



the trouble

with falling

usa today bestselling author

shaw hart

THE TROUBLE WITH FALLING

HONEY PEAK

SHAW HART

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Elijah Grove is the absolute worst.

And he knows it too.

Mainly because I've told him so every day since I've met him.

I wish that I could just avoid him for the rest of my life but that's hard to do when we live in this small town.

I thought that we were on the same page about ignoring each other but then one night he shows up at my bakery and offers me a deal.

One that I promptly reject but when he jams his foot in my door and refuses to leave until I hear him out, I relent.

He wants me to be his girlfriend.

It would be fake, obviously. We just need to make it look good and fool his family so that they don't try to set him up while they're in town.

In exchange, he'll help me get my bakery up and running.

I would be an idiot to say yes, but there is a lot of work to be done and we'd only have to pretend for a few days.

I can handle it.

Or I thought that I could, but the more time that I spend around the grumpy giant, the more I start to see that he might not be as bad as I first thought.

But this is all just a façade.

Isn't it?

ONE



Hartley

I WISH I had known just how cold it would be in Honey Peak in January. I mean, I know that it's Michigan and that there would be snow, but I guess my southern blood just wasn't prepared for just how cold it would be here.

The skies appeared to have dumped another two feet of snow on the town and I shiver just looking out of my apartment window at the piles of fluffy white stuff.

I have to admit that it does look pretty. I'm used to city streets and bumper to bumper traffic. There's nothing like that here though.

Honey Peak is a small town and it's set up like most small towns. There are only a few main roads with most of the businesses set up there. The sun is just starting to peek out over the top of the mountains, glinting off the snow dusting the top of the trees that line the hills. I let the curtain drop, retreating farther into my small apartment.

I'm used to waking up early, a habit of my occupation. I'm a baker. Normally, at this time, I would be taking the next batch of baked goods out of the oven or maybe frosting the last batch if it was cooled down enough.

That was if I was still back in Atlanta, working at the bakery around the corner from my grams' place. I'm not in Georgia anymore though.

I moved to Honey Peak, Michigan a few days ago, needing a change of, well, everything, after my grams passed away. She had been sick for a while. Alzheimer's, although it was a stroke that killed her.

She had raised me after my parents were killed in a car accident. They had been driving home in the middle of a rainstorm when their car had hydroplaned and they had crashed into a tree. I was young, barely four, and don't have many memories left of them, but from the pictures that I've seen and the stories Grams told me, I feel like I know them.

My hair is dark brown, so dark that it's almost black, and with my bright blue eyes, I look a little bit like Snow White. I'm even rocking the pale look since I spend most of my time in a kitchen.

I must get my coloring from my dad because both my mom and Grams had light coloring. Grams had pale blonde hair so light that you barely noticed the change when she started to go gray. With eyes the color of melted chocolate, she was my opposite.

I barely remember them, but I remember Grams. She was my parent, my best friend, and my whole world. She took me in when she was grieving her own loss and she made sure that I was alright and adjusted. She raised me, helped me with homework, listened to me gush over my latest crush in school, and most importantly, she taught me her love of baking.

Grams was an incredible cook, but she said that sweets were her favorite. She had always dreamed of saving up and opening her own bakery. We'd lay awake at night dreaming up ideas of what it would look like and what treats we would serve.

We never did it though.

There was always something that came up, some unforeseen expense, and we'd be back down to zero. Braces for me, a new car when her old beater finally died, school supplies, the list goes on and on.

I had tried to help out the best I could. I worked at a coffee shop before school and at a local grocery store after school. I saved up as much as I could, wanting to help Grams finally reach her dream. We had been close to having enough too.

We used some of our savings to put me through culinary school and I had come back to Atlanta to start looking for spaces to rent with Grams. That was when we got the Alzheimer's diagnosis.

My time and energy went into taking care of Grams then. I worked at the bakery in the mornings and at a little café a few blocks away in the afternoon. I tried to spend all of my free time with Grams. On the good days, we would look through old photo albums or make our favorite old recipes together. On bad days, I just did my best to make her comfortable and happy.

We spent the holidays baking but I noticed that she seemed to be getting worse, having more bad days than good. I managed to talk her into going to the doctor again right after Thanksgiving and we had the appointment scheduled, but we never made it.

Grams collapsed in the apartment when we were making dinner together one night. I had called 911 and rode with her in the ambulance to the hospital, squeezing her hand as they worked on her. I had tried to talk about the bakery and all of the things that we were going to do when we went back home, anything to try to get her to stay, but she didn't make it.

She had a stroke and by the time the EMTs got to the hospital, it was too late. They couldn't revive her.

I spent the first part of December planning her funeral and trying to adjust to being all alone. Grams was buried next to Grandpa, Mom, and Dad in a quiet cemetery on the outskirts of town. The funeral had been small with just a few friends from the neighborhood.

Then it was like the whole world just forgot about me.

Everyone got busy with the holidays. They put up decorations and bought gifts and celebrated. They did all that

while I mourned.

By the end of December, I knew that I needed a change. I couldn't keep living in our apartment, in the place that she had raised me. It was right before Christmas when Grams' lawyer reached out to me.

We went over her will and, while I knew most of it, I was shocked to find that Grams had one last surprise for me.

A savings account with enough money to start that bakery that we had always dreamed about and one final letter.

I walk over to the desk that I managed to cram into the corner of my new small one-bedroom apartment. The top is covered in mortgage papers for the new bakery, old recipe cards, and my laptop. I make a note to myself to try to organize it later this week as I open up the top drawer and pull out the envelope.

I must have read this thing a hundred times in the last three weeks. I can probably say it all by heart now, but there's something comforting about seeing her familiar handwriting on the page that has me reading and rereading it.

I carefully unfold the worn paper, smiling when I see her loopy script.

HARTLEY,

IF YOU'RE READING THIS, then I'm gone. I wish that I didn't have to go. I know that you must be sad and I hate that I left you all alone. That's actually what this letter is about.

DON'T BE.

SURE, you'll have to grieve me, just like with your parents, but then go out, Hartley. Have a life. Meet new people and start a new family.

THAT'S *what I want for you. To be happy.*

I THINK *my next surprise will help with that as well.*

I'VE BEEN SAVING, *putting away everything I could all these years for you. You might not be able to afford that fancy bakery that we had planned in Atlanta, but maybe that's for the best. You could use a change, something to knock you out of your comfort zone and get you started on your new life.*

I HOPE *that you find a nice place with great people. I want you to know that wherever that is, I'll always be watching.*

LOVE YOU FOREVER,

Grams

I WIPE AWAY a stray tear as I carefully fold the letter back up and gently place it in the envelope and then back in the desk drawer.

I head back over to the window, glancing out at the empty street below. I've had more doubts and second thoughts in the last two weeks since I moved here than ever before, but something deep inside me is telling me that this is where I am meant to be.

When I had thrown a dart at the map back in Atlanta, I had been shocked when it hit this tiny town in Michigan. A part of me, a big part, had wanted to redo it, but that was against the rules. I had gone online and started looking for spaces to rent and apartments, and I was surprised to see that Honey Peak, while small, was actually pretty nice.

