She still did, even when she’d been insistent that Santa and the radio weren’t real, and she was done. It’d been a cry of hope, really.

“So tell me about that list of yours. I want to see how I measure up.”

“No—you don’t.”

“Come on. Try me.”

She couldn’t believe this. Moreover, she couldn’t believe she was about to give in. “The person on the list was supposed to be nice,” she said, deciding to start with the least harmful one.

“Check.”

“Dance with me.”

“I could do that.”

“And have eyes striped like candy canes.”

Mason’s laughter burst from him in a loud guffaw.

“Shut up,” she said, smiling. Her cheeks were so warm. She covered her face with her hands. Another cannon sounded inside of her.

“Candy cane eyes. If that’s my only deficiency, I think I can live with that.”

How could he act so casual, so comfortable, with this? Flecks of gold danced in his eyes, and there was a soft spray of brown dots speckling across his nose.

“Look at that,” she said, inching closer for a better look. Or just to be close to him, either way.

His hand came around her back. “What?” His eyes roamed as if taking in her features up close and liking everything he saw as much as she did.

“You have freckles, too,” she said. She trailed a finger across his nose.

“Close your eyes,” he said.

Her heart flapped in her chest. “Why?”

“I have a surprise for you.”

Sure he did. Inside her, a whirlwind swirled, but she did as he asked.

“Open your mouth,” he instructed.

“Uh oh.”

“You’ll like it. I promise.”

Feeling tingly all over, she let her lips part. She wasn’t sure what to expect. She wouldn’t have to open her mouth for a kiss. Was he going to feed her something?

Seconds later, something soft touched her teeth. She closed her mouth around the treat.

“Divinity drops with a Christmas twist,” he said. “I found some in the freezer when I pulled out the microwave dinners. They’ve been thawing out in my pocket.”

She wasn’t sure if Mason had expected to put the entire thing into her mouth. He either pulled away too soon or not

soon enough. Either way, her lips ended up closing around the middle of the divinity drop, with part of it sticking out of her mouth.

Opening her eyes, she worked to catch the confection, her gaze flicking to Mason's in mortification. But he didn't seem to be put off. Instead, he looked intrigued. He stared at her mouth as if transfixed. His eyes took on a hazy desire. Then, as if on impulse, he bent in, moved slowly, opened his mouth around the other end of the divinity drop, and bit off its other end, his lips brushing over hers in the process.

Junie's eyes widened. At the intimate sharing, the taste and the way the peppermint in the divinity drop drooled over her tongue. Mason chewed for a moment, staring at her with intense, expressive eyes. Moments later, he was kissing her.

And oh, what a kiss. His tongue slid against hers, making the taste of peppermint explode all over. Junie gripped his shoulders, soaking in his sudden passion and the collision of peppermint. Securing his arms around her, he walked with her until the fridge met Junie's back, until she had nowhere else to go but to him. And honestly, she had no other destination in mind. He was all she wanted. And she was fairly certain no other kisses, but the peppermint kind would ever be enough for her again.

"I love food," Mason said once the kiss slowed. He trailed his thumb across his mouth. "But I admit, I've never mixed it with kissing before."

"Me neither," she said, tiptoeing up for another before smiling.

He hitched her close, pressing his cheek against hers as he muttered low in her ear, "We should see what chocolate is like."

She giggled.

CHAPTER 14



Mason nuzzled his nose into Junie's hair and inhaled. Cinnamon seemed to be infused in everything she was. The tangy, homey aroma tantalized him and made him crave her as his home. He didn't consider the tiny apartment he slept in down in West Hills home, not really. He roomed with Troy, the inn's other sleigh driver, who traded off with Boone. They got along well enough, but it wasn't a place he felt he claimed, a place that provided comfort and all the things home implied.

Not the way it felt to hold Junie in his arms. Being near her seemed to settle his heart into his chest in a way it hadn't before. Not having much else to do while they waited for Boone, they'd settled back onto the couch after they'd eaten. After their peppermint kiss.

He'd stoked and renewed the fire, and then the last thing he remembered was holding her in his arms while they watched the sunrise and the snowfall through the large windows peering out the front of the event center. They fell asleep in one another's arms.

She lay on his chest on the couch, nestled perfectly against him, with her hands curled to her chin. His arm draped across her waist, and he lifted it slowly, not wanting to wake her. She'd had a rough night, and her lids had gotten heavy the longer they'd sat together.

They'd discussed marriage, but the high of the moment had simmered. The drug of her brightness and the inoculation of her mouth had made him foggy. Now, as he had some time

to peruse his thoughts, the drifting snowfall out the window brought clarity back to him.

He couldn't marry Junie. That was what she wanted—but he couldn't do that to her. Like it or not, he was still his father's son. His thoughts drifted to his previous girlfriend. The need to control and the anger that had risen when he couldn't manipulate the situation. He'd hurt Katy. He'd overreacted and shouted and said horrible things. He couldn't do that to Junie. He couldn't let himself get closer to her.

He shouldn't have kissed her at all—and yet, he couldn't help himself. And holding her like this felt so good, so right, but he couldn't permit this to continue either.

Mason didn't know what to do. He didn't want to let Junie go, but how could he stay with her, knowing she had yet to see the darker parts of his personality?



JUNIE WOKE ON THE COUCH AND WAS PLEASED TO FIND sunshine filling the event center's lobby. The space on the couch where Mason had sat was cold and vacant. She pushed from her position to find him standing near one of the vast front windows with his back to her. One hand on the windowsill, he stared out at the foggy afternoon.

She bent at the waist for a satisfying stretch and then rose to join him. The floor was cold beneath her socked feet. In fact, everywhere away from the fireplace was colder than the area surrounding the fire.

She was thrilled to be near him again. Her dreams had been replays of their snuggles and of peppermint kisses, and she fully expected him to welcome her to his side and take her in his arms. But he acknowledged her with guarded eyes.

“Everything okay?” she asked. Had he not been able to get any sleep?

“I haven't been completely honest with you.”

Unease stewed inside of her. She sensed him pulling away and didn't like it. "About what?"

"I can't do this, Junie."

The words stabbed straight into her chest. She should have known better than to get her hopes up. She was too gullible. She'd always forgiven easily. She should never have given in.

I told myself I was done with Santa, she ranted inwardly. Why didn't I stick to that? So what if I thought he was giving us a second chance? I should never have been foolhardy enough to buy it.

"You won't want anything more to do with me after I tell you the truth about me."

Something was eating at him. She didn't like the dark mood he'd succumbed to. "About what?" she asked, trying to lighten things. "You're married?"

He peered at her. "Junie."

"You have a separate family living somewhere remote like Mexico, and you've been hiding the truth from everyone."

"Come on." His tone implied he would never be that deceitful.

"Then tell me."

The sound of jingling bells interrupted Mason, and out the window, Boone appeared in front of the event center in the sleigh pulled by Hazelnut, the buttery-colored horse he tended.

Mason's gaze was conflicted. His throat lifted in a swallow. She waited for him to continue, to get out what he'd been trying to say. "Looks like it's time to go," he said instead.

No, she wanted to shout. Tell me what you were going to say! Don't pull away from me, not now. Not after all we've been through.

Mason stepped away from the window and made for the door.

"Wait," Junie called, hurrying to his side. "This has been—this—being here with you—"

He stroked her cheek. “I know,” he said. “It was amazing for me too.”

She couldn’t fully bask in the relief of his words, not when he said them with so much reservation. He retrieved his coat and stuffed his feet into boots. Junie grabbed her coat as well.

“You’ll tell me later, right?” she said. “What you were going to say?”

Before Mason could answer, Boone turned the knob and stepped through the center’s front doors. His cheeks were rosy from the cold, and he held two pairs of snowshoes.

“Boone,” Junie said as he dusted the snow from his boots. Snow speckled his snow pants and littered the woolen hat covering his ears. “You made it.”

“That storm came in early.” Boone shook the snow from his gloves. It tinkled to the tile. “Earlier than we thought. I’m glad you two had decent shelter up here.”

Decent was one way to put it. Junie’s gaze flew to Mason’s, but his attention was on Boone. She was tempted to tell her cousin to give them a moment. To drag Mason to the kitchen and finish the conversation that had been interrupted. But what explanation could she give him?

“Is everything okay?” Boone asked. “You ready to head out there?”

Junie considered confessing everything to him, radio and all. If she hadn’t been so sure Boone would make a comment about the situation, she might have.

Mason was acting so differently than he had earlier. He’d been so open, so kind, and kissable. But ever since her nap in his arms—where she’d felt safe and well-fitted like a pair of mittens had encircled her heart—he’d retreated from her.

That meant he regretted what had been the most magical night of her life.

She wanted to rat Boone out for his terrible timing. Mason had been about to tell her something. If only Boone had come even five minutes later. What had Mason been about to say?

“We don’t have to go right away,” Mason said. “You hungry? You should at least warm up before venturing back out again.”

There had been a few more microwave dinners in the freezer; that was true. A trip up the mountain took about an hour by sleigh ride. Boone was probably freezing. Then again, he knew exactly what to expect by now and always came well prepared.

“I’m good, but thanks,” Boone said with a sniff. “Hazelnut will be okay, too. I think we’d better head back now. The guests are all worried, and your parents have been asking after you.”

“Your parents are here?” Junie asked.

Mason dragged a hand behind his neck. “Yeah. They were there at the bonfire before, you know, everyone disappeared.”

Junie wasn’t sure if she should be upset that he hadn’t told her or not. He gave her an apologetic grimace.

“Oh,” she said. He’d said it himself—his communication was terrible.

“Shouldn’t take too long to get back,” Boone went on. “Though if you’d lighten up about snowmobiles, we could have a little more fun around here.”

Mason brightened and gestured in Boone’s direction. “Snowmobiling would bring an entirely new clientele here,” he said, his tone turning playful and matching Boone’s. “You could really monopolize something like that. Offer rentals.”

“We are not encouraging others to ruin the landscape,” Junie argued. “You do that well enough on your own.”

Boone chuckled.

Junie checked everything. The electricity still hadn’t come back on, but she made sure the lights were all off so that they wouldn’t have lights blaring once it did. Mason carefully put out the fire that had kept them warm, dumping ashes onto the logs to ensure they wouldn’t catch again.

Locking the doors and bundling back up, she strapped the snowshoes Boone had brought to her feet and trekked with Mason and Boone across the top of the heaping snow to the awaiting sleigh.

Boone stroked Hazelnut and fed her handfuls of something from a burlap bag within the sleigh. Junie climbed into the back and shook the snow from the blankets within the second bag Boone had brought.

“Have you ever been?” Mason said as he climbed in beside her.

“What?” He was talking to her. That was a good sign.

Mason nestled next to her and spread the blanket across their laps. Junie was startled. Maybe he wasn’t pulling away after all. What had he been going to tell her?

“Snowmobiling,” Mason said. “Maybe if you tried it, you might find that you like it.”

“You—” She shook herself. No sense in acting like anything was wrong. “I’m not sure about that.”

Boone climbed into the sleigh and removed his snowshoes, securing them beneath the seat. Junie and Mason handed theirs to him as well.

“How many snowmobiles do you have?” Mason asked, leaning forward to ask Boone as he settled into the driver’s seat.

Boone peered over his shoulder. “Just the one.”

Mason slid Junie a mischievous look. “Mind if we borrow it?”

Junie socked him with a gloved hand, which Mason caught in his.

At Boone’s guidance, Hazelnut began a steady pace through the snow. He then peered behind him.

“You’re kidding, right?” He adjusted himself on the bench and looked at them—particularly at Junie. “You up for that?”

For riding a snowmobile with Mason? An all-expense paid reason to put her arms around him and hold on tight as they bumbled over drifts and ridges? Junie chewed her lip. She wanted to maintain her fierce, anti-snowmobile stance...but the argument slipped away from her tongue like water dripping from a melting icicle.

She tried to make her smile stay down but failed, resorting to lifting her chin. "As long as we ride somewhere away from the inn itself. Around Boone and Grace's cottage."

Mason grinned. "You've got a deal."

Charming as he was in this moment, and as much as she loved being cuddled in next to him, Junie still couldn't shake the worry over what he'd been about to tell her as they made their way back to the inn.

CHAPTER 15



Mason had meant to end things with Junie before Boone had arrived, but she was infectious, and he couldn't get her earlier question out of his mind. *What if it's something you're choosing?*

He could be with her if the radio had nothing to do with it, couldn't he? That was one reason he hadn't stopped himself from inviting her to ride Boone's snowmobile with him. He knew he should keep his distance from her, but he still owed her that explanation and wouldn't mind adding a little fun into the mix while they were at it.

He still had time to talk to her about his last relationship with Katy. He still had time.

It was why he'd slipped his arm around her during the sleigh ride. Junie hadn't pushed him away. She'd settled against him as he'd hoped she would, and he held her, hardly noticing the cold.

They'd made it back to the inn as the sun began to set. Junie had a few matters to oversee, and now that he had cell service again, a text from Dad came through. The text expressed disappointment in Mason's discourtesy at not being there to greet them.

"Surprise, surprise," Mason grumbled in response.

That wasn't the only message he received. An email chimed through, an email that completely rattled Mason. It was from the Hyacinth. Sure enough, they'd been impressed with his interview, with the food he'd served those he'd

interviewed with. They offered him the position. They wanted him to be Executive Chef.

Mason sauntered to the reception desk where his parents were waiting. Nerves beset him. He wasn't sure what he expected—for his father to hug him? Convey relief and happiness at seeing him again after so long? How could he when he'd said how disappointed he was in that text message?

Mason would be expected to report on the job interview. He'd have to endure a lecture about all the strings that had been pulled to get Mason consideration for such a prestigious position—prestigious for a chef, anyway. That slight wouldn't be left off.

For Stephen Devries, insults were added like a garnish on an otherwise immaculate dish.

That was all the more reason for Mason not to take the job. How could he? He couldn't leave Harper's Inn. He didn't want to. For what, just to make his father happy?

He straightened his shoulders and turned the corner. His parents stood in the space between the Christmas tree in the living room and the reception desk off from the main stairwell. Right where Dad had said they'd be.

Mom's short blonde hair had the slightest curl on the ends. Her brown eyes twinkled, and she beamed at the sight of him. Dad looked like Mason—though his dark hair was balding, he had the same tan skin and dark eyes. He was several inches taller than Mom but still not as tall as Mason, who'd had the extra inches since he was fifteen.

“So good to see you,” Mom said, opening her arms to him.

“You too, Mom,” he said, kissing the top of her head. He released her and stepped away, wondering if they remembered speaking with him on the mountaintop before the snowstorm had kicked in. From his father's severe expression and the lack of any mention of the disastrous bonfire, he guessed not.

“This inn is darling. I'm ready for the tour,” Mom said.

“The tour?” She'd been here before. Why was she asking for a tour? Unless it was for Dad's benefit...

“You work here,” she said. “You practically live here. I want to see what you do all day.” She grinned.

“I—” He flicked his gaze toward Dad, who still hadn’t cracked a smile. “I can show you the kitchen if you want.” He wasn’t sure he had included his dad in that invitation.

Sure enough, Dad grunted. “It’s a kitchen,” he said to his wife as though she were a simpleton. “What’s there to see?”

“Plenty,” she said. “Because Mason is the master of it. I’m ready when you are.”

Mason hated the way his father treated his mother, another thing that made him cringe. He never wanted to be like that to his wife. All the more reason to keep his relationships from getting to that point, wasn’t it? Like with losing his temper, he refused to slip and treat Junie that way.

“You coming too?” Mason said, hoping his father would decline. As he waited for an answer, Junie rounded the corner with several wrapped presents in her arms. She stopped at the sight of them for only moments before a smile flourished and lit up her face. Not taking her eyes from him, she made straight for him.

“Long-time no see,” she said. She’d changed into a black-and-white polka-dot sweater that did her curves all kinds of favors.

“What are you up to?” she asked. “Hey, there, Mr. and Mrs. Devries. I’m Juniper Harper. But please call me Junie.”

“Hi, Junie,” Mom said. “We were about to get a tour of the place.”

“Oh, I can give you a tour.” Junie’s cheerful response brought a relieved grin to Mason’s face. He loved seeing her in action. She had a way of making people feel welcome and wanted. “Just let me set these presents by the tree in the front room, and I’ll be back in a jiff.”

Sudden worry streaked through him. Mason indicated for his parents to wait, and then he hurried forward to take the gifts from her grasp. “Let me give you a hand with that,” he said.

Though his intentions were to help her, that wasn't the only reason he stepped forward.

Junie's eyes glittered and filled with secrets only the two of them knew. "So thoughtful. Just in here."

Any other time, he would have swept her into a secluded spot and stolen a kiss. Every step at her side blazed with awareness of her. Part of him wished they were still snowed in on the mountaintop with nothing to do but enjoy one another's company—and no one else's.

The instant they turned the corner, Mason leaned in, keeping his voice low. "You really don't have to do this." He peered back to find his mom watching them.

"I don't mind," Junie said. "I'd like to meet your family and help if I can. That is—unless you don't want me to."

"That's not it," he said, placing the present at the tree's base. He'd always wondered about the gifts here. They were different every year, making him suspect that the Harpers used this tree as their Christmas tree for the season. He'd never spent Christmas morning here with her, but he had a sudden desire to.

"My dad is..." Mason began, unsure of what to say.

"He looks nice."

"...prickly."

Her brows rose. "He didn't look that way."

"He's..." Mason didn't know how to continue. Stern? Brusque? Judgmental? An all-out jerk? "I just don't want you to be disappointed."

Her smile made him want to kiss it. "Why would I be?"

He was momentarily stymied, made worse by the fact that she tiptoed and placed a kiss on his cheek. "Leave them to me."

He followed her back to his parents in a daze. The strangest sensation climbed inside him, giving him an

unprecedented desire to laugh, especially as he watched Junie's interactions with his family. This might actually work.

Mason's heart warmed at Junie's friendliness and ability to melt whatever ice she encountered. Her friendly demeanor was a gift, and he'd never been more grateful for it than at this moment as she led them to the front room, telling stories of the radio that was somehow once again at its place on the table instead of stashed away at the event center as it had been the last time he'd seen it.

Pfft. Santa magic.

Junie shared a few stories behind the inn's fireplace, as well as the renovations that had taken place since she'd been a child. She also showed them the family wing, the rooms, and the gym.

Junie definitely knew more about the inn's history than he would have. She gave insight and answered his dad's questions much better than Mason could.

She showed them the spa and offered them a complimentary couple's massage, which Dad seemed impressed by. "I wouldn't say no to that," Mom said.

Then they trailed to the kitchen to see where Mason worked day in and day out. Junie mentioned Mason's ability to throw contingency plans together since everything they'd worked toward had gotten marooned by weather changes at the event center on the mountaintop and how, now that they'd be celebrating Christmas Eve at the inn, she was sure he'd be able to create the perfect menu here, despite it all. She winked at that, and the praise—and that look—made him feel like he could take on the world.

It wasn't a sensation he was used to experiencing in his father's presence.

Mom hugged Junie once the tour ended. "Thank you, that was wonderful," she said.

"You're a delightful young lady," Dad added, giving Junie a rare smile.

Mason's brows rose, and hope ballooned in his chest. They liked Junie. Then again, how could they not?

"We'll be down for dinner," Mom told him.

"Then we'll turn in early." Dad's tone would brook no argument.

Mom peered at him with disappointment and confusion, but she didn't argue as Mason hoped she would.

"Dad, you can join us. It's Christmas Eve." Us. Assuming Junie would want to spend the evening with him. He probably should have cleared that with her, but it was too late now. Junie didn't seem to mind. She answered with an agreeable nod.

"Oh no," Mom said in her placating tone, reserved for settling disputes peaceably, "I'm tired too. We can always catch up on Christmas morning."

Dad inclined his head in approval at her. Mason wanted to argue, but he knew that expression on his father's face. What good would it do to stir the pot now after things had gone so well during the tour?

Dinner went better than he'd hoped. The spread of ham, prime rib, sweet potatoes, the multiple salads, and fluffy rolls he'd had planned to serve at the event center turned out as deliciously as it would have on the mountaintop. To everyone's delight, Junie even performed her skit about the radio's origin story just as she would have at the bonfire.

The guests ate it up—including his parents. Dad kept mentioning how charming the hostess was. Mason was beyond relieved. Maybe their regard for Junie would help him break the news that he had no intention of leaving Harper's Inn.

Boone caught Mason in the kitchen once most of the cleanup was finished. Mom and Dad had already turned in for the night, and Mason was eager for some time alone with Junie to thank her for being so hospitable to his parents. He'd stolen several glances with her throughout the evening, but he hadn't yet had the chance to tell her of his plans to whisk her away.

He hadn't gotten her a gift, but that didn't mean they couldn't share a moment or two by the Christmas tree. Knowing Junie, she had some mistletoe hidden somewhere around here. The prospect of an evening with her stirred his blood. He wanted to hold her again, to tell her how grateful she was for helping with his parents.

"Dinner was amazing, Devries," Boone said.

"Thanks," Mason said. "And thanks for coming all the way up there to get us. We'd still be stuck up there if it wasn't for you."

"Happy to." Boone inclined his head and made as if to leave when Mason stopped him.

"Hey. When you get the chance, I want to talk to you about that snowmobile ride."

Boone's brows lifted. "You got Junie to agree?"

Mason grinned. "I sure did."

Boone shook his head and exchanged a glance with Grace across the room. She sat at one of the tables and guided a spoon to Brecken's mouth. "The sled is parked at the barn near my cottage," Boone said.

He'd never been out to Boone's cottage before, but he knew it was farther than a casual walk away. Mason's hopes fell but only for moments before the other man went on.

"If you'd like to spend Christmas with Grace, Brecken, and me, you're welcome to ride out to the cottage with us tonight. The two of you can take the snowmobile back in the morning. We don't have much room, but there's enough space for one of you to take the couch and one to sleep on the blowup mattress Grace's parents use when they come."

Mason couldn't believe this. He was being invited to spend Christmas with them? He thought again about the comment he'd overheard Boone say to Junie, about how soon the radio would thrust her and Mason together like it had for him and Grace. But this time, Mason found he didn't mind so much.

The prospect of spending Christmas with Junie was more than enticing.

“That would be amazing,” Mason said. His parents had made their aversion to spending Christmas Eve with him clear. He and Junie could have Christmas Eve with Boone and Grace and then make it back Christmas morning so he could celebrate with his parents later.

He didn’t have a gift for Junie—or for Boone and his family, for that matter—but under the circumstances, he supposed they’d forgive him for that slight.

“I’ll pass it by Junie,” he said. “Thanks for the invitation.”

“Of course,” Boone said. “We’ll be out in the barn in about an hour or so if you decide to come.”

One hour. That gave him time to get the overnight bag he kept on hand—for instances where the snow prevented him from returning to his apartment—and convince her to come, didn’t it? He had to find her first.

Mason searched everywhere he could think of. He even checked the attic, but she wasn’t likely to close the ladder while she was up there. She wasn’t in the gym or the spa, which would close soon. He even tried the hot tub but eventually found her in her office.

“There you are,” he said.

He slid the door closed behind him, and the room filled with her. Her presence, her smell, the glimmer in her eyes. He had to touch her. He crossed the space and slipped his hands to her waist. Her sweater was just as soft as it had looked.

“You. Me. Snowmobile,” he said, dipping forward to press his nose to hers.

She shoved him impishly, but he didn’t let her go. “That’s what you’re thinking about right now?”

Actually, his thoughts also ran along the lines of peppermint and chocolate kisses...But he didn’t bring that up.

He grazed his nose to her cheek. “What can I say? I like to take things fast.”

She laughed. “Your behavior proves otherwise.”

Oof. That stung. “You got me there.”

She twined her hands behind his neck. “So what, we go out to Boone’s—”

“He invited us to spend Christmas Eve with them.”

Delight gleamed in her eyes. “Really?”

“Really.” He knew she usually spent Christmas with her mom. Since her mom had decided to stay in southern Utah due to her health, Junie had probably been preparing to spend the holiday alone.

She hesitated, and in moments her excitement deflated. “I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“I can’t leave the inn unmanned.”

Mason frowned. He hadn’t thought of that. “Don’t you have staff? Isn’t there anyone you can leave the front desk with? It’s Christmas Eve.” Junie had hired a new girl, Vanessa, to cover the desk at night, but she’d taken the holiday off. He’d forgotten.

“I always have to work on Christmas Eve,” Junie said. “Hazards of being a softie when it comes to other people’s requests to be with their families.”

“You deserve a break,” he said. She really did. As far as he knew, Junie oversaw the entire operation of Harper’s Inn. He wasn’t the only one who answered to her for approval over decisions. Now that Grace had quit to take care of her baby, Junie had also hired another young woman whose name he couldn’t remember to help restock towels and handle laundry and the like. But that girl was probably off for the holiday too.

There were the women who ran the spa. What were their names? For the life of him, he couldn’t remember those either. The spa segment of Harper’s Inn wasn’t a place he went often, though he knew the ladies did come to the dining room for meals.

He hadn't gotten Junie a conventional gift, but he suddenly had a different idea. "I'll be back," he said.

"Where are you going?"

He pressed a quick kiss to her mouth. "I'll be back," he said again without explaining. He couldn't mention anything about it in case things didn't work out as he hoped they would.

CHAPTER 16



Mason hurried past the dining room and down to the opposite wing of the inn. His nostrils began to fill with the scent of eucalyptus and mint. Before stepping into the spa, he waited for a woman in a robe to meander past him.

The eucalyptus scent slammed into him stronger now that he was inside. Soothing music drifted overhead. And with the potted plants, the lighter textiles, and the overall hush in this space, it gave the room a calming ambiance. He drew in a long inhale, feeling instantly more relaxed, despite the urgency coursing through him. He approached the woman at the desk.

“Oh, hey, Mason,” she said. “What can I do for you?”

Sure, she knew his name. He cursed himself for not paying more attention. “Hey,” he said. “I had a thought and wanted to run something past you.”