With the mountains and all of the cabins, it reminded me of a scene out of some old western movie. The snow had looked beautiful in all of the pictures, gently landing on rooftops or clinging to the tops of the mountains, but now that I'm here, the charm is starting to wear off.

The apartment that I found was small and came furnished already, so I was able to sell most of our stuff back in Atlanta. The bedroom, bathroom, and living room are all super small, but it has a kitchen and that's all I need in life.

The space that I rented is directly below me. I had been surprised when I found the old bakery up for sale. Sure, it needed a fresh coat of paint, a new oven, and a new industrial mixer, but the display cases and floors were in perfect condition.

I had jumped on it, putting a huge dent in the savings account but feeling like it was the right step.

I check my phone, groaning when I see that the temperature today is going to be around ten degrees all day. I decide that I'm going to have to break down and go buy a better coat and pair of boots.

I can see my car down below, half-buried under the new snow, and I know that it will take me at least fifteen minutes to brush the snow off and defrost it. At least I'm not going far.

I smile as I let the curtain drop and head into the kitchen, thinking that this day calls for something sweet.

TWO



Elijah

I LET OUT a groan when I see Patrick's truck pull up in front of the store. I was about to close down the Grove Trading Post and head home, but it looks like Patrick is here for his daily visit.

The guy is new to town and while everyone else in Honey Peak tends to leave me alone and in peace, Patrick never got that memo. He showed up in town a few months ago with his nephew Brennan in tow. They had wandered into my shop on their first day and I had helped them find some hiking boots and camping gear. I had pointed them downtown to a spot for lunch and had thought that would be the end of it, but they came back the next day, and then the next. Somewhere along the way, we became friends.

The bell on the door tinkles loudly as the door blows shut after them. It's starting to snow harder and I look around the shop, deciding that I can finish stocking those boots tomorrow. I'll just say hi to Brennan and sneak him his Hershey Hug before I usher them outside. We should all be getting home before the storm gets much worse.

Growing up in Honey Peak, you get used to reading the skies and knowing when you're going to get dumped on with snow. It snowed some last night but it's even darker tonight and I have a feeling that we're going to get more than the two feet we did last night.

For the first time since they retired and moved down to Florida, I envy my parents. They grew up in Honey Peak, but after they passed the shop down to me, they wanted to make a change. I don't blame them for wanting to escape the cold and all of the snow.

"Hey, little man," I call out as Brennan barrels down the aisle toward the front counter.

"Eli!" he yells excitedly as he hurries around the counter and wraps his tiny arms around my legs.

At six-foot-seven, I tower over everyone. I'm used to having to duck to enter rooms and feeling like a freak when I stand next to people, but Patrick and Brennan have never made me feel self-conscious. Brennan thinks I'm a badass because of my height. Maybe that's why we've always gotten along.

"Hey, Eli," Patrick says with an easy smile as he joins us at the front counter.

"What are you two doing out in this mess?" I ask as the wind howls outside.

"We had to come see our best friend. Wanted to make sure that you didn't need anything from the store. We're headed there before we head home," Patrick answers as I grab the candy jar out from beneath the counter and hold it out to Brennan.

The little boy gives me a toothy grin as he shoves his hand into the jar.

"I'm good. I've got some leftovers at home that I'm going to heat up tonight. I can run and grab some more stuff tomorrow."

"Are you sure?" Patrick asks and I nod.

"Get out of here before the roads close," I order and Brennan gives me another quick hug before he hurries out from behind the counter.

"We'll see you tomorrow, man," Patrick says with that same easy-going grin that never seems to leave his lips as they turn and head back out into the storm.

I trail after them, intending to flip the lock, turn off the lights, and head out the back, but before I can get there, the door swings open, letting in a cold breeze, a few flurries, and a shivering woman.

“Hey! Y’all are still open, right? I’ll be two minutes. I just need a new coat and maybe some boots,” she says, her thin coat dusted in snow.

Her accent is decidedly southern and sounds so out of place here in rural Michigan. I watch as she brushes off her tennis shoes on the mat.

“I’ll say,” I grunt out, scowling at the girl’s less than ideal winter wear.

“I just moved here from Atlanta and they don’t even sell this kind of cold weather stuff down there,” she says defensively as she starts to browse the rack of winter hats and mittens by the door.

“Oh. You’re the bakery lady.”

The woman tenses before she looks over her shoulder at me.

“Yeah... how did you know that?” she asks, looking at me like I might be a stalker.

I probably do look scary to her. I’m over a foot taller than her and my stoic face is great for keeping people from talking to me, but decidedly less so when you’re trying to put people at ease.

I’m the town loner. Born and raised here so people are used to not seeing me around much, but this girl is new and probably doesn’t know that. At least not yet.

“It’s a small town. Word gets around fast,” I say as I watch her walk around to the back of the store to the wall in the back that is filled with every kind of shoe and boot that you would ever need.

I stomp after her, hoping to get her out of here quickly so that I can head home myself.

She picks up a pair of Uggs and I make a disgusted face. I hate that we even have to stock those boots. They're not really warm enough for winters in Michigan but they sell like hotcakes.

The girl hums, looking the boots over and I can feel my left eye start to tick as I hear the wind pick up outside even more.

"We stock those more for the tourists or for fall weather. They won't keep you that warm up here now," I explain in a rush, hoping to get her out of here before we get snowed in.

"They're so cute though," she says wistfully as she sets them back on the shelf and moves on to a more practical pair.

She holds them up to me, waiting for me to give my nod of approval before she bends down to find her size. She takes her thin jacket off before she takes a seat on the bench to try the boots on. She moves so slowly that part of me, a big part, wants to rip the boots out of her hands and help her put them on. I refrain, but only just barely.

I close my eyes, counting to ten before I open them back up. By now, she has them on her feet and is bent over, lacing them up tight. She stands, taking a few steps to test them out and my eyes can't help but to run over her.

For the first time since she walked in, I look at her. Really look at her.

Her mass of dark hair is tangled from the wind with half of it covered by her bright red knit hat. She's pale, like the snow falling down outside, and tiny, or at least tiny compared to me.

It's her eyes that have me pausing, half kneeling, in front of her. They're bright blue and so clear that it reminds me of a lake or the ocean in Florida.

I get a look at the curvy body that was hiding underneath her jacket and my mouth starts to water. *She's gorgeous. And she smells like sugar and I want to lick my lips. Hell, I want to lick her.*

Shit, where did that thought come from.

I haven't so much as looked at a girl in years. I swore off relationships a long time ago.

I try to remind myself of that as she walks back over to the bench and starts to unlace the boots.

I'm a quiet guy and I like being by myself. I spend most of my time when I'm not at the shop working, outdoors. I like to hike and kayak, and I'm sure it shows in my muscles and tanned skin. Even in the middle of winter, I'm still tan and the difference between us is stark in that moment.

"You shouldn't be driving around in this weather," I say, trying to make small talk but as soon as the words leave my lips, I realize that was the wrong thing to say.

Her head pops up, her eyes narrowed on me.

"I'm doing fine. It's not snowing that bad out there."

"The weather changes fast out here in the winter. We're probably going to get a few more feet of snow tonight and if you got stranded, you'd be stuck in that thin jacket and your tennis shoes. You need to be smarter."

She shoves her feet into her sneakers and stands, tucking the boots back into the box and shoving it into my chest.

"I'll take those," she snaps, her blue eyes sparking as they meet mine.

I glare at her back as she stomps across the store to where the winter coats and parkas are. I realize that I never caught her name.

"I'm Elijah, by the way," I say and I'm proud when it only slightly comes out sarcastically.

"Hartley," she says, stopping in front of the first rack of coats.

"Welcome to Honey Peak," I say and I see her turn to look at me.

Her eyes are speculative, like she's trying to see if I'm being sincere. I make sure to keep my face blank as she studies me.

“Thanks,” she says, taking a step back as she clears her throat.

I cross my arms over my chest, sighing as I watch her grab a coat off the rack and try it on. She gives me a side-eye look back, taking her sweet time trying it on. She flips the hood up, shoving her hands in the pockets. It’s like she’s examining every single stitch and I let out a louder sigh.

I see her smile slightly as she starts to zip it, but that smile quickly drops when the zipper gets snagged halfway up.

“Here, let me help you,” I say, moving to crouch down in front of her so I can get a better look at what the problem is.

“I’ve got it,” she argues, trying to step back as she pulls at the front of the coat.

“Obviously,” I mutter as I push her hands aside. “Just calm down. It just got caught on the lining here. Give me a second.”

“How is this place still in business with all this faulty merchandise?” she asks with a scowl when the zipper still won’t budge.

“Oh my god, it’s one jacket,” I mutter from between gritted teeth.

I try to tug the lining free but with Hartley dancing around, it’s hard.

“Just hold still, I’m going to pull it over your head.”

“Just let me try to—”

I ignore her, grabbing the bottom of the jacket and starting to tug it up. Hartley wiggles, trying to pull away from me.

“How can you sell anything in this freaking defective shop?” she yells inside the coat as I try to wrestle the bunched up material over her head.

“It’s not defective! You just don’t know how to unzip a jacket apparently,” I snap back as I finally pull the damn thing over her head.

I ball the parka up in my fist as I meet her pissed off face.

That's when I look down to see that I managed to take her sweater off with the coat.

"Shit," I whisper, staring down at her pale tits, wrapped in black lace.

Hartley clears her throat and I jerk my eyes up, my cheeks heating a bright purple as I hurry to untangle her sweater from the coat. I thrust the soft fabric back into her hands and turn around to give her some privacy.

"I think I'll take this one," she says, grabbing a parka off a nearby rack.

I grab it from her hand, hurrying up to the front counter to get her checked out. We stand in tense silence as I scan her items and take her credit card.

"Should I bag these for you or are you going to wear them out of the store?" I ask her and she rolls her eyes.

"I'll just carry them. Thanks, sweetie," she says with a deep southern accent.

"Of course," I say back with an equally fake smile.

She storms off to the front door and I follow after her, ready to lock up and head home. The wind and snow blow inside in a rush as she hurries out to her car.

"Drive safe!" I yell after her, earning me a muffled curse and a middle finger over her shoulder.

So, that probably wasn't the best way to introduce myself to the newest resident in town. I grin to myself as I lock the door and turn off the lights before I head out back to my own truck.

THREE



Hartley

I HUM under my breath as I open the oven, the blast of heat warming up my tiny apartment. I pull out the last round of cupcakes, smiling when I see that they're all a perfect light golden color.

My kitchen countertop is covered in baked goods. I've been making small batches, trying to figure out what recipes I'm going to use in the bakery downstairs.

There are nine different kinds of cookies, seven kinds of cupcakes, a few brownies, and even some fudge. I'll end up spending the afternoon taste testing them and narrowing down the list. I already know that I'll be making my croissants for some breakfast sandwiches and maybe I'll do a few cake pops every now and then.

"Maybe I should do some cakes or pies. Sell them by the slice," I murmur to myself as I take the cupcakes out to cool.

I set the pans in the sink and pick up my notebook and pen. I scribble down notes, trying to figure out how many treats I could fit in the display cases. If I do cakes or pies, I might need more round display cases on top of the counter.

"Donuts!" I shout as the idea hits me. "I can do them and the breakfast sandwiches to get the crowds coming in the morning."

I scribble down more ideas, crossing off the fudge ideas and adding in more flavors of donuts. My grams and I used to have donuts every Saturday morning before we went out to run errands, and I can't believe that we didn't think of making our own before.

We made them in culinary school, but I haven't made them since. I head over to the small pantry and check to see if I have all of the ingredients here. I frown when I see I'm almost out of flour and that I'll need to grab some more stuff to make some more frosting.

It finally stopped snowing at some point this morning, and I decide to make a quick run to the store now before it starts to get dark out. I must have lost track of time while I was baking because the sun is already starting to set.

I turn off the oven and make sure that my wallet is in my purse before I slip on my new boots and jacket and head out into the hall. It's almost ten degrees outside and I grin to myself as I wonder what Grams would say if she could see me now.

I was the girl who was always at home with fuzzy socks and a throw blanket on, even in the summer because I was always cold. Now, I'm here where it seems to snow every day and where temperatures have yet to be above ten degrees. I've heard that it gets nice here in the summer, but I'll need to make it through the next four months before the snow melts to see it.

My old Honda Accord is parked around the corner and I bite back a groan when I see the layer of snow covering it. I hit the button on my key fob, starting the car up to defrost. I grab the brush out of the back seat and get to work scraping off the snow before I move to work on the thin layer of ice on the windows.

I'm both sweaty and cold by the time I finish and toss the brush back into the back seat. My car is warm and I use my teeth to pull off my gloves before I back out of my space and head the few blocks to the store.

The lot in front of the grocery store is almost empty when I pull in and I find a space near the front. I hurry into the store, pulling up the list that I wrote down on my phone. I grab a cart, wincing and wishing that I had left my gloves on when I feel how cold the metal is.

I smile at the bored looking cashiers up front. They're all leaning against the checkout lanes, talking and watching the sky through the front windows.

I steer my cart toward the baking aisle, slowing as I hit the flour section. I debate a few of the brands, wondering idly if I should try to make some with some almond flour for people with allergies. I write a note down in my phone about it, but opt out of buying the almond flour today. It's expensive, and since I'm still in the testing phase, it would be a waste. I'll have to wait until I have flavors and everything locked in before I experiment with that.

I add a few packages of flour and some more sugar before I move onto the spices. I grab some vanilla and a few other flavors, tossing them into the cart. I add some powdered sugar so I can make some more frosting.

Now that I have all of my baking materials ready, I head over to the frozen food section. I should probably eat something besides desserts today.

I'm standing in front of the frozen pizza, debating between a pepperoni or the five cheese one when I catch sight of someone familiar walking toward me. It's the guy from the outdoor store. He's bundled up in a parka with a pair of dark wash jeans and some black boots on his feet. His black hair is mussed and I smile when I spot a navy blue knit hat shoved into the pocket of his coat.

My good mood immediately sours and I debate between grabbing my frozen pizza or just leaving and pretending like I never saw him. I'm about to do the second option when his eyes meet mine.

I'm not sure who is more upset to see the other.

"Elijah," I say, giving him a tight smile.

“Hartley.”

He towers over me, and I duck my head, taking a sneak peek into his cart. It’s piled high with frozen meals and I raise my eyebrows.