“We’re about to close,” she said.

“It’s not—I’m not planning on coming to the spa,” he said.

“That would be a first for you.” She winked.

He blanched but went on. “It’s about Junie, actually.”

“Oh?”

“It’s Christmas Eve.” Duh. He really needed to get out what he’d like to say. To her credit, the woman behind the desk didn’t act annoyed. She simply bobbed helpfully and waited for him to continue. “Junie would like to spend the evening with her cousin and her family, especially since her

mom is gone. She does so much for the inn,” he said. “She deserves a night off.”

“She really does,” the woman said. At that, another woman with too much makeup, long brown hair, and a similar black apron stepped out from the hall and waved to him with curiosity.

“Hey, Mason. Olivia, are we about ready to close up?”

Olivia. At least he knew one of their names.

“In a sec. Mason is trying to ask something. What are you getting at?”

He squirmed inside. “I know it’s a lot to ask, especially last minute, and I apologize for that. Junie usually handles the front desk all night long on Christmas Eve. But I thought it would be nice for her to get a break this year and spend Christmas with her cousin at his cottage,” he said as a recap for the newcomer. “Is that something you two might be able to help with?”

Olivia stared at him in thought for a moment, but the new woman placed a hand on the counter. “You know, I wish I’d thought of that before. That would be an incredible thing to do for her. She does so much for everyone else around here.”

“She does,” the newcomer said. “I had plans with my kids tonight, though.”

“Bring them here,” Mason said on a whim.

“Are you serious?”

“How many kids would love to spend a night in a place like this? They could have the extra room in the old family wing. Can you do it? Can you handle the front desk and any complaints that might arise?”

The two women exchanged a glance filled with questions and hesitation.

“Bring your families,” Mason said again. “The meals will be included.” He would see to that.

“Really?” Olivia’s delight was evident in the tone of her voice.

“Really,” he said.

The moment was loaded with anticipation. He was almost certain they were contemplating reasons to reject his request, but seconds later, Olivia perked up.

“You know? I think it’s a great idea. I’d love to.”

“You would?” Mason couldn’t hide his relief.

“Yes,” she said with a smile. “My kids are going to be all over this. And the hubs will love having your Christmas dinner. He couldn’t stop talking about your food after we came to the Valentine’s couples thing last year.”

“I will, too,” the first woman said, beaming. “I’d love to do this for Junie.”

“You’re both amazing,” Mason said. “I’ll make sure everything is in order for the meals. And thank you so much.”

“Thank you,” the two women said, almost in unison.

He gave them a smile and turned. It took more effort than it should have to simply walk to the door rather than bolt through it like he wanted to. He couldn’t wait to tell Junie.



JUNIE LOOKED OVER THINGS IN HER ROOM. SHE’D GOTTEN Mason the same generic gift she’d given to all the other members of the staff—a gift basket along with some coffee mix and gift cards to the one and only restaurant in West Hills. She eyed the presents she’d gotten for Boone, Grace, and Brecken.

If only she’d gotten something more for Mason. She didn’t want to lump him in with anyone else. Not after all they’d shared.

She wanted him to know how special he was and how special he’d been to her for a long time now. It was too bad

she couldn't make a night at Boone and Grace's work. She hadn't been out to the old homestead for a while and wouldn't mind being there for Brecken's first Christmas. He was seriously the cutest little thing. Every time he flashed one of his smiles at her, it made her gooey inside.

She still couldn't believe the possibility of Christmas with Mason was even happening. He wouldn't have said yes unless it was something he wanted. What about his family? If it were possible, Junie would suggest his parents join them, but in that little cottage, space would be limited as it was. And besides, it wasn't Junie's place to invite anyone to Boone's house.

But it wouldn't happen. There was no way she could leave her responsibilities here. She'd always worked Christmas Eve, and she would work this one too.

Mason could stay here, though. Maybe he would consider sitting up with her...

A commotion sounded down the hall. Junie released an exhale, knowing she needed to get back out there. Now that Christmas Eve dinner had been served, guests would be turning in for the night. She needed to be at the desk in case anyone needed anything.

Junie stepped out of the family wing and passed the stairs, only to stop. Olivia Ethington sat behind the desk, staring at the rack of empty hooks where room keys were stored. She no longer wore the black apron she usually donned while working in the spa. Instead, she wore a pair of cloth pants and a gray blouse.

"Olivia?" Junie said, standing to the side of the desk. "What are you doing here?"

Olivia opened her heavily lined lips to reply, but a different voice sounded behind her.

"She's your replacement," Mason said.

Junie whirled to find him leaning casually by the entrance into the sitting room.

"My—what?"

Olivia smiled. “That’s right. Mason told me you had plans. Bianca and I are covering for you tonight.”

Junie gaped at him, stunned. “He did?”

He smirked like he didn’t mind being caught with his hand in the cookie jar. “You deserve a night off,” he said. “Go on and get packed. Boone is about to head to the cottage. We’re going with him.”

Junie couldn’t think. She couldn’t believe Mason had done this for her. She was completely touched and speechless. “What about your parents?”

“I’ll spend the morning with them when we get back. Go on now.”

She couldn’t help her grin and the squeak of delight that leaked out with it. Junie started scampering off, stopped, and turned back to throw her arms around him in the warmest hug. She burrowed her face into his neck and breathed him in.

“Thank you,” she said.

He hugged her tightly. “You’re welcome.”

And then she was off, dashing to her room and floating half of the time as she opened her drawer.

“I lied,” she told her pajamas. “You’re coming with me. Oh, and Santa? We’re back on,” she said skyward, grinning like a fool.

CHAPTER 17



Grace and Brecken nestled on the sleigh's driver's seat beside Boone. Mason and Junie snuggled in the back. When they arrived, Mason and Boone clustered in the kitchen, and Junie joined Grace in the back of the cottage to change Brecken. Grace cranked up the only bedroom's space heater and cooed at her baby boy, who busily grabbed his toes the instant he was freed from his snowsuit.

"He's so cute," Junie said, sinking onto the bed and tickling his belly.

"Thanks," Grace said. "I can't believe he's here. I just feel so blessed, you know?"

"You are," Junie said.

Grace fiddled with Brecken's sock, working to keep it on his foot as she placed a replacement diaper and wipes on the bed beside the baby.

"Looks like you are, too," Grace said. "You and Mason? How long has this been going on?"

Junie shook her head in disbelief. "You'll never believe me if I tell you. Actually—" Junie changed tack. "It worked for you, so maybe you will."

"What worked for me? The radio?"

Junie bit her lip, beaming and leaning in closer.

"I know it played for you and Mason the same year it played for us. But I thought nothing came of it," Grace said.

Junie had confided in her about this when she'd been sad that nothing had happened. *Confided* might be too tame of a word. In all truth, Junie had wailed to Grace after Mason had first begun to ignore her.

"So did I," Junie said, whispering. She glanced at the door behind Grace. The men were in the kitchen, but who was to say they wouldn't step through the door any minute? "But the mountaintop? You were up there. The guests all were. Everyone was gathered and waiting for the bonfire to start. Then this storm blew in and took you all with it."

Grace paused while slipping Brecken's pants back on his little kicking legs. "You're kidding."

"I'm not. I know it sounds crazy, and you don't remember, but it was as real as anything, Grace."

Grace's hand went to her chest. "Oh my gosh, Junie. You've wanted this your whole life."

The mention of that made Junie duck her head. "I know better than to get my hopes up."

"Just look at how he looks at you," Grace said, nudging her in the direction of the door. Junie wondered what the men were doing. Preparing things for the evening, no doubt. "Boone told me how Mason's been looking at you, and I see it now too. How he cuddled up with you on the way back from the event center and talked about taking you snowmobiling. How he willingly accepted the offer to spend Christmas Eve with us. He never would have accepted before, Junie. This is real."

"Real," Junie breathed while tiny flurries swirled inside of her.

Again, she wished she could talk to Santa Claus. What was going on? *Was* it real? Was this something she could rely on this time? Could she plant her hopes on him?

They gathered around Boone's small dining table. Junie's knees collided with Mason's, but she didn't mind in the slightest. She certainly didn't mind when his hand found hers. Boone doled out several card games, and the four of them

played and laughed with one another for some time. It wasn't until Brecken began to rub his eyes that their festivity was interrupted, and Grace took him to the bedroom to get his Christmas jammies on.

"He's ready," she announced, bringing the baby boy back out again minutes later. He wore candy-cane-striped footies.

"Those look just like mine," Boone joked, leaning in to kiss his little boy's cheek.

"Da da da," Brecken said, beaming a one-toothed grin at his dad.

With stars in her eyes, Grace stared at her husband. Junie and Mason exchanged a look.

"Guess it's time to call it a night," Boone said.

"We can get your bed all set up." Grace handed Brecken to her husband and headed to the back of the cottage, returning with a bundle in her arms. "It won't take long to blow this mattress up."

"Sounds good," Mason said, taking the bundle from her.

After inflating the air mattress and each of them readied for bed, the group gathered to read the story from Luke 2 in the Bible. Soon, Grace and Boone bade them goodnight, leaving Junie and Mason alone in the room with the crackling fire and heat in Junie's cheeks.

Christmas with Mason Devries. If someone had told her last year that she would be here with him now, she would have laughed in their faces.

Junie toyed with the fuzzy fabric of her gingerbread pajamas. She dodged around the air mattress, making for the couch. "What does your family do for Christmas?" she asked.

"We traveled a lot," Mason said.

He'd changed into a pair of plaid pants and a plain t-shirt. His dark hair was tangled as usual, and Junie loved this look on him. This comfortable side he was showing her. He hadn't even been this comfortable up at the event center.

“Dad always said experiences were more valuable than gifts, so we didn’t do a whole lot of gift-giving.”

“Where was your favorite place that you went with your family?”

He settled onto the air mattress, sitting across from where Junie sat on the couch. He bent one knee and rested his arm across it. “England and Ireland were pretty cool. I’m a sucker for history and loved the castles we toured.”

“I’m jealous! That sounds so neat,” Junie said. She’d never done anything like that before. In fact, she’d never traveled much at all except for a trip to Disneyland when she was younger. “It’s been years since I’ve had a conventional Christmas,” she said. “When I was a kid, we would have Christmas at the inn. That was before my dad died.”

“I didn’t know he died,” Mason said, “though I admit, I’ve always wondered what happened to him.”

“Yeah, I was fifteen when he got cancer.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Mason said.

The moment between them separated itself from the rest of time. It paused in place, making Junie feel like she and Mason were the only ones experiencing it. She tilted toward him... and he pulled away.

Oh no. Would he always pull away from her? She remembered the concern he’d shown at the event center before Boone had arrived. Did his withdrawal have something to do with what he’d been about to say? She hadn’t thought about it since they’d gotten back to the inn, but she probably should have.

“You—what’s wrong?” she asked. “Is it because Boone and Grace are in the next room? There’s a good chance they’re doing the same thing we are.”

Mason shook his head and placed his hand on hers. “It’s not that. I like you, Junie. And if you’re not sure if I want to kiss you, I absolutely do.”

“Then I don’t see the problem.”

He acted conflicted, and she almost couldn't bear the pain he seemed to battle. "I can't be that version of myself." The words were soft, almost reluctantly spoken.

"What version?" she asked, edging closer to him. Her feet on the air mattress made Mason bobble.

He rested a fist on her knee. "A relationship means commitment. It means getting closer. Relying on someone else and being tied to just one person—"

She inwardly shrank back. That's what this was about? He didn't want to be with her. He didn't want her hanging on him. "You don't want me to tie you down, is that it?"

He'd never struck her as a lifelong bachelor, but maybe that was what he wanted.

If that was the case, why had he acted so sweet about coming to Boone's? Why had he gone through the effort of finding someone to cover the desk for her?

He reached for her hand again. His skin was warm. "That's not it at all."

"I don't understand. You don't want to be in a relationship with me?" Was he saying he just wanted the occasional makeout session? She couldn't see him being that kind of guy. Was she really so awful that he couldn't stand the thought of being with her?

The time to retreat was now. She should have known he would do this to her again. She should have known better than to set her hopes on him.

"Junie—"

Junie withdrew. She scooted far enough on the couch that it left him bobbling on the air mattress from the effect of her movement.

"I get it," she said. She should have stayed at the inn.

"Please don't pull away. I'm saying this all wrong."

"What do you want me to do?"

He struggled, face pinched, and ran a hand through his hair, tangling it all the more and making him that much more appealing. “I—I want you as far from me as you can get—and at the same time, the idea of not being near you is painful.”

“What are you afraid of? That I’ll interfere with your plans?” Was that the real reason he hadn’t taken the job in New York? Was he saying he felt tied to her and wished he wasn’t? Granted, she didn’t want him to leave the inn, but he had to do what he felt he needed to, as painful as that seemed.

“You asked what I’m afraid of? Myself. That’s what I’m trying to say. My father’s selfish. He comes across as a nice guy until you get under his skin, and there’s nothing but bitterness under there. And the worst parts of him? The parts I hate? I can see them in myself, Junie.”