“I’m guessing you’re not much of a cook, huh?” I ask with a small smirk.

“Oh no, I can burn things with the best of them.”

I bite the inside of my cheek, trying to stop the laugh and smile that wants to slip out at his sense of humor.

“What are you making?” he asks as he nods toward my cart half-filled with bags of flour and sugar.

“I’m testing out some stuff for the bakery. I made a bunch of cupcakes and cookies this morning, but I need some more ingredients to finish them. I’m thinking that I’ll make some donuts too, but I haven’t started playing with flavors and all that for them yet.”

“I thought you were some fancy chef. What are you doing in the frozen food aisle?” Elijah asks, his eyes scanning the shelves of pizza that we’re standing in front of.

“I was just debating between a cheese or pepperoni pizza to make for dinner and then I’m heading back to my apartment.”

“I’m going to let you in on a secret,” he says, and my eyebrows shoot up so high that I’m sure they’re lost in my hairline.

“You are?” I ask skeptically.

“Yeah, call it a welcome to town present,” he says as he reaches past me and pulls out a pepperoni and three cheese pizza. “This one is the best,” Elijah says.

He passes it to me and I toss it into the cart. We both turn and start to head down the aisle and to the front to the checkout. It’s silent and a bit awkward, but it’s also kind of nice to not be alone. If only for a few moments.

We each join a different line and I forget about him as I load my groceries up onto the conveyor belt.

I check out before Elijah and decide to be nice, so I give him a wave before I head out into the cold and over to my car. I load the groceries in the back seat quickly and hurry to push my cart back up to the front of the store. I'm just slipping behind the wheel when Elijah exits the store.

I shove my key into the ignition, turning, only to be met with a pitiful clicking sound.

"Shit," I groan as I try once more with equal success.

"Dammit."

I really don't have the money in my budget to get a new car right now. I'm debating my options when there's a knock on my window. I jump in my seat, letting out a gasp as I turn to see Elijah crouched down next to the driver's side window.

"Pop the hood," he shouts and I fumble around under the dashboard until I find the lever.

I tuck my parka tighter around me as I join him under the hood.

"Are you also a mechanic?" I ask him as I flip the hood of my parka up.

"Nope, but I can fix a few basic things."

"Can you fix this?" I ask hopefully.

"Nope," he says plainly and I sigh.

I step back as Elijah closes the hood and turns to me.

"I can give you a ride home and call the mechanic for you. It's probably an alternator or something, but you need snow tires, or even better, a car with four-wheel drive."

"You're the worst. Has anyone ever told you that?" I snap.

Elijah just grins. "Nope, this is a first."

I trail after Elijah to the trunk and grab a bag of groceries as he grabs the other three. He leads me over to his big black

truck and opens the passenger door for me. I climb up, dumping my bags on the floorboard between my feet.

He climbs in next to me and pulls his cell phone out, shooting off a quick text message before he starts the truck and pulls out onto Main Street. We're silent as we drive past Wayside Diner and around the corner to where my bakery will be.

I don't bother asking him how he knew where I lived. I have a feeling that everyone in town knows who I am, why I'm here, and where I am staying.

He parks out front and I rush to grab my bags and my purse.

"Thanks for the ride," I say as I stumble my way out of the passenger side.

"Yeah, sure. I texted Brian. He's the mechanic and he'll take care of your car. You can go see him tomorrow. The place isn't far from here."

I nod, giving him a small smile before I slam the door shut and head up the stairs to my apartment. I put the groceries away, slipping the pizza into the oven and promising myself to forget all about Elijah and his weird mood swings.

I do my best to stop thinking about how he can be charming one second and then a bossy jerk the next as I make more notes on the bakery and finish frosting everything that has cooled on the counter.

As I take a bite of the pizza and moan as the three cheeses, tomatoes, and garlic, hit my tongue, I decide to forgive Elijah for the mood swings.

FOUR



Elijah

I HAVEN'T EVEN HAD my first cup of coffee when Patrick comes strolling in the next morning with a shit-eating grin on his face. I already know that I'm not going to like what he has to tell me. Anything that can make him this happy can't be a good thing.

"What could you be so happy about so early in the morning?" I grumble as I pick up my coffee cup and take a big gulp.

"Oh, you mean you haven't heard the latest town gossip?" he asks, his grin somehow growing.

"Come on, man. You know that I don't follow town gossip," I say with a scowl as I head out from behind the counter and kneel next to the sock display.

"Well, I just thought that you might this time. Considering that it's about you."

That has my stomach dropping. What could I have done to make people talk about me? I'm either in the shop, at home, or doing something alone in the outdoors.

I wait for Patrick to go on but when he doesn't, I realize that he's waiting for me to ask him a bunch of questions. No way that is going to happen.

I start to restock as Patrick grabs his own cup of coffee from behind the counter and heads over to join me. He makes himself comfortable on a shoe bench nearby and takes his own big gulp of coffee.

“So there’s nothing that you want to tell me?” he asks, his eyes open and curious.

“Nope,” I say, ignoring him and stocking more socks onto the shelf.

Patrick sighs, giving up his game.

“Well, the town gossip is that you were in here the other night after Brennan and I left... with a woman.”

“Yeah, I was. It was the new baker in town. Her name is Hartley.”

“So you admit it!” he says, pointing a finger at me, and I just look at him like he’s crazy.

“Yeah, I admit that she was in here the other night. She came in to buy a new pair of boots and a parka. What’s so interesting about that? Why is that town gossip?”

“Well, Sheriff Hull was driving by and said he saw the two of you in here in a compromising position.”

“Compromising position?” I ask, searching my mind for what he could be talking about.

“Yeah. He said that he saw you taking off Hartley’s clothes. He said she was standing right over there without her shirt on and that you two looked like you wanted to go a few rounds.”

“Oh. That.”

I close my eyes in pain, hanging my head.

“That was an accident,” I try to explain but Patrick butts in.

“Sorry, so you did or didn’t have a girl in here topless the other night?”

“I did, but not like that. The coat zipper got jammed and I was helping her out of the thing.”

“By taking her shirt off?” Patrick interrupts with a laugh.

“No! I pulled the jacket off and her shirt came with it. That was it. It was just an accident. Completely harmless.”

Patrick studies me, eyeing me like he’s trying to see if I’m being honest. When he sees that I am, he sighs.

“Oh. Bummer, man,” Patrick says, taking another long drink from his coffee cup.

I glare at him over my shoulder.

“You know that I’m not looking for a relationship.”

“Everyone should be looking for a relationship,” Patrick tries to object.

“What about you?” I ask, giving him a look.

“Well, I would be looking for a relationship, but I have Brennan. He just lost his parents and I need to get him settled and make sure he’s happy before I try to find someone to settle down with. He needs to be my priority right now. You know that.”

“Uh huh. So what? You’ll find someone after Brennan has graduated and moved out?”

“That’s the plan, yeah.”

I just roll my eyes as I stand up and head back behind the counter for my coffee cup.

“So you and this Hartley girl then?” Patrick asks, trying to steer the conversation back to me.

“Nothing there.”

“Yeah, but there could be,” he insists.

“I ran into her yesterday and she said that I was the worst, so, no, I really don’t think that there could be.”

Patrick throws his head back, laughing as I grumble and sip on my coffee.

“What did you do?” he asks after he’s calmed down.

“What did I do? How do you know it was something that I did?” I ask, outraged.

“I just do. Now, what did you do?”

I glare at him and he just grins at me, taking a long slow sip of his coffee. I sigh.

“I don’t even know. I ran into her at the store and then gave her a ride home when her car wouldn’t start. I told her that she needed snow tires and a car with four-wheel drive and she asked if I knew that I was the worst.”

“How did you *say* that she needed snow tires and a new car?” Patrick stresses and I try to think back.

“I just said it like that,” I say with a frown.

“Okay, so matter-of-factly and like a dick then,” he says, nodding his head like that makes sense.

“No, not like a dick,” I object.

“Listen, Eli. You’re a good dude but you have a way of saying something in this really stoic way that can come across as, hmm, how do I say this... asshole. It comes across as asshole.”

I frown, trying to think back to my exchanges with Hartley. *Is that what happened?* I don’t have great social skills. In fact, I would say that mine are decidedly less than stellar, so it’s entirely possible that I did come across that way even though I didn’t mean to.

I’m saved from having to answer when Patrick’s cell phone starts to ring.

“It’s Brennan’s school,” he says and I can hear the concern and slight panic in his voice.

He’s still getting used to being a parent and anything having to do with Brennan always has him freaking out. I guess maybe I would too if I had a kid of my own.

He answers it and I watch him. I know that it would kill him if anything happened to that kid. Hell, it would kill me if

anything happened to that little boy.

He hangs up the phone after a minute, his face pale.

“Brennan threw up at school. I’m headed there to pick him up now,” Patrick says distractedly as he grabs his car keys off the counter.

I follow him up to the front door, worried now that Patrick looks so worried and upset.

“I hope he feels better. Let me know if you guys need anything. I can pick it up on my way home,” I offer.

“Thanks, Eli,” he calls over his shoulder as he heads for the front door.

“Wait,” I call out but he’s already outside.

I grab a few Hershey Hugs from the jar under the counter and chase after him.

“Hey!” I call as Patrick reaches his car. “Give these to Brennan when he feels better,” I say, passing him the candies.

“Thanks, man. I’ll talk to you later!” he calls as he slips behind the wheel and takes off down the road toward the school.

I watch him go, noting that a few of my neighbors are outside. I raise my hand to wave at them and notice some of them giving me weird looks. When the Sheriff, Hank, drives past and gives me a wide, knowing smile, I let out a curse and head back inside the shop.

I try to push thoughts of Hartley and the rampant town gossip from my head as I finish stocking and help a few customers. When I break for lunch and my mother still hasn’t called me to ask about the topless girl that I had in my shop, I start to think that maybe I dodged a bullet.

Deep down though, I know that it’s only a matter of time before the town gossip reaches her ears. She might live a few thousand miles away now, but she still has friends who live in town and who will be all too happy to tell her what they heard her son was getting up to.

She's been pushing for me to settle down and give her grandbabies for years now, so I know that once she hears, she'll be over the moon excited. Then I'll have to ruin her mood by explaining that it's not what it seems.

And then, she'll try to set me up with a friend of hers. It will, of course, go terribly and the cycle will repeat over and over again.

I sigh as I get back to work stocking shelves and trying not to flinch or show fear every time the phone rings.

FIVE



Hartley

I WAKE EARLY the next morning and make a to-do list for the day before I remember that I don't have my car. I had called the mechanic last night after I got home and he assured me that he would look at it first thing this morning.

It's still too early for most people to be awake, so I pad into the kitchen and make myself a cup of coffee. I should be nailing down the bakery menu, figuring out what the heck I'm going to call the place, and ordering the last of the ingredients and equipment that I need for the kitchen but instead, I find myself carrying my coffee cup over to the couch.

I head into my bedroom, stretching up on my tiptoes to reach the old shoebox on the shelf in the back of my closet. The worn cardboard is familiar and always brings a smile to my face. I run my fingertips over the top of the lid, smiling softly as memories start to pop up in my mind.

Grams and I decorated it when I was just a kid, gluing tissue paper and pictures of food to the entire outside. The box was Grams' idea. I think that she knew that it was too easy to get discouraged in this life and to just stop trying to reach your dreams. She said if we had it, had something that we could hold in our hands and strive toward, that we would never stop fighting to get our bakery and reach our dreams.

We've been filling the box with all of the ideas for when we were going to open our own bakery. We used to look

through it all the time but we seemed to stop when Grams got sick. I guess that was when we stopped making plans. It was too hard, too painful to dream of the future when Grams' was so uncertain.

I sit down on the couch and take a deep breath, preparing myself for the old memories and grief that this box may bring up, before I flip the lid of the box off.

Recipes, loose pieces of paper, and a few photos lie inside. I smile as I pick up the photos first, flipping through them and laughing as I see Grams and I in our kitchen back in Atlanta, our faces and hair streaked with flour, our arms thrown around each other as we grin into the camera. You can see cookies lining the counter behind us and the dirty dishes piled high in the sink.

There are more pictures of us together and some of us separate with different desserts. I flip through them slowly, smiling as I remember the day that they were taken and the memories that they bring back.

I move onto the recipe cards next, my eyes tearing up when I see my grams' writing. She had made stars at the top of the index card of the ones that she liked best and I set those to the side, promising myself to make them later. Maybe I'll end up making one of them to sell downstairs.

Finally, I pull out the loose pieces of paper. There are different samples of paint colors, pictures from magazines and ads of ovens and countertops that we had liked. I probably can't even find spare parts for the ovens and mixers that we had liked back then, they're too old, but I know that I can still find something similar to the paint colors that we had picked out. I'll need to do that soon too so I can send the colors to the designer I hired to make the logo. I'll need a name first.

I groan when I think of all that I have to do. I set an opening date for February eleventh so that I would be open for Valentine's Day sales. Now I'm wondering if that was a huge mistake.

I set the ad clippings aside with the recipe cards and grab my coffee cup, taking a big gulp. My eyes are a little damp,

but I don't feel the grief that I thought I would. I still miss her, of course. I still think about her every day. Thoughts of her pop up at the most random of times.

I still wish more than anything that she was still here with me for all of this, but seeing all of our dreams and hard work about to pay off just has me feeling happy. I know that Grams would be proud of me for finally getting our bakery dream off the ground.

I finish my coffee and check the time. The mechanic's shop opened half an hour ago, so I set my empty cup in the sink and head into my bedroom. I make quick work of showering and getting dressed before I tug on my new parka and winter boots and grab my keys and wallet.

I make it down to the street before I realize that I'm going to need my hat and mittens. It's freaking colder outside today than it was yesterday. How is that possible?

I hustle down the sidewalk, bracing against the wind.

I make it about three blocks before I feel like a popsicle.

The mechanic's shop isn't far, so I thought that I would be fine walking, but I should have checked the weather this morning. If I had known that it was going to feel like Antarctica out here, then I would have called for an Uber. I would be shocked if it was above ten degrees out right now.

I pull my hat down lower, picking up my pace. The smell of coffee has me perking up and I spot a sign up ahead for a place called Cool Bean's. My stomach rumbles and I hurry toward the door, desperate to get inside and warm up with a cup of coffee or maybe a latte.