“You’re anything but selfish. Look what you did for me tonight. You got someone to cover for me. You took care of me on the mountaintop when I could have died of frostbite.”

“Those were only decent things to do. I’m talking about little regular interactions. When things go wrong, he gets angry. I can’t do that to you.”

She didn’t grasp what he meant. “You make it sound like you have some kind of Mr. Hyde in you.”

“Maybe I do.”

She tried to think of the best way to approach this. “Look at me, Mason. Please.”

He did. Pain lingered in his eyes.

“A monster isn’t going to emerge from within you if you date me. Newsflash, I’ve known you for five years now. I’ve talked to you before, even on a personal basis like you’re talking about, and you’re not that scary.”

He hung his head as if hiding from past memories that flayed him. “I was in a relationship before, with a girl I thought I could marry. And the closer we got, the more she pointed out how I was more like my father than I realized.”

“That doesn’t mean she was right,” Junie said. “It sounds like she was the one who was being unfair. I mean, I have no room to judge the situation. I don’t know her, and I generally like to give people the benefit of the doubt, but why would she say that?”

His eyes turned glassy. “Because I hurt her.”

CHAPTER 18



Junie couldn't wrap her head around this. What kind of hurt was he talking about here? He certainly wasn't the kind of man to physically endanger a woman. Had he done something to hurt her emotionally? That didn't sound like he was a bad person—it sounded like he was human.

"I don't believe that. You are the kindest man I've ever known."

His gaze flicked to hers. "You—"

She slid to the edge of the couch and ran her fingers through his hair. His eyes closed, and he leaned into the touch. The air sparked between them, the same attraction she felt every time he was near. He was so handsome, she could hardly stand it. And Mason hurting anyone? She couldn't believe he was capable.

"What terrible things did she claim you did?"

He considered this, thinking, sifting through his memories. "I snapped at her. I said things—"

"How long ago was it?" she asked.

"I dated her back in cooking school."

"Tensions were high. You were younger. You've changed, Mason. You've grown and matured. You manage your team beautifully, and if anyone can see this supposed tendency toward unkindness, it's them."

"Maybe they do," he said. "And you just don't know it because they're too nice to report me."

“So you think,” Junie said. “They would report as much to me during our check-in meetings when I ask them how things are going and how they like working with you.”

From the way he went still, he was touched by her reassurances, so she gave him a few more. “I talk to people at the inn, Mason. Many of the guests who come say that meeting you was their favorite part of their stay. You deal with so much and haven’t pushed anyone away yet.”

“Except you,” he said.

“I wasn’t going to say it.”

He chuckled and rested his arms on her knees. “Because you’re kinder to me than I deserve.”

“You are not a terrible person, Mason Devries. In fact, you’re the opposite. Now I think you’d better kiss me already, so you know how serious I am.”

He chuckled and leaned forward. The mattress pitched his weight. His arms snagged around her, and he pulled her from the couch as if losing his balance, though she could tell he did it on purpose.

Mason pulled her to him and planted his mouth on hers. The kiss was the reassurance she needed. It wove through her and warmed her blood.

“Do you think Santa is going to come down the chimney?” Mason asked against her mouth.

“I don’t know what he does.”

“Are you still mad at him?” he asked, nipping a kiss on her nose. Junie caught his lips and indulged in a sumptuous kiss that lasted so long she nearly forgot what he’d asked. She should be good and climb back onto the couch, but nestled in his arms on the bed was so much better.

Soft crying broke through the thin walls of the cottage, making Junie’s mouth slow against Mason’s. She gripped his shoulders. Mason reared away as if he could see the fussing baby through the wall. Then, grinning, he turned back toward her and pressed his forehead to hers.

“Guess that’s what we have to look forward to,” he said quietly.

Her fingers dug into his shoulder. “We?”

Did he just say what she thought he did?

“You want to marry me, don’t you?” he said.

She needed someone to pinch her. He couldn’t be serious.

“You are the most attractive man I’ve ever met,” she said.

He laughed and tightened his arms around her. Junie drowned in his embrace, in his kisses, in everything that he was. They muttered against one another’s mouths, talking of future things, of potential. Sometimes they didn’t talk at all, but stared at the dreams in one another’s eyes, and shared smiles they would keep secret for years to come.

This wasn’t her list at all, and yet it was so much better. Maybe that was why it had been left in her stocking that morning. On that note...

“I want to show you something,” Junie said.

He groaned in complaint as she extricated herself from his arms, made the air mattress wobble, and dove into her bag near the table. It was much colder outside the warmth of his embrace.

She wasn’t sure why she’d had the impulse to bring the letter, but she did, removed it, and returned to him. She knelt on the air mattress beside him, and Mason sat to meet her.

She held the page gingerly in her hand.

“Is this the infamous list?” he asked. To her relief, she detected amusement in his tone. “Going to see how I measure up to your childhood expectations?”

She shoved him. “I thought you might like to have a good laugh.”

He slipped his arm around her waist and rubbed his nose along her jawline, addling her senses. “Let’s hear it then,” he said, gliding his lips along her jaw.

Junie cleared her throat. This was going to be a lot more difficult if he kept that up.

“It says—” She giggled. “Mason, it says—hey, stop it.”

“Stop what?” His voice was soft and distracted against her ear. Brecken’s cries through the wall started up again, but they were weak and sleepy this time. Mason’s arm tightened around her. She gave up on reading the list and turned her attention to him more fully, giving in to his mouth’s insistence, losing herself in a pool of kisses.

“You’re relentless,” she said.

“I’ll take that as a compliment.”

She was overheating and losing her grasp on reality and the reasons they needed to slow down, which was all the more reason to capture his hand as it explored her waist. He may want to marry her, but they weren’t married yet.

“It says we should be careful,” she said.

He broke from her then, resting his head against hers. “Your wish list?”

“I don’t want this to go back to what happened before,” she admitted.

“Neither do I.” He stroked her cheek.

She caught his hand and stared him down, not wanting the passion of the moment to muddle anything else. “Do you mean that?” she asked.

“You still don’t trust me?” A look of hurt flashed across his eyes.

“I want to. This is so magical to me. I think I’ve been in love with you for a long time now and—”

He placed his fingers on her lips, staring at them, subduing in the light of the fire and those twinkling from the tree.

“Say that again?” he said, the corners of his lips doing strange things to her insides.

“I love you.” She didn’t see any reason to keep the truth from him. Why else had she been so hurt that he’d kept his distance from her? They’d been friends for a few years now, but her connection with him had always been more than friendship. She’d noticed him in a boyfriend or husband kind of way, not in a friend way. She’d daydreamed about him like that too.

His lips broke into a full smile, his eyes gleaming with so much light it tore the breath from her lungs. “You love me.”

“I do. I love you.”

“Junie, no one has said those words to me in—I can’t remember the last time anyone said those words to me.”

“Not even your family?”

“Not even my family. I’m sure my mom has said it, but not for a long time.”

The thought made her sad. With the whole-hearted gleam and the connection stringing between them, she realized how hurt he’d been for years. Tenderly, carefully, she cradled his face in her hands. His breath stroked her skin.

“I love you, Mason Devries,” she said. A shudder rippled over him. “I love your eyes.” She placed a tender kiss on each of his eyebrows. “Your nose.” A kiss to the tip. “Your mouth.” Trembling, she kissed first one corner, then the other, before kissing the center and drinking in the taste of his response. He deepened the kiss, which was more expressive than anything they’d yet shared. This kiss was expansive, a communication, an acceptance.

“I love your heart,” she said. “Your hands.” She brought his knuckles to her lips. “They can cook for me anytime.”

He laughed and then guided her to his chest. Her head rested against his heart. She felt its rapidity spurring hers to a new cadence. Cannons clamored in her chest. Drums and cymbals and an entire percussion section clanged with unabashed pronouncement.

“Thank you,” he said.

“You deserve to hear it,” she said, lifting to meet his gaze again.

Gradually, so slowly it was almost painful, she pulled back again. He held her face in his hands this time. “Junie. Juniper Harper.”

“Watch it.”

“I love your name,” he said. “And your kindness.”

“I didn’t say what I just said to be kind.”

“I know.” A moment beat between them. Any minute now, he’d return the sentiment. He felt the same for her, didn’t he?

Maybe not. Maybe her hopes were as fleeting as the snow outside, ready to flurry at the smallest gust or melt at the slightest amount of heat.

“We’d better get some sleep,” he said, kissing her mouth.

This kiss felt so final it pricked her eyes with tears. She wanted to question him. To demand he say the words back to her, to mean it. But she grasped his meaning—

He didn’t love her. He’d talked about marrying her, but maybe that had just been him being caught in the moment. He’d allowed himself to do that before, too, which was why she knew she couldn’t trust the promise.

“Thank you for a wonderful Christmas gift,” she said, knowing she needed to pull away to salvage what was left of her heart. She wasn’t one to hold grudges. She would be hurt, it was true, but she wouldn’t hold it against him.

He didn’t love her. How could he? Love wasn’t something to be forced on someone else or to punish them for. Though they’d known one another for a long time, that didn’t mean any feelings had developed on his end, especially not when he’d pushed her away before and kept himself at arms’ length for so long.

“I didn’t give you anything,” he said.

“You gave me a night off, and that is something no one has done for *me* in a long time. Not just any night, either, but

Christmas Eve? Best present ever.” Even if the kisses they’d shared tonight would torment her for the rest of her life, at least she would have the memory.

He had given her a night off. She could focus on that.

“You’re welcome.”

“Good night,” she said, climbing onto the couch and settling in. It was colder here, but her body heat would warm the cushions and blanket soon enough. If she waited long enough, she’d warm up again, wouldn’t she?

Mason turned his back to her. Junie had hoped for more small talk as the two settled and relaxed, but soon he was snoring. Just like that.

How could he act so unaffected by all of this? This was monumental for her. She replayed their kisses, their conversation over and over in her mind, but one thing plagued her. She’d told him she loved him—and she’d meant it. But he hadn’t said it back.

Did that mean he didn’t love her? That he didn’t mean what he’d said about marrying her? He’d made it sound like marriage and babies were something he wanted with her.

A wave of embarrassment washed over her. Had she read too much into things? Had she said too much? He’d drawn away from her before. Would he do so again in the morning? That was what she took their final kiss to mean—it meant goodbye.

She wished she could be sure of his affection, that the passion they’d shared wasn’t just him being a guy and that it stemmed from his feelings rather than the attraction of the moment.

Junie rolled onto her side when something crinkled beneath her. The list. The stupid list. She’d checked it—twice. A lot of good it had done her. She pulled the paper free, tempted to toss it into the fire.

Mason hadn’t seemed all that interested in seeing her qualifications, and why should he be? She thought he would at least find them funny but—

Junie startled. She bolted upright as fear injected into her and stared at the paper. The list, her scratchy twelve-year-old writing, had vanished. The paper was now as blank as it had been before she'd put pen to it.

CHAPTER 19



Junie stared at the familiar paper, at the Christmas trees lining the top of the stationary. Mom had given her this stationery for her birthday—never mind that her birth date happened to be in August and struck during the hottest month of the year. Junie had always loved Christmas everything and had wanted Christmas for every occasion, whether it was Valentine’s Day or Thanksgiving. Every holiday was always a reason to celebrate Christmas too.

She’d gotten the paper. Hugged her mom voraciously and had said, “I know the first thing I’m going to write on this!”

It had taken her several drafts to come up with the perfect traits her future husband would have. She’d held onto the paper and stared at it more times than she cared to admit. Waiting for Christmas to come was marginally that much more painful—not because of what she hoped to receive, but for the list she’d hoped to leave for Santa.

The devastation of that morning still hovered like bad breath after an unwanted hug from a relative you hadn’t seen in years. Her hands felt just as empty now that Santa—she knew he was the one behind this. Who else could it be?—*Santa* had not only rejected taking the list from her but had wiped it completely clear.

She couldn’t possibly have brought a blank page by mistake. She didn’t have any more of this stationary, after all, not now that she was double twelve in years. Which meant—

Junie fumed within her blankets, and the heat of her anger made her body heat climb to volcanic temperatures. Boone's cottage was too small. The walls were too thin. She'd create a ruckus and wake everyone if she wasn't careful, but she couldn't remain where she was.

She had to go somewhere she could vent. Somewhere she could make some noise.

Junie climbed to the end of the couch and leap-frogged off of it, avoiding Mason's air mattress altogether. Within minutes, her feet were in her boots, her coat cooking her, and she slipped out into the cool winter night.

It was all she could do to pace far enough away from the cottage before a screech of frustration catapulted from her lungs. She let the yell free and ricochet off the tops of the trees.

"Seriously?" she spewed. "Things have been going so good with Mason. I thought we were back on. I thought—I'm tossing the radio. I'm chucking it over the nearest cliff the minute we get back to the inn. I said we were done before, but now? Now we are *so* done."

The sound of footsteps approaching behind her startled her in her boots. The moonlight dusted over the snow, making it sparkle; the smell was fresh and clean, full of pine and stardust. Junie froze, not wanting—not daring—to turn to see who had followed her out here. Mason would think she was a nutjob. He probably already thought that. That was probably why he couldn't love her.

That was it. She was psycho, and she was destined to spend every Christmas from here on out in utter solitude, alone in her room at the inn, waiting for Boone and Grace to come from their family festivities to open the meager present she'd have wrapped for them. Mom would stay roosted in snow-bird-heaven, and Mason would plan meals and act like the incredible experiences they'd shared had never taken place.

But the voice wasn't Mason's. It wasn't even Boone's or Grace's. The voice was a merry sound, a tone that, though serious, still hinted at a hidden sparkle in the seriousness.

“If you don’t want the radio anymore, at least let Boone and Grace keep it.”

Junie’s tongue swelled. She didn’t turn of her own accord. Her duplicitous curiosity got the better of her, making her feet rotate in the snow to face a stout man with a kind face, rosy red cheeks, and a token white beard. He wasn’t dressed all in red, but he didn’t have to be for her to recognize him.

Disbelief racked her with such force that it rendered her speechless and motionless. She thought through all the ranting, hate-filled tirades she’d spewed since her frustration with him had begun. She never would have said half of those things if Santa had stood before her as he did now.

“You—you’re real.”

“You know that,” he said, a merry glow in his countenance. “You know it better than most.”

Junie couldn’t wrap her head around this. She’d dreamed of this moment, of meeting Santa as Lacie Kingston had claimed she had several years before. That was when the bitterness had sprouted, Junie supposed. It had started the minute she’d found out Santa had visited someone else, someone who hadn’t been as devout and enthusiastic about him as she had been her entire life.

“You’re a traitor.” She wasn’t sure anyone had spoken to Santa like that before, but he had it coming. Junie was no sugar-coater of things.

“I wiped that list because you need to let it go, Junie. Let Mason be who he is and have a little faith in him like you’ve had in me. He needs that, more than you know.”

This wasn’t the response she’d expected, and Junie was humbled. Mason had been on his own for a long time. He’d been essentially cut off from his family, from the sound of things. They may have traveled together when he was younger, but she remembered the cold greeting he’d received from them and the way they hadn’t cared to spend Christmas Eve with him. The way *he* hadn’t wanted to spend Christmas with them. A person’s family should be in their corner.

He had no one in his.

Was that what had gone wrong? Junie saw everything clearly, as though every aspect of their conversation replayed with complete clarity.

She'd broken their kisses to show Mason the list of expectations she required him to meet? Junie had thought he would think it was funny to see her childish dreams and how silly they were...especially since she'd already told him about the list back at the event center. But there was nothing like starting a relationship by throwing a list of conditions for him to meet.

She should have kept it to herself. She'd already told him how asinine the list was. Why did she have to go and ruin the moment by throwing it in his face? No wonder her hadn't told her he loved her back.

"That's why you didn't take my list that morning," she surmised aloud.

Santa's eyes glittered in the moonlight. He beamed at her and touched the side of his reddish nose. "Very astute. You can't go forcing something like this. And besides, you're not the same girl you were when you wrote that."

This gave her chills, which were additional to those from the cold. "Are you saying you know me better than I know myself?"

"Eyes striped like candy canes?" Santa said, eyes twinkling. "I may have magic, but even I can't work that kind of miracle."

She laughed, feeling the slightest bit squeamish. "I was a little silly and extreme."

His gaze turned even more adoring, making her feel like nothing she did could make him love her less. It was a remarkable feeling. "You were charismatic and joyful. Sometimes our lives don't fit into a perfect plan, Junie. You can try to prepare and have goals and dreams, but you can't account for the moments when other people's goals and

dreams collide with yours. It can send you both on an entirely new trajectory.”

Was he talking about her and Mason? His goals were different from hers. They had taken him to a big city, a place she had no desire to venture to. What would she have done if he told her he was going to take the job in New York, after all? “What if I don’t like the direction?”

“That’s where faith comes in,” he said.

Junie hung her head. Faith. Belief. Everything she’d banked her life on. Everything she’d turned her back on recently. “I’ve been so mad at you.”

“Ho ho, don’t I know it! How many of your wishes have I granted this year, Junie?”

More than she could count. Not doing the bonfire. The guests all disappearing on Christmas Eve. Having Mason all to herself and being given a second chance to see if things between them might work.

“Thank you, sir,” she said, hoping he read the sincerity in her voice. “If I might ask—why? Why did you do that? Why grant my wishes when I didn’t deserve them?” She’d lambasted him from here to kingdom come.

“I think you did,” Santa said. “One momentary spell of doubt and frustration doesn’t negate years of devout belief. We can have moments of doubt, Junie, but that doesn’t make us less than worthy to receive good things or make what we’ve held onto untrue.”

He allowed his words to settle into the empty spaces inside of her. Strangely enough, though the winter air was frigid and chilled, it felt as though she were standing beside a warm oven and inhaling the scent of freshly baked cookies.

His expression gleamed, and he stepped away from her, his shiny black boot crunching the snow. “Give Mason some time, Junie. Enjoy the experience. Often, if we’re not careful, we can push away the very thing we’re so close to obtaining because we’re too impatient to let it blossom on its own.

You've been one of my most staunch supporters for a long time. Don't lose that faith in me—in people. In him."

Junie didn't like the sound of this. Was Santa implying she would have reason to doubt Mason before all of this was through?

"Merry Christmas, Junie," he said, touching the side of his nose.

Was it a Merry Christmas? Could she return the sentiment?

"Thank you, Santa," she said, but before she finished the words, he was gone, leaving her alone in the woods.

CHAPTER 20



If it hadn't been so cold, Junie might have lingered outside a lot longer. But after mulling over her conversation with Santa—*Santa*. She'd *finally* met Santa—the cold got the better of her. She stalked toward Boone and Grace's hut, taking in the smoke wafting from the chimney and picturing a time when her grandfather had been small and received a visit from St. Nick all his own.

At least that part of her heart was warm. The part that had been devoted to Santa and Christmas all her life. But the Mason part of things was still too confused to make much sense of the muddle.

Junie opened the door as quietly as she could and was grateful to see that Mason was still asleep. Thankfully, the door leading to the back half of the cottage where Boone, Grace, and baby Brecken were sleeping was blessedly closed. Perhaps that meant none of them knew she'd slipped out.

She wasn't sure she wanted to share what had transpired with anyone. She paused for a moment to take in the peace on Mason's handsome face, on the featherlight dusting of his long dark lashes against his skin, the muscular length of his arms, and the powerful build of his torso partially covered by his blanket.

Santa's voice resonated within her. *Give him time. Have faith in him.*

She wasn't sure exactly what that meant, but Junie took advantage of his closed eyes and drank him in. He was so

beautiful. He was a wonder of his own. Had he really held her? Kissed her? Would he do so again?

With thoughts rambling in all directions like a reindeer cut loose from the sleigh, she climbed onto her spot on the couch and lay for quite some time before sleep finally settled in.



“I DON’T WANT TO WAKE THEM.”

“The fire is probably out. We need to add more logs to it. It’s better than building a new one from scratch.”

“That’s true. And I did want to make a Christmas breakfast.”

Boone and Grace’s voices drifted into Junie’s subconscious, pricking her. Brecken’s excited cooing joined in, along with the slapping of his hands as he clapped the way he always did when he saw Junie.

“So much for staying quiet,” Boone muttered in bemusement at his son.

Junie peeked her eyes open in time to see him smiling at his baby boy and planting a kiss on the little guy’s chubby cheek, which earned another coo and a round of “da da da” from Brecken.

Grace beamed at her husband and set Brecken in his high chair. The kitchen area of the cottage was cramped as it was, but they’d found a high chair that attached to the table itself rather than taking up space all on its own.

“Morning,” Junie said, sitting up and stretching her arms toward her feet.

“Sorry to wake you,” Grace said. “This little man doesn’t let us sleep in for long.”

Boone began digging through the cupboards, and the sound of one of the doors slamming made Junie’s shoulders jump. Mason stirred as well, rolling to take in the commotion in the adjacent kitchen.

“Understandable,” Junie said sleepily. “And it’s no problem. Merry Christmas!” She attempted to work up her usual muster for the holiday. Usually, she loved the magic of Christmas mornings, and she couldn’t give either of them any kind of idea that something was amiss.

Her dreams had been filled with trips to the North Pole, searching for Santa, ready to pepper him with the question she hadn’t been able to ask, only to come up empty-handed. She couldn’t allow the feeling of loss to linger. Not this morning.

Santa had visited her. He’d answered the question she’d had about leaving her note behind, at least. He may have implied things would be difficult with Mason from here on out—but Mason was here with her now. She couldn’t ruin that fact with her worries.

“Merry Christmas,” Mason said. He thrust his blanket aside. “Here, I’ll help.”

“No way,” Grace said. She was still in her gray flannel pajama pants and matching snowflake t-shirt. Her blonde hair hung around her shoulders. “You’re always making food for everyone else. Let us make breakfast for you today.”

Mason stared at them for a moment. “I don’t mind.”

“Neither do we,” Grace said. She planted a hand at her hip and stared him down while somehow managing to smile.

“I’d listen to her.” Boone slid an adoring look at his wife.

Mason exhaled, and then his face split into a smile. “Okay, then. I’ll leave you to it.”

She nodded as if in approval and set to work, cracking eggs, stirring pancakes, and sliding bits of dried fruit onto the table in front of Brecken. Boone bustled beside her, helping as he was needed. Mason turned to Junie.

“How did you sleep?” he asked.

“Once I finally fell asleep, great.”

“You had a hard time falling asleep?”

She wanted to apologize to him for thrusting the note at him in the middle of their kisses, but figured now wasn't the time. She also had a sudden urge to gush to him and everyone in the room after her midnight encounter—and perhaps the old Junie would have done exactly that. But this new somber version of her, the sadder-but-wiser version, kept her meeting with Santa to herself.

“I couldn't get you off my mind,” she admitted.

He smirked at her. “Same.”

They ate breakfast and enjoyed some light banter. Then Mason and Junie helped deflate the air mattress to free up space for the four to exchange gifts. Or, rather, for the Harpers to exchange gifts. Grace had gotten Junie a necklace with a snowflake on it.

“Here,” Mason said. She held still as he brushed her hair to the side, his fingertips stroking the skin of her neck, and secured the clasp, so the lovely silver pendant dazzled from its chain.

“I love it,” she told Grace.

She felt chagrined; she had nothing for Mason. Fortunately, somehow Grace had something for Mason to open that morning. A board game that, in all likelihood, had been a gift for Boone but had been transferred to Mason instead.

Grace received a cake-baking kit replete with cake boards, spatulas, and a turntable, as well as a new apron. She threw her arms around Boone and planted a kiss on his mouth that transitioned into something a little deeper and longer lasting.

Mason slid a look at Junie, whose cheeks were heating. She cleared her throat in an obnoxious, obvious way. Grace slid away from Boone, her eyes locked on him in a glance that bespoke her deep-rooted love for him. Boone returned the glance, giving her a wink.

“There's more where that came from,” he said, making his wife throw a pillow at his face before covering her own. Brecken laughed and clapped his hands.

“You, little man,” Boone said, his voice turning lighthearted. He scooped the baby into his arms and approached the tree. “Let’s see what we have for you.”

“This one is from me,” Junie offered, pointing out the picture book she’d wrapped.

“Excellent,” said Boone. “And here we go.” He selected a larger box, kicking it toward Grace before seating himself. Together, he and Grace helped their baby pull the wrapping paper to reveal a toddler bike within.

Junie was struck by the beauty of the moment. By her cousin’s complete, heartfelt smiles and the delight in his eyes as he connected with his wife and son.

There had been a time when this moment had been taken from Boone. He’d lost his first wife in a tragic accident just before she’d been about to give birth to their first baby. The loss of Amy and their baby had devastated him for years. He’d shut himself away from Christmas completely. It’d been all Junie could do to get him to come to the inn during the holiday season, period, but to have her cousin show up Christmas Eve or Christmas Day was out of the question. He’d sworn he could never be happy like that ever again.

Then Grace had come. Santa’s radio had intervened, snowing the two of them in here at his cottage, and new light had sparked in Boone’s eyes, light that had been snuffed out for so long.

Santa’s voice resonated anew in Junie’s heart:

Have faith in me. In him.

Boone had been shown a new life was possible. A new chance at happiness, and a chance to bring happiness to Grace as well. That happiness emanated from them now with sickening, gooey prominence.

She slid a glance to Mason. Was a life like what Grace and Boone had possible for her and Mason too?

She wanted this. She couldn’t enunciate how badly she wanted exactly *this*. A baby of their own, stealing kisses they never wanted to end, sharing Christmas mornings, cooking

breakfast together. What did Mason think of Boone and Grace's happily ever now?



“NO. NO, NO NO NO, AND NO.” JUNIE STARED AT THE LIME green snowmobile in the barn alongside Boone's cottage. Her brain protested every direction this situation could go. They'd helped clean up the wrapping paper. Then she and Mason had bundled up with the understanding that Boone would take the two of them back to the inn.

Riding the snowmobile back? Not happening.

“But this was the plan,” Mason said, standing beside the stall where Hazelnut had been sequestered. “Boone and I straightened it all out.”