I reach it at the same time as a pretty redhead and it takes me a second to realize that I know her.

"Iris?"

She turns to me with big eyes and grins.

"Hartley? What are you doing here?" She asks, wrapping her arms around me.

I smile as I hug her back.

“I live here now. I just moved here,” I tell her.

Iris is with another woman who is so bundled up that I can only see her eyes.

“Sorry, this is Sutton,” Iris says, introducing me to her friend.

“Nice to meet you,” I say as we head inside the coffee shop.

“You too,” Sutton says with a friendly smile.

“How are you liking Michigan so far?”

“So far, it’s okay. I’m starting to meet people and it’s easy to remember name since it’s such a small town.”

“Ah, one of the perks of small-town life, huh?” Iris says with a brilliant smile.

“Let us buy you a coffee and a muffin or something. A little welcome to town gift,” Suttons says with a warm smile and I can’t argue with that.

We stand in line and I scan the menu, deciding on a mocha latte and a blueberry streusel muffin. I place my order and Maggie hands over some cash before we turn to find a table to sit down at.

“How are you liking Michigan so far?” Sutton asks.

“I like it. I’m not crazy about how cold it is right now, but that might just be my southern blood. I’ll have to give it a few winters and see if it gets better.”

“Having a car definitely helps with that,” Sutton jokes, taking a sip of her coffee.

“I know. I’m headed to the mechanics right now to hopefully pick mine up, actually.”

“Yeah, I heard that Elijah had to give you a ride home,” Iris says and I notice both of them watching me closely. “I didn’t realize that he meant you as Hartley.”

They’re watching me expectantly, like they’re waiting for something but I don’t know what that could be.

“Yeah, I’m lucky that he was getting groceries too,” I say carefully.

I knew that gossip in small towns was supposed to be bad, but giving someone a ride home when their car doesn’t start seems like some pretty weak gossip.

“Elijah doesn’t really talk to many people,” Iris says.

“Yeah, well, besides Patrick and Brennan,” Sutton interjects.

“Right, so it’s weird that he even approached you. Not that he isn’t a nice guy!” Iris hurries to say.

“He’s so nice! But quiet and he’s usually alone. So it’s always a little strange when we see him talking to someone. Especially someone brand new to town.”

“Oh, I had met him when I went to his store to buy these boots and coat. That’s probably why he came up to make sure that I was alright.”

“Hmm,” both Iris and Sutton say at the same time and I wonder what that’s about.

Before I can ask, Iris’s phone goes off and she excuses herself.

“What do you do?” I ask Sutton as I finish off my muffin and draining the last of my latte.

“I help my great uncle run the Mystery Spot down in Destiny Falls,” she says, pride clear in her voice.

“I saw pictures of that place! Right across from the water, right?” I ask, pointing south.

“Yeah,” Sutton says with a proud smile.

“It looks cool! I wanted to check it out.”

“Let me know when you come by and I’ll give you the grand tour,” she says as Iris joins us back at the table.

“That was Arlo. I’ve got to get back to Destiny Falls, but it was so nice to see you again, Hartley. Give me a call and we can hang out soon,” she says with a bright smile.

“Thanks! It was so nice to meet you Sutton. And thank you for breakfast,” I say as we all stand and clear away our trash.

“Let me give you a ride to the mechanics,” Iris says and Sutton nods.

“I don’t want to put you out,” I protest but Iris shakes her head.

“It’s no bother. I’m actually headed in that direction too so it’s not a problem,” she says as she leads me over to her car.

The ride is short but much appreciated. Iris and Sutton point out a few of the sights and businesses as we drive past them, and I grab Sutton’s number too before I get out of the car.

“See you later, Hartley!” she calls as I close the door and wave.

Honey Peak is starting to look like a pretty cool place to live.

SIX



Elijah

THE PHONE CALL comes around closing time. I'm locking up and about to head out the back door when my cell phone goes off and I let out a groan. I know without looking that it's my mom calling.

At least I got a few days of peace before the gossip reached her.

"Hey, Mom," I say as I press the phone between my ear and shoulder and finish locking up the shop.

"Hey, honey! Are you busy?" she asks, her voice cheerful and I'm instantly transported back to my childhood.

"No, I'm just locking up and about to head home," I tell her as I pocket the shop keys and make my way over to my truck.

"Headed home? Or maybe home to someone?" she asks, and I have to laugh at her lack of subtlety.

"I see that you've heard the rumors then," I reply as I climb into my truck and start it up.

I crank the ignition, blasting the heat to try to warm the cab up.

"Trish called me this morning. I don't like that I had to hear about this special someone in my own son's life from my

friend, but your father and I are thrilled that you've found someone!"

I can hear my dad grumbling in the background and I grin. I'm sure that he's trying to rein her in. Silly to even try. Everyone knows that there is no reining in Susan Grove when she's got an idea in her head.

"It's not what you think, Ma," I try to object.

"I heard that you were getting frisky and that you had the girl half undressed in the middle of the Trading Shop," she replies primly.

I cover my mouth, trying to hide my long sigh.

"Yes, she was topless for a second, but—"

"I hope that you're treating her to more than a romp in your store," my mom reprimands me and I contemplate banging my head on the steering wheel. "Anyway, dear, your father and I wanted to hear more about your new girl. Will we get to meet her when we're in town next week?"

"No, she's not my girlfriend, Mom."

"You kids are so weird nowadays. No labels and all of that. I know that you don't ask people to go steady like they did back in my day, but if you like the girl, you need to make sure that she knows that and that you're serious about her."

I buckle up and pull out of my spot behind the shop. It's not snowing, so I have to wait a few minutes for traffic to pass before I pull out onto Main Street.

"How long have you two been together? What's her name? Have you told her that you love her yet?"

I listen to my mom rattle off questions as I drive downtown. I promised Patrick that I would pick up some Gatorade for Brennan. The poor kid is home sick with the flu and I know that Patrick is worried about leaving him and he doesn't want to make the kid go out when he's throwing up.

"Her name is Hartley. She's new to town, here to open up a bakery or something, but I'm sure that you already knew all of that."

“I did, but what I really want to know is how you feel about her. Are you two serious? Trish didn’t know.”

“No, Mom. I’m still single. Hartley was a customer who got caught in a jacket and I was trying to help her pull it off. I accidentally took off her shirt too and that was it.”

“Oh, honey. I’m so sorry to hear that, but don’t you worry! I’ll be back in Honey Peak soon and I’ll help you find someone. I heard that Mrs. Jeck’s granddaughter is back in town. She was always a sweetheart and I’m sure you two would be adorable together.”

I let my mom rattle on as I park in a spot in front of the grocery store. I let her chatter on as dread starts to fill me.

I remember how bad it got when my parents still lived in Honey Peak. I couldn’t go anywhere with them without her trying to introduce me to someone’s daughter or granddaughter or friend of a friend. It got so bad that I had to check with my dad before I went over to their house for dinner to find out if I was about to be ambushed.

I don’t think that I can do that again.

I know that I can’t do that again.

Before I can think it through, the words are leaving my lips.

“I’m seeing Hartley, Mom. It’s just new and I didn’t want to get your hopes up. We’re not really telling people in town yet either, so please don’t say anything. We don’t want to jinx anything.”