“Boone,” Junie snapped at him. “Hitch up your sleigh.”

Grace stood beside him in the open doorway. She'd also bundled up and had thrown a thick blanket around Brecken before accompanying them outside. Junie couldn't expect Boone to leave his family to take them home. She hurried to add, “I'll drive it myself.”

“Come on,” Mason said. “What are a few tracks really going to hurt?”

“Don't force her,” Grace said, pitching into the argument. Brecken was in her arms, kicking his legs so hard he nearly upended the blanket she'd secured around him in the cold morning. “She has a lot to keep track of at the inn.”

Grace knew that all too well. She'd worked with Junie for a few years after she and Boone had gotten married, right up until Brecken had been born.

Junie gave her a smile of thanks and stood her ground. She planted her hands on her hips for good measure.

The dilemma swam in Boone's eyes. “You don't know the first thing about driving a sleigh,” he said.

“How hard can it be?”

His concerns deepened, made evident by the furrow between his brows. She knew what was going through his head—or she had a good idea of what, anyway. He was considering hitching up Hazelnut and taking her himself, after all.

Ugh. It was *Christmas*. She couldn't expect him to leave his family now. Her gaze passed from Boone to Mason, then to Grace, who all watched her expectantly. Each of them saw nothing wrong with this plan despite Junie's reservations.

Her will crumpled.

"Fine," she mumbled.

Mason's face lit up. "Fine? You mean it?"

"Just as long as you don't pull right up to the inn. But keep the machine along the outskirts and drive around the north side of the barn."

Mason scooped her in his arms and pressed a kiss to her cheek. She laughed at the show of affection in front of her cousin and friend.

Boone clapped his gloved hands together. He made for the hooks where tack hung and retrieved the two helmets hanging there as well, handing them in Mason and Junie's direction. "All right then, here you go. Merry Christmas. Thanks for joining us."

"Thanks for having us," Mason said, taking his helmet.

Junie hugged Boone around the middle, then hugged Grace and pinched Brecken's cheeks. She then secured her helmet—it squeezed her head more than she liked, but she wasn't about to ride this thing without it. She climbed onto the sled and held tightly to Mason's waist as he kicked the snowmobile into gear.

The rambling noise was deafening and made regret squirm into her stomach, but it was too late to back out now.

"Hold on," Mason called over his shoulder, the sound muffled through his helmet. And then they zoomed off through the barn's open door with unexpected speed that threatened to

dismantle Junie completely. She laughed and clung tighter to Mason. He zipped through the trees and tore across an open meadow, treading in circles and gaining speed.

Mason trailed through trees and more trees, veering along the outskirts. Junie thrilled at the ride, the elation, at holding tightly to him, but she had to say, she was more than slightly relieved once the inn and its big red barn came into view.

He did as she'd asked. He veered around behind the barn, leaving the tracks well out of sight of the inn's guests as much as possible.

"How was that?" Mason asked once they arrived at the barn.

"Exhilarating," she said, still laughing and holding the helmet beneath her hand. The horses pawed their hooves, uncertain of what to make of the intruding machine. "Don't worry, guys," Junie told the animals. "It won't be here long."

"Don't tell me you're not going to let Boone ride it around here now."

"That was a one-time exception," she said, leaving the helmet beside his seat.

Mason pocketed the key and joined her side. Together, they walked to the door, but he paused before opening it.

Junie sensed the reason for his hesitation. It felt like once they took that step out, the magic of their holiday together would end.

Would it? Was there any way to keep things going between them?

"Thank you," he said, staring at the door, barring them from the barnyard outside.

"For what?"

He peered at her. "For welcoming me into your family. This morning was amazing."

"I'm sorry I didn't have a present for you," Junie said.

“They don’t always have to be tangible things,” he said, taking her hand. He reeled her close but didn’t kiss her as she thought he might. Instead, he captured her in a different way, a way that felt just as intimate. He slid his arm around her and rested his head against hers. The gesture was immense. It shifted from intense and devouring to remorseful as he stepped away and opened the door.

Still, he didn’t step out into the snow.

“What’s the matter?” she asked.

“Is it terrible that I want to stay in the barn?”

Harper’s Inn was visible beyond the barnyard. “Are you talking about your parents?”

Mason gave her a melancholy nod.

Junie tightened her hold on his hand, wanting him to know she would hold him for as long as he needed. “What happened with them? There’s more to it, isn’t there? Tell me.” How had they gone from amazing family vacations all over the world to barely wanting to see one another? They’d already talked about his family, but she suspected he hadn’t shared everything.

“I don’t measure up,” Mason said with an exhale that made itself visible in the cold air. “My father is a world-renowned brain surgeon. He’s saved countless lives and been featured in magazines and documentaries. He’s achieved numerous accolades, and as his only son, the expectation was for me to follow in his footsteps.”

“You’ve been on the Food Station,” Junie argued.

“Doesn’t matter. I’m a chef.” He said this as though he were a disgrace.

“You’re everything in my eyes,” she told him.

He swallowed as though nervous.

“I’m serious,” she went on. “It doesn’t matter if you’re enough for them because you’re enough for me.”

The look he gave her brimmed with gratitude. “Thank you, Junie.”

She tiptoed up and pecked just beside his mouth, not daring to give a full kiss. “If you’d rather whisk me away for a much-needed distraction, I’m game. I know where we can settle in cozily for a while upstairs. Boone and Troy have that storage room, and there’s a couch in there.”

He hung his head and laughed. “Thanks, but that’s what I’ve been doing since they arrived. I’m going to have to face them sometime.”

She couldn’t fathom this. If her mom were here, she’d want to spend time with her, and she missed her dad something fierce. “Want me to come with you?”

Mason drew in a long breath. “My inclination is to say yes, but I think I’d better do it on my own first, okay? My father isn’t the most tactful person on the planet, and I don’t want him saying anything to you that might...”

“He and I got along just fine on the tour, remember?” she said. She’d sensed Mr. Devries’ hardness during that tour, but it hadn’t deterred him from warming to her. “I’ll be there with you.”

He rubbed her arm. “I know. And I appreciate that more than you know. But I—I haven’t spoken to them in person in years, and I feel like I need to do this alone first.”

She tried not to be bothered. She told herself that his refusal had nothing to do with being ashamed of her. Junie smiled because that was what she did.

Have faith.

She really wished that little voice would leave her alone sometimes.

CHAPTER 21



Mason could tell by the expression on her face that Junie was uncertain. He wanted more than anything to put her at ease. But he refused to allow his father to insult Junie to her face, which Dad was certain to do if Mason approached and announced that he was falling for her without prepping his father first.

Dad had thawed during their tour of the inn; that was true. But he'd softened toward Junie as the inn's receptionist, not as someone Mason was falling in love with.

It would go much smoother if he had the chance to tell his parents about his relationship with Junie first. He could let Dad make all the snide comments he could out of Junie's earshot and then ask Dad to be civil before getting everyone together again.

At least, that was how he hoped things would go.

Mason had slept more restfully last night than he had in a long time. Thoughts of Junie had kept him warm when the fire had dimmed. Memories of holding her close, kissing her, and especially the finale when she'd told him she loved him, had sustained him the whole night.

Junie *loved* him. He couldn't fathom how that could be. Yet, she did; he could read it in the glitter of her gaze and the earnestness lingering there. She loved him. Purely. Simply. And yet not so simply either, he suspected.

The minute she'd spoken the words, the fog in his life had seemed to clear. He'd been conflicted about the job offer in

New York. He'd been conflicted about having his parents see where he'd settled himself, living in a thumbprint of a town in the middle of nowhere, working at an inn in a position of service to people.

Why should he be ashamed of the choices he'd made? Why should he want to wither and shrivel on the spot at the thought that he would have to announce as much to his overbearing father?

He wasn't breaking any laws. He wasn't committing any cardinal sins. He was happy here in Montana. He enjoyed the satisfaction of creating a gourmet meal and watching people's delight as they savored his food. And he was falling for the inn's adorable owner.

Mason paused in his procession to the dining room, where he'd agreed to meet his parents. A new thought dawned on him.

Junie had said she loved him. He'd been so caught up in the moment, so overwhelmed and touched, he hadn't said it back.

Did he love Junie? He loved kissing her; that much was evident. Attraction existed between them. She'd consumed all of his thoughts for a while now, and he felt like he could fall asleep with her in his arms and kiss her every chance he could get for the rest of his life. He'd mentioned marriage and a baby of their own last night without even thinking before the words had left his lips.

Was that love?

He hung his head. Did he know what love was? To him, family and fatherhood meant lording your wishes over someone else the way his father had done to him and his mother all their lives. Something told him that wasn't the true meaning of love. What was love?

He rested a hand on the wall, the thoughts constricting his airways so tightly he could hardly breathe. This wasn't fair to Junie. He couldn't offer her love, not when he didn't know

what it entailed for himself. How could he give something he knew so little about?

The same argument he'd had before resurfaced. He refused to be the kind of husband and father his dad had been. If that meant ending things with Junie to protect her from the way he would behave toward her, then so be it. He would take that job in New York if he had to. She deserved someone who could truly love her. A man who knew what love was and was better at offering it.

He pounded his fists against the wall. He'd had every intention of going to this meeting with his parents and declaring his interest in Juniper Harper—but how could he now?



JUNIE'S PHONE PINGED AS SHE MADE HER WAY DOWN TO THE reception desk. Olivia sat with her head propped in her hand. At Junie's approach, she lifted her chin and gave her a sleepy smile.

"How did it go last night?" Junie asked. She understood all too well the strain of manning the desk and seeing to other people's comfort. That took a high level of attention, one she questioned at times.

"Great!" Olivia said. "I hope you had a nice time. That was so cute of Mason to get us to cover for you. Is something going on between you two?"

Heat dotted Junie's cheeks. She fought the urge to fidget with her hair. "Why would you say that?"

"Because we saw that hug you shared before the two of you headed out in the sleigh with Boone last night." She winked.

Junie lifted her hands to cover her cheeks. Some of the staff knew how she felt about Mason, but she hadn't been close enough to confide anything with Olivia or any of the other women who worked in the spa. Junie wished she was

better at lying or deflecting the way some people could so easily.

“Sorry, I’ve got to check this,” she said, lifting her phone. “Thanks again for covering for me. Any needs I should be aware of?”

“Just Mr. and Mrs. Simmons in number three. They requested more towels. And many of the guests are wondering about the Christmas breakfast.”

“Isn’t it being served in the dining hall?”

“As far as I know. But they keep asking questions about what to expect since the bonfire was canceled Christmas Eve, you know? I think they were thrown off and want to ensure everything goes as outlined.”

“Right,” Junie said, feeling queasy. Christmas Eve made her think of the event center, which made her think of warm fires and Mason’s arms and peppermint kisses. “Thanks again.”

“See you later. The spa is closed until tomorrow,” she said with a laugh, trodding past the staircase to the hall leading to the spa where her things were undoubtedly stowed away. She looked tired and was probably ready to head home.

Junie inhaled, drawing in the cinnamon scent that wafted from the plug-ins she kept stocked throughout the halls of the inn. She smiled at the tree, visible within the front room, and then retrieved her phone from her pocket to check the message she’d received.

Mom: *Merry Christmas, June Bug.*

Junie: *Thanks, you too! We spent Christmas Eve and morning with Boone and Grace.*

Mom: *We?*

Uh oh. Were she and Mason a *We*? Junie squirmed. She’d been doing that a lot lately.

Junie: *Yeah. You know Mason?*

Mom: *Are you two finally together?*

Junie had told Mom about the radio playing. Mom had been there for Junie's decompressing heartache when things with Mason had died off so suddenly. She knew the extent of Junie's feelings for the handsome chef. Junie wished she could answer in the affirmative, but she went for honesty as always.

Junie: *I'm not sure what we are. Does kissing by the Christmas tree count as being together?*

Mom: *Absolutely! Oh, honey, that's so exciting.*

Was it? Junie wanted to feel excited. She couldn't allow herself to be hyperactive, not when Mason didn't want her to come with him while he met with his family. She'd welcomed him completely and was ready to do so in every aspect of her life. If he wasn't prepared to do the same for her, did that mean they were together?

Santa had told her to be patient with him. To have faith in him. Junie still wasn't sure what that meant exactly, but for now, she took it to mean giving Mason the benefit of the doubt.



GIFT IN HAND, MASON KNOCKED ON THE DOOR OF ROOM number twelve and waited with nerves racing. The door flew open, and Dad greeted him, chin elevated.

"Merry Christmas," Dad said, stepping back to welcome him inside.

Mom sat on the floral armchair across from the bed. She rose to pull Mason into a hug, and he breathed in her familiar honeysuckle scent.

"Merry Christmas, sweetie," she said.

"You too."

"Have a seat," Dad said, gesturing for Mason to take Mom's vacated chair. Mason did so, sitting awkwardly, holding the present in his lap. He'd gotten a few things from the gift shop down in West Hills. Corresponding mugs, t-

shirts, and a keychain for each of them. Mom bustled into the closet and stepped out again with several presents too.