“I knew it!” my mom yells and I jerk the phone away from my ear as she continues to yell to my father about my new girlfriend.

I lock the truck and head up to the store, ignoring the looks I get from the tourists that I pass. I should be used to people gawking at me because of my height, but it still stings. It feels like needles poking into the back of my neck as they stare at me.

I grab a basket and hurry down the aisle, grabbing some Gatorade and a box of saltine crackers before I head to the checkout. The store is close to closing, so it's nearly empty and I checkout in record time and hope back in my truck.

My mom is still talking to my dad, making plans to meet my new girlfriend while they're in town next week and that's when it hits me.

I've made a terrible mistake.

"Is Hartley coming to the wedding with us?" my mom asks and I panic to find a way to explain why they can't meet Hartley.

"Um, no, I didn't request a plus one."

"Oh, don't worry about that! I'll call your aunt Jenny right now. I think she said that your cousin Robby and his girlfriend broke up, so there's an open seat."

I can hear my mom making plans with my dad in the background and my heart starts to race as I realize just how screwed I am.

"Your father wants us all to go out to dinner too. Before the wedding. Oh, but if you two are keeping your relationship a secret, maybe we should just make dinner and have her over? How about that chicken cacciatore recipe that you love? Oh! Maybe Hartley can teach us all a new recipe since she's such a good chef?"

"I'll have to ask her, Mom."

Sure, Eli, keep digging the hole deeper, you freaking idiot.

"Okay, well, I'll just let you two talk and you can get back to me. I'm so excited! I can't wait to meet the girl who captured my Elijah's heart!"

I spend another five minutes promising my mom that I will talk to Hartley and get back to her before we finally hang up. I stare out the windshield for a minute before a text from Patrick comes in asking if I'm close.

I text him back, telling him I'm on my way, and pull out onto Main Street heading toward Patrick's place.

I can't stop thinking about how the hell I'm going to convince Hartley to go along with all of this. The girl seems to hate my guts and we can barely spend five minutes together without getting upset with the other.

As I pull up in front of Patrick's place, I try to forget about this new mess. At least for tonight.

I spend a few minutes with Patrick, who looks exhausted and worried, and Brennan, who looks even worse. The kid perks up when he sees me and looks even more excited when he sees the Gatorade.

I listen to Brennan tell me about seeing the doctor and getting to leave school early. He still has to do his homework while he's home, and I can't help but laugh when I see his disgruntled face.

Brennan's eyes start to drift shut and I take that as my cue to leave. I pat his head, letting Patrick tuck him in and make sure that the trash can is by the bed before he shows me out.

"Thanks for grabbing that stuff," he says as he follows me out onto the front porch.

"My mom heard about Hartley," I blurt out.

Patrick blinks and then bursts out into laughter.

"Thanks for sharing that, man. I really needed a laugh after the last two days."

"I'm glad that you can find humor in my pain," I grumble.

It takes Patrick a second to get himself under control, and he finally calms down and leans back against the porch railing.

"What did she say? Is she already planning your wedding?"

"Yep. I told her that Hartley and I were dating."

"Are you insane?" Patrick almost shouts before his eyes cut to inside the house.

We both pause, waiting to see if Brennan woke up. When it's silent, he continues.

“I thought she hated you? How are you going to convince her to date you? Not just date you, but *meet your parents?*” he stresses.

“I was planning on begging.”

“Solid plan,” Patrick says, his usual easy-going grin stretching his lips.

I sigh, tilting my head back and staring up at the stars for a second.

I am so screwed.

“Let me know if you need anything else. Tell Brennan I’ll be by in a couple of days when he’s feeling better with some pizza, and tacos, and burgers, and—”

“Try to remember that we’re trying to get the kid to *stop* throwing up,” Patrick teases and I laugh, throwing a wave over my shoulder as I climb back into my truck and head home.

SEVEN



Hartley

IT'S late and I'm busy down in the bakery making notes on my pad when I hear a knock at the front door. The only lights I have on down here are the ones in the back hall. I'm working on what I'll need in the kitchen part and office, and I didn't think that anyone could even see the light from the front door.

I'm about to ignore it and go back to work, thinking that I just made the sound up or that it was the wind, when the knock comes again, harder this time.

I frown, setting my notepad on the counter as I poke my head out into the front area. It's dark out but I can make out a figure at the front door and judging by the height, I have a pretty good guess at who it is.

I take my sweet time walking over to answer the door and as I flip the lock, I look up into his annoyed face. In response, I turn up my southern charm and give him the fakest smile that I can muster.

"Elijah, how nice to see you again," I say, laying on the southern accent and charm.

"I need a favor," he starts and I can't stop the laugh from escaping.

"Pass," I say, trying to shut the door in his face.

“Just hear me out,” he pleads, though he doesn’t look happy to be here.

I wonder what favor he could possibly need that he wouldn’t be happy about. My curiosity grows and I briefly debate letting him in.

My mind flashes back to him giving me a ride home the other night. He didn’t have to do that. I mean, sure, he was a jerk about it a bit, but he did give me a ride and contact the mechanic about fixing it, so maybe I owe him for that. The least that I can do is hear him out.

“You’ve got one minute,” I say, opening the door wider and letting him come in.

I hit the light switch and cross my arms as Elijah scans the empty bakery.

“You’re wasting time,” I remind him and he turns to face me.

His hands rest on his hips and he hangs his head as if he’s in pain. He might be a giant at over six and a half feet tall, but seeing him in that pose makes him look like a teddy bear. Suddenly, the annoyance that I was feeling when I first saw him starts to fade.

“What’s going on, Elijah?” I ask, losing the southern sass.

“I need you to be my girlfriend,” he says in a rush and it takes me a second to process what he just said.

“I’m sorry, what?” I ask, trying to keep from showing my shock to a minimum.

“I need you to be my girlfriend,” he repeats.

“No,” I say, trying to usher him back out the door. “Oh my god, no. I knew I shouldn’t have let you in here. You berate me in your store, call me an idiot for not having winter wear, nag me about my car the other day and now you want me to go out with you? You must be insane. Is that how people ask each other out here?”

“It’s not like that,” he protests. “Just hear me out.”

I lean against the front door, crossing my arms over my chest as I stare him down.

“It’s my mom,” he says with a sigh. “She’s been trying to fix me up with someone basically since I was born. She heard the rumors that are going around about you and me and called to find out about the new girl in my life.”

“What rumors going around about you and me?” My mind goes back to the weird looks that I got from Juliet and Maggie earlier, and a sense of foreboding slams into me.

“They saw me take your shirt off the other night?” he says nonchalantly.

“*Who* saw you take my shirt off?” I shriek.

“The Sheriff. And now the whole town knows. And my mother knows. And now I need you to be my girlfriend,” he says slowly.

“And you just lied and told her that we were together?”

“No! No, I told her that we weren’t together and she started going on and on about how she’s going to find me someone when she’s here next week. That’s when I panicked and told her that we had just started dating and that we weren’t telling people yet.”

His eyes are wide and pleading and I don’t know what to do or say. He looks like a lost boy and there’s something almost sweet in his expression.

“I’m sorry, but I’m not looking for a relationship. I’m trying to get this place open and... and I’m still getting over losing my grandma. I can’t be your girlfriend.”