Dad perched on the bed and took the gift she offered, waiting for Mason to take his, and then began tearing into his present. Mason rose to hand Mom the present, and they dove into their gifts.

“A coffee machine?” Mason said. “Thank you.”

“Cappuccino,” Mom corrected, smiling.

“We figured you had one,” Dad said, “but there’s something about having a few new things when you move into a new place.”

“A new—what are you talking about?”

“Delbert told us the good news,” Mom said, her cheeks rounded by her smile. “We heard you got the job!”

Mason cringed. He had replied to the email only to thank them for their interest and let them know he was taking his time to decide.

“I haven’t accepted yet.” Mason set the cappuccino machine on the floor beside his feet.

“Don’t tell me you’re going to turn it down,” Dad said. He’d barely looked at the package of bookends Mom had given him. Mom was still tearing into the gift Mason had gotten for them, but her fingers paused. Her gaze flicked from Mason to his father.

“I haven’t decided yet,” Mason said.

“We pulled a lot of strings to get you that interview,” Dad barked.

The defensive side of him that usually flared around his father began to boil. This was why he didn’t mind living in Montana, far away from his parents in his home state of Florida. The more distance between him and his parents, the better.

Now was the moment. He wanted to proclaim his love for Junie. To tell them he intended to ask her to be his wife, to

settle themselves here in Montana, and continue running the inn together.

Mason could hear the disappointment railing him now. Dad would lose his temper. He would blow his top, rip and rifle him, declaring all of his flaws from now until New Years. Mason would take all the brunts he had to if it meant he could have Junie.

But how could he have her? Despite her insistence that Mason was nothing like his father, the behavior only served as a reminder of the man he didn't want to be around her.

He couldn't risk ripping into her like that someday. Who was to say during their first disagreement as husband and wife Mason wouldn't do the same thing? He'd nearly done so back at the inn. He wouldn't be able to bear seeing the pain in her eyes, the pain that was currently simmering in his mother's eyes.

He wanted to marry her, but he couldn't.

For the first time, the notion of taking that job in New York became a possibility. He could see himself in that prestigious kitchen. Rubbing elbows with New York's finest, preparing meals on a much larger scale, and manning a much larger menu than he currently did. He could take that job, and not only that, but he would rock it.

"I wanted to wait until after the holidays were over before I decided," Mason finally said.

"And?"

He jutted his chin forward, wishing there was some way to clear his throat without actually clearing it. "And you're right. It is a great opportunity."

"So you're taking it?" Mom asked.

"Sure," Mason said, hating himself.

Dad's face lit up. "Really now? New York."

Mom beamed. "That's great, honey."

One of Dad's rare smiles made an appearance. "You'll leave this pit and start making something of yourself. I'm glad to hear it."

This hurt Mason more than he could say, but he chose not to mention it. He didn't want to have an argument with his parents here. Knowing how elevated Dad's voice could get, the other guests would undoubtedly hear his dissatisfaction through the walls.

He would take the job, he supposed. Not because it was the best thing for him. But because if he left, it would be the best thing for Junie.

CHAPTER 22



Due to the busyness of the next few days, Junie didn't have the chance to speak with Mason more than in passing. Then he'd had his team cover meals during the last part of day two.

Unable to wait any longer, she'd texted him to ask how the meeting with his parents had gone. Junie expected a drawn-out reply and maybe a text conversation to tide over the distance budding between them. Instead, his responses had been brief. He'd told her he was spending some time with them before they left. That they were going "sightseeing."

Without her.

Fair enough. She had her responsibilities around here, that was true, so she wouldn't have been able to go with them in the first place. But an indication of missing her or wishing she could come would have been nice.

On the morning of the third day, after receiving a fat lack of answers to her texts, she hovered around the kitchen, pestering Logan and Sylvia.

"Mason's been giving us instructions from his apartment," Logan said.

"His apartment?" Not sightseeing? She hadn't seen his parents around here for the past few days either, but they hadn't yet checked out. What was going on? "Is he sick?"

"I don't know," Logan said. "He'd better be for staying away this long."

“You might need to promote Logan to head chef,” Sylvia said, bending to pull a sheet of something that smelled completely delicious from the oven. Rolls, perhaps?

“I just might,” Junie said, irritated. It was one thing to take a few days off. It was another to not fill her in about what was going on. She wasn’t just his boss anymore, dang it. She was his girlfriend! Or so she’d thought.

She texted Mason for the thousandth time, but he hadn’t responded to her texts. After the sight of his parents making their way for the complimentary couple’s massage Junie had offered them, her patience had reached its limit.

She pulled out her phone.

Junie: *Where are you?*

Mason: *Sorry. I decided to take the day off.*

Junie: *Since when do you take days off?*

She didn’t want to throw the boss line in there, not when this was clearly something personal. Maybe something had happened with his parents, and he was trying to avoid them. If that was the case, he would have told her, wouldn’t he?

What if it wasn’t his parents he was trying to avoid? What if he was avoiding *her*?

Have faith.

Junie was starting to think faith was overrated.

Junie: *Is everything okay?*

Mason: *Fine. I’ll be back in tomorrow and explain everything then.*

Junie was tempted to throw her phone across the room, but the guests in the living room would startle at the receptionist of Harper’s Inn coming unhinged. She choked her phone instead.

The jingling bells on Hazelnut’s rigging chimed through. Boone pulled the horse to a stop and stroked her before climbing the steps and entering the inn. He kicked some snow from his boots.

“You,” Junie said too loudly.

Boone froze. “Me, what?”

She angled around the desk and stepped closer. “Have you seen Mason?”

Boone frowned. “Not for a few days. Why? Is something wrong?”

“Everything,” she muttered. She wasn’t going to stand around, not this time. “Can you cover the desk for me?”

“Why?”

“I’m going to his apartment. I need to talk to him.”

Boone rotated. “You mean—”

“You don’t mind, do you?”

“How long are you planning on being?” Boone asked.

“Not long,” Junie said. At least, she didn’t think this would take long.

Reluctantly, Boone agreed. Junie hurried to grab her coat, purse, and keys. Her car was parked in the lot beside the others. It was covered with a few inches of ice, thanks to the fact that she hadn’t driven anywhere in over a week. But after warming the engine and using the defrost, she made her way down the mountainside to the little town at its base.

Junie loved West Hills. It was the kind of town that time hadn’t touched. Most of the homes were gathered farther down the hill, away from the line of shops and stores. She parked in front of the gift shop on the town’s main street and hurried around to the basement side door.

She’d only been to Mason’s apartment once before, back when he’d first moved in. Ice coated spots on the concrete steps, but she took them carefully so as not to slip and made her way to the bottom before knocking zealously.

After a few agonizing moments, Mason opened the door. He looked terrible. Not in an ugly sense—he was still as handsome as could be. It was more like he hadn’t been sleeping. Why not? What was bothering him?

Acting aloof, he wouldn't look at her, but he kept his head bent to the floor. "What are you doing here, Junie?" he asked.

"I had to see if you were okay," she said. "Can I come in?"

He sniffed and gripped the door handle. She thought for a moment he might deny her request, but then he retreated and allowed her into the warmth of his apartment.

It was cozy and simple, with a single couch across from an old-school TV. The kitchen counters were cleared of dishes, and she wouldn't expect anything less of him. Mason rarely left messes back at the inn. She hadn't thought he would one here in his home either.

"What's going on?" she asked without waiting for him to invite her to sit down. "How did it go with your parents? Is everything okay?"

His forehead pinched. "I'm leaving, Junie."

The floor dropped from beneath her. "What?" Was this why he'd been avoiding the inn? Avoiding her?

Finally, he brought his eyes to hers, and they were filled with toil. "I got a job offer for that position in New York, and I'm going to take it."

"Mason." This was the moment. He was going to invite her to come with him. He was going to reveal how much he loved her and how he couldn't bear to leave her behind.

She would do it. She would sell the inn and leave all of this behind if it meant being with him.

The pain in his expression was stark. He didn't invite her. He didn't say anything regarding her whatsoever.

Junie could hardly believe it. The room tilted, and she rested her hand against the wall for support. "You're—you're leaving? Even after I told you—"

"That's why I have to. It's what's best for you."

"Best for me? How?" This made no sense. The room continued to spin. Junie blinked and waited for it to stop. She couldn't make sense of this. Why would he do this to her?

“I love you,” she said. “I’m no liar. In fact, my tendency to tell the truth gets me into trouble sometimes. How can you leaving be what’s best for me when all I want is you?”

He grunted and turned away from her. His fists were clenched, and the tension in his body reverberated through the room. “I don’t fit your list. I don’t fit your life. If I leave, you’ll be open to finding someone else who does.”

“Santa wiped the list!” she said with a desperate laugh. “It’s gone. It’s long gone, and I don’t even care if you fit what my stupid twelve-year-old self fantasized about. *You* fit what I fantasize about, Mason. I love you, and that means all of you. Even the parts of you that are terrible at communicating.”

His eyes flashed at her. He thrust a hand in her direction. “And what if I lose my temper at you? You’ve never seen that side of me. You have no idea the kind of man I truly am.”

The pain in his expression was unbearable. Did he really think so poorly of himself? What had happened when he’d spoken to his parents? Had his father said something to make him take this outrageous leap?

“I’ve seen you get angry,” she said, adding as much sincerity to the words as she could. She had to help him understand—she wasn’t worried about him losing his temper at her. Not in the slightest. He never had before. He was keeping it together now. They’d had plenty of misunderstandings over food in the past. If he was as bad as he insisted he was, she would have seen evidence of that behavior by now.

“You’re not nasty. You’re patient in the kitchen, even when one of your team burns the dumplings.” It happened last Christmas. Mason had handled things courteously before leaving the room, undoubtedly to vent his frustration in private. That was a mature way to handle things, in her opinion. She’d seen him handle things similarly at other times too.

“I—”

“Santa told me to have faith in you, Mason Devries. I’m not giving up on you.”

This stopped him. “What?”

She crossed the room to where he stood. She planted herself before him and lifted her chin so he couldn’t mistake her sincerity. “If you leave Harper’s Inn, then I’m leaving too.”

“Junie, you can’t do that.”

“I love you, idiot. And I think you love me too. Tell me you don’t.”

Something flashed in his eyes. It was the spark of desire, the heat of conflict, and the gleam of truth. It didn’t waver. It didn’t wane. Instead, it burned brightly and brought life to his expression. It hinted at the battle raging inside of him.

Junie gasped and covered her mouth. “Oh my gosh, you do.”

“My father isn’t a kind man—”

“But you *are*,” she said, quickly grasping the unspoken reasons he was doing this. He was leaving because he thought it was best for her. He did love her.

She wanted to laugh, but that wasn’t the best thing right now. Still, she couldn’t help the smile rampaging all over her face. “It doesn’t matter how you were raised, Mason. You still have a choice of what kind of man you want to be. It’s clear you don’t want to be like him.”

“What if I am anyway?”

“I don’t believe you will be. Because you don’t want to. Because you love me.”

“I do,” he said, his entire body relaxing as if succumbing to the admission. A smile teased the side of his mouth, rendering him so attractive she could hardly stand it. “I do love you.”

She stepped closer to him and lowered her voice. “Say it. Shout it.”

“I love you, Junie,” he said, and she felt the relief this confession brought him.

She threw her arms around him, holding him, keeping him upright. Mason’s arms wound around her too, and he buried his face into her neck. He held her so close. They remained there together in the healing of that embrace. The relief of his words and the tears welling in his eyes brought tears to hers too.

“We still have four more days of Christmas left in our song,” she said, pulling back enough to see his face. “Do you know why I think Santa didn’t let the radio finish playing it for us?”

One of the tears welling in his eyes escaped, and she wiped it away. “Why?” he said, voice quiet.

“Because we have so many more Christmasses together, Mason. So many that a single song couldn’t count them. Our true love is endless. On this day of Christmas, my true love gave to me his heart.”

“You have it,” he said, smiling through the sentiment. “I love you.”

“If you leave, I leave. If you stay, I am too. I want to be wherever you are.”

“I’m staying,” he said.

He wrapped her in his arms, lifting her, so her feet dangled from the ground. “I’m staying. I’ve never been happier than I am here at this inn. I’ve never been happier than I am cooking food, discussing menu plans with you, and seeing you at the end of the day. And having you stop into the kitchen just to say hi. This Christmas together has been the best of my life because you were in it.”

“Mine too.”

Mason bent in for a completely delectable kiss. It was slow, purposeful, and filled with the love they both swam in. When he pulled away, he smiled and took her hand.

“Thank you,” he said.

“For what?”

“You’re a believer, Junie, and I needed your belief in me. You never gave up on me, not even when I deserved it.”

Junie thought of what Santa had told her. She’d essentially expressed the same thing to him as well, surprised that Santa had granted her wishes even when she hadn’t deserved it. The realization sank in deep.

She *was* a believer. She’d nearly lost sight of that part of herself, but Mason had helped her find it again.

“Sometimes years of believing means we don’t give up on someone for moments of doubt. Or something,” she said, trying to repeat what Santa had said and failing completely.

“What does that mean?”

“I’ll explain later,” she said, grinning and pressing her mouth to his.

Several moments later, Mason broke away, stroking her cheek. “I have something to tell my parents. Would you like to come with me?”

“Anywhere you go,” she said, kissing the back of his hand.

Mason hurriedly changed his clothes and readied for the day. He admitted one reason he’d been staying at his apartment had been to avoid having awkward run-ins with his parents. They had gone sightseeing, but that drive had only been to see the snowy surroundings and had only taken an afternoon. After that, he couldn’t bear to face them again—or her.

“You can tell me how you feel,” Junie told him. “Don’t shut me out.”

“I won’t,” he assured her. “Not after this.”

They made their way back up to the inn. Boone inclined his head at them from the reception desk.

“Just a little while longer,” Junie said as he rose to give her her place back. “I’ll be back soon, I promise.”

Boone grunted and sank down again behind the screen on the desk. Junie gave him a little wave, and then she and Mason climbed the stairs to his parents' room.

She squeezed Mason's hand for reassurance as the door opened.

"Hello," Mr. Devries said. "Your mom and I were just packing to leave. Our flight is this evening." His eyes drifted downward. He didn't fail to notice Junie's hand in Mason's, and his scowl deepened.

For a moment, Junie worried Mason would rescind his word, but he held her fast with a firm, steady grip. She sensed he was done dithering back and forth. He was done hiding his feelings from his parents. He'd made a decision about her. He loved her, and he was sticking to it.

"Mason?" Mrs. Devries elbowed her way to the door and pulled Mason into a hug, which he returned one-handed. He still hadn't released Junie's hand.

"It was so good to see you," she said. "I'm glad you stopped by to say goodbye before we left."

"It's been great seeing you, too," Mason said. "Dad, thanks for coming."

Mr. Devries gave him a nod, his glance veering in Junie's direction. "Give us an update when you get to New York," he said, stepping back as though to close the door.

"About that," Mason said, holding the door open with a hand. He lifted his chin, standing tall and confident. "I'm not going. I've turned the job down."

"Why would you do that?" Mr. Devries demanded.

"Because I've fallen in love."

Mr. Devries sniveled. "I assume that's why you're holding the receptionist's hand."

Junie chose not to be insulted by that. Something told her this man's treatment of people he deemed beneath him was generally awful.

“You assume correctly,” Mason said. “I didn’t want to tell you before,” he said, giving Junie a smile, “and I’m ashamed of my cowardice. But I’m done hiding who I really am from you.”

“And who are you?” his dad asked with derision.

“I’m a chef. I’m happy here in West Hills. I love it here. I love cooking food, Dad. And I’m in love with Juniper Harper.”

She didn’t correct him. For once, she approved of the full use of her name, even if the double “per” at the ends ruffled her feathers. Then again, if things went as she hoped they would, her last name wouldn’t conflict with her first for much longer. Junie Devries. Now that had a great ring to it.

On second thought, Junie Devries would clash, and she couldn’t do that.

Juniper Devries it was. She could embrace change.

“She accepts me for who I am,” Mason said. “She supports me in everything I do. She’s never given up on me. I’m going to do the same for her. Junie is a light to everyone she meets. You’re blind if you can’t see that about her.”

His tone was filled with years of boldness. With a challenge, daring his father to voice his displeasure. His defense of her filled Junie with pride and a little wonder too. Did he really think that highly of her?

“We’re happy for you, sweetie,” Mrs. Devries said, smiling. She nudged her husband, who only grunted. Junie’s heart panged. No wonder Mason dealt with so much self-doubt if this disapproval was something he dealt with on a regular basis.

Mr. Devries cleared his throat. “Sounds like you have everything figured out,” he said.

“I do,” said Mason. “Whether you approve or not.”

Junie wanted to shout praises in his honor. She wanted to pump her fist into the air. All she could do was smile for him, and that was enough.

EPILOGUE



Junie placed a hand on the bump protruding from her belly. She sank into her chair and sighed with exhaustion as she stared out the window across from her desk and the view of the snowy mountainside it offered.

“Everything go okay?” Mason asked, popping his head into the door. He wore his chef’s apron and had flour on his cheek. She smiled, loving that he hadn’t cleaned up before coming to check on her. He’d been doing as much since they’d married a year before, especially since she’d found out she was pregnant a few months later.

“Everything is good. I think I found the perfect replacement.”

Mason stepped into the room. “Already? How many people have you interviewed?”

“Only about ten,” she said, attempting to push to her feet. With her rounded stomach, movement was a little more difficult than usual.

“You know, there’s no need to rush anything. Grace said she can help you cover the desk and responsibilities too.”

“Brecken reached the terrible twos a year early,” Junie argued. “She’s expecting baby number two now. I can’t ask that of her.”

“I’ll just swing by the spa and ask Olivia,” Mason said.

Junie laughed, resting a hand on her low back, though it did little to relieve the discomfort there. “That may have

worked for Christmas Eve a year ago, but you know it won't now. She can't handle the reception desk and manage the inn, not when she's carrying out the same duties in the spa."

Grinning, Mason placed a kiss on her temple. "You hate this, don't you? Having to give up your spot."

"Any other time, I might," she said. "But this is our baby, Mason. She's coming in two more months. Now that we've moved into Boone's cottage, I want to spend every spare minute preparing the space and making it ours. I want to make sure everything is ready for her, and I can't worry if everything in the inn is taken care of."

"Especially since sleep will be a thing of the past." He wrapped his arms around her, and she leaned against his chest, loving the warmth and support he gave her.

"For a little while at least," she said. "I'm so ready to be a mom."

"You'll be amazing," he said. "Just like you are at everything else."

She beamed at him.

"So you think one of the people you interviewed has what it takes?"

"I think so," she said, reaching for the resumes. They had more interest in the position than she'd anticipated, but she supposed the radio had something to do with that. Just as the radio drew people's interest from miles around every year, several interviewees had expressed the desire to be close to it.

Junie hadn't told them that the radio hadn't played since two Christmasses ago when she'd gotten snowed in with Mason at the event center. She hadn't told them that she suspected Santa was taking a break from matchmaking, for a little while at least.

Let them think what they pleased. The truth was, she had no idea when Santa would decide to take people's love lives into his hands again. She was only happy he had done that for her.

Would she and Mason have gotten together anyway? Without the radio's interference? Maybe. But there was something magical about the fact that they had. There was something magical in their quick wedding shortly after Mason had declared his love for her to his father. They hadn't wanted to wait to be together, not after they'd let so much time keep them apart after the radio first played.

There was also something magical in this baby they were about to bring to their family.

The inn was magical, too, in its own way. Lacie and Jared had sent a gift and a note of congratulations. Though Boone and Grace had moved into the new house they'd built down in West Hills so they would have enough room for their growing family, they'd agreed the inn was magical too.

"I love this place," Junie said, staring up at the ceiling. "It will always have a piece of my heart."

"It's been your home for a long time," Mason said.

She leaned her head against him. "Now, wherever you are is my home."

"So you're okay with this?"

"Of course." She beamed at him. "It's not forever. I'd like to continue managing the inn when I get in a position to. For now, I'll pass the responsibility to someone else. But it won't last. Just as you want to continue cooking here, I want to claim my spot again, to have our kids romp these halls and work alongside us like I did with my parents. This is a family establishment, after all."

Mason chuckled and kissed her hair. He readjusted and settled his chest against her back so he could wrap his hands around the fullest part of her belly.

"This is incredible to me. You are incredible."

"We are totally credible," she said.

He bent in and placed a kiss on the side of her throat. "And the radio?"

"What about it?"

“You’re going to leave it in the entry? You don’t want to take it home?”

“I think it will stay right where it belongs. Who knows, maybe someday in the future, it will cause a little mischief in a new couple’s life.”

Mason laughed. “I’m glad it caused a little mischief in ours.”

Though she couldn’t fully wrap her arms around him with her watermelon-sized belly between them, she turned to the side and rested against him. “Me too. You have no idea how much.”

She thought again of her list, of how glad she was that her life hadn’t played out as she’d requested. Santa had ignored her list, it was true, but this love, her marriage with Mason, had turned out even better than she’d wished for.

THE END

AUTHOR’S NOTE:

The idea for Santa’s magic matchmaking radio came to me while I was going through the car wash, of all places. *Winter Wonderland* was playing while the brushes smattered my windshield with soap, and I was suddenly blasted with the idea for Lacie and Jared’s story, of having the snowman pronounce them husband and wife and having that completely upend their world. The snowman scene in their book, *Snowed In at Harper’s Inn*, was actually the first thing I wrote with regard to this series.

The ideas only sprouted from there, especially as I wrote Junie into the other books. I loved Junie from the start and imagined what it must have been like for her to grow up hearing the stories and being completely lovesick for her turn to hear the radio play. I couldn’t be more pleased with how Grace and Boone, Lacie and Jared, and Junie and Mason’s

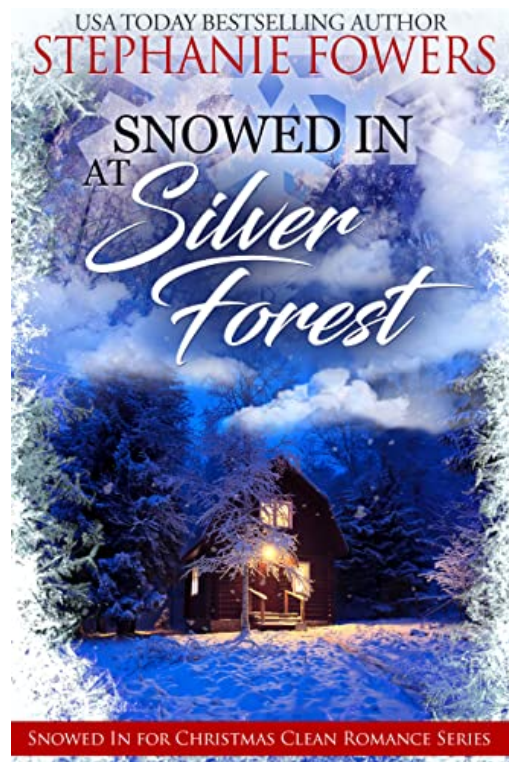
stories turned out. They are dear to me, and I hope you've come to love them too.

Thank you so much for reading these stories. Each one has been completely enchanting for me to write, and I hope they have brought you as much joy as they have for me.

Merry Christmas!

-Catelyn Meadows

SNOWED IN AT SILVER FOREST



Don't miss the next book in the Snowed In for Christmas clean romance series, [Snowed In at Silver Forest by Stephanie Fowers!](#)

PLEASE REVIEW

If you enjoyed this book, please review *Snowed In* at the Event Center! Reviews not only help Catelyn, but they also draw readers to other books they might like.

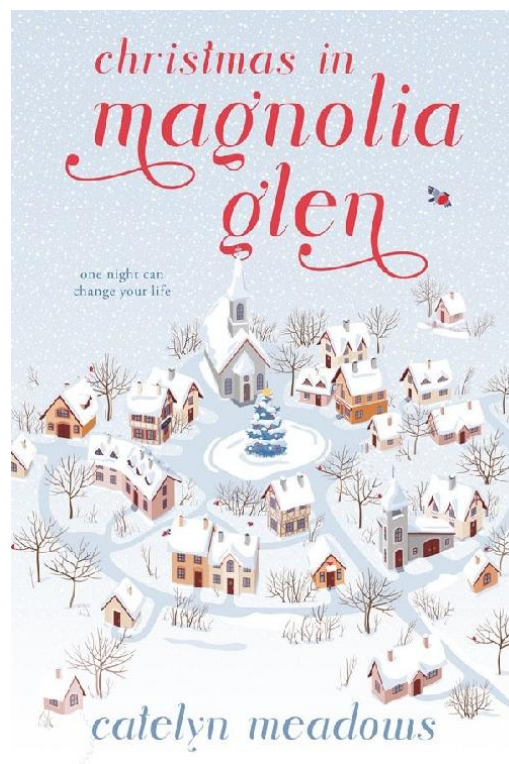
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JOIN MY READER GROUP

Hey there! Catelyn here.

I have a group on Facebook where fans can gather, talk books, play games, and have all kinds of book fun regarding the titles from my two pen names.

(I write clean romance under a pen name. I also write clean YA fantasy romance and urban fantasy under my real name, Cortney Pearson.)

The group is called Cortney's Secret Keepers because all of my stories, regardless of genre, deal with secrets in one way or another.

I have a PA who helps me run the group, and all of my books are chatted about in there, from both of my pen names. We also do giveaways and sneak peeks because who doesn't like freebies?!

[I'd love to have you join!](#)



Hope to see you there!

-Catelyn

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Catelyn Meadows is a romantic at heart. A mom of four munchkins, Catelyn married a true-blue farm boy who still makes her heart pitter-pat, and she wanted to create stories that do the same. She loves chocolate, classical music, and plays clarinet in her local community orchestra.

You can find more about her and her books at <https://www.catelynmeadows.com/>.

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Edited by Cindy Hale and Joseph Frederickson

Cover Design by Steven Novak

Author Photo by Clayton Photo + Design

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