“I’m sorry to hear about your grandma. That must have been rough.”

“Thanks,” I say softly.

Silence stretches between us but, strangely, it’s not uncomfortable.

“I’m not looking for a girlfriend either. I’m not the relationship type. I just need someone to show my mom to so I

can get her off my back. At least for a little bit.”

“I... I can't. I have too much work and stuff to do here.”

He looks around the mostly empty space.

“What if I could make you a deal?” he asks after a beat.

“A deal?” I ask, my interest piqued against my better judgment.

“Yeah. What if I could help you out around here and in return, you pretend to be my girlfriend next week while my parents are here?”

I look around the empty space. I really could use an extra hand getting this place ready. I was hoping to open around Valentine's Day, but there's still so much to do in order to be ready by then.

Is having him help me really worth it though? I would have to spend even more time with Elijah and pretend to be his girlfriend for an entire week.

“What would I have to do?” I ask carefully.

“Just pretend to be my girlfriend. Since they think that it's still new and that we're trying to keep it quiet, we should be able to get away with the rest of the town not finding out.”

“Okay, but what would I have to do? Do I have to spend the whole week with you guys?”

“No, they mentioned a dinner or two, but I can probably get it down to just the one, and then you'll have to be my date to my cousin's wedding.”

“Oh, so you meant that I'm going to be meeting your *whole* family next week,” I say with an eye roll.

“It won't be that bad. It's one night and everyone will be focused on the happy couple. Not on us.”

I can't help but take notice of the tone of disgust in Elijah's voice when he talks about the happy couple. Looks like he isn't looking forward to the wedding either.

“The wedding is in the next town over and we’ll be in and out before anyone notices us. Are you in or not?” Elijah snaps and his attitude has my spine straightening as I face off against him.

“Dude, you’re over six and a half feet tall. I think we’ll be noticed.”

Elijah flinches and I suddenly hate myself.

“Shit. I’m sorry, that was a shitty thing to say. I just didn’t like you rushing my decision. I mean, you’re here to ask me for a favor and you’re also trying to push me into answering you. It’s rude.”

“You don’t need to apologize. It’s not a problem,” he says, his voice hard as he crosses his arms over his chest and stares down at the ground.

“Yes, I do. I shouldn’t have said that.”

“Trust me, I’ve heard worst.”

“Then I apologize for them too. I’m sorry. Those people were assholes too.”

Elijah chuckles at that and I frown.

“What?” I ask when he keeps laughing.

“Hearing you say asshole in your accent was just funny.”

“Asshole,” I say, laying on the southern accent and Elijah grins at me.

The tension between us seems to dissipate after that.

“So, do we have a deal?” he asks, calmer this time.

“What exactly do I get out of it?” I ask, looking around the bakery and mentally making a to-do list of what needs to be done.

“I’ll help you paint,” he says, looking around as well.

“Can you paint? I want this place to look perfect. No streaky walls or uneven patches.”

“Yeah, I can paint. It’s not exactly rocket science,” he says with a roll of his eyes.

“Alright. Is that it? That’s only one thing and I have to meet your parents, have dinner with them, *and* go to a wedding where your entire family will be.”

“You’re making it sound bad. It’s not going to be that bad.”

“I’ll be the judge of that,” I say with a snort, crossing my arms over my chest as I give Elijah a skeptical look.

“You have to help me paint, help me set up the tables and chairs that I ordered, and then help me install the new lights. They should be here next week.”

“That’s too much,” Elijah grumbles and I give him a sweet smile.

“That’s the deal. Take it or leave it.”

He grumbles again, looking over to the boxes of tables and chair parts and then around the space again.

“Do we have a deal?” I ask, closing the distance between us and stretching out my hand toward him.

Elijah studies me for a minute, looking around once more at the walls and the boxes of furniture, before he lets out a sigh.

“Deal,” he says, shaking my hand.

EIGHT



Elijah

IT'S dark the next night by the time I lock up the Trading Post and head into town to Hartley's bakery. Tonight is the first night that I'm helping her with the bakery and we're painting. I brought a change of clothes to work this morning and put the old ones on before I left the shop.

I'm already second-guessing this whole plan.

Will anyone even believe that we're together? I mean, my parents know me and they know how I've always felt about relationships and girlfriends. Will they really believe that suddenly I had a change of heart?

My mom might be able to miss it since she'll just be so excited that I'm with someone, but how long will that last? How long before they spot that Hartley and I don't know the first thing about each other?

I park in front of the bakery, looking over to see that all the lights are on and Hartley is balancing on the top of a ladder.

"Crazy girl," I mutter as I bolt out of my truck and into the bakery. "You shouldn't be up there," I scold her.

Hartley jerks, the ladder teetering under her as she braces herself against the wall to balance herself.

I cross the space, grabbing on to the ladder and scowling up at her. She looks down, returning the dark look.

“*Hello, Elijah,*” she says sarcastically.

“You shouldn’t be standing up there. Not without someone to make sure you’re steady,” I repeat.

“I was doing just fine before you came in and tried to give me a heart attack.”

I hold the ladder as she steps down and brushes her hands off on her pants. She’s wearing a pair of tight black yoga pants that look like a second skin with the way that they mold to her thick thighs.

Her dark brown hair is tied up in a messy knot on top of her head and she’s wearing an old T-shirt that looks to be at least two sizes too big.

“You look nice,” I blurt out and Hartley looks at me like I’m insane.

Where the heck did that come from? I mean, she does look pretty, but why would I say that?

“Thanks... oh! Is this practice for next week? I guess it would be a good idea to start getting to know each other and acting like a couple before we have to do it for an audience next week.”

“Yeah. That’s what I was doing.”

Hartley nods, her eyes scanning over my body. I’ve got a pair of gray sweatpants on and an old college t-shirt.

“You look nice too. Sorry—handsome. I like your sweatpants,” she says with a flirty smile and a wink, and I wonder if I’ve entered a different dimension.

“Uh, thanks.”

Hartley laughs, like she’s in on a joke that I’m just not getting.

“So, I already taped off the whole place and I’ve got all of the supplies ready for us.”

I trail after her as we head into the kitchen and I see everything set out on the counter. She has tarps and other

coverings on the floor, so I head over and grab a roller and pan off the counter.

“Where are we starting?” I ask.

“Out in the main area. I think we’ll have to do two coats out there, so we should start there.”

“Sounds good. Lead the way, dear,” I say, adding a too-big smile to the pet name.

“Don’t call me dear,” she says as she grabs her own paint roller and leads the way out into the main area.

“How about baby?” I try.

“Absolutely not,” she says, prying open the paint can and dumping some into her tray.

“Sweetheart?” I try again as I join her.

“I’ll kill you,” she whispers and I laugh as I pick up my brush and head over to a wall.

“Honey, pumpkin, apple pie,” I ask, barely able to hold back my laugh.

“Why are pet names so awful?” Hartley asks as she starts to roll the paint onto the wall.

It’s a pretty lilac color and with the white trim, it will look light and happy in here.

“I don’t know, but most couples appear to like them,” I say with a shrug as I start to paint my own section of wall.

“What do you want me to call you then, baby?” she asks hesitantly and I laugh when she can barely say it without looking sick.

“How about Eli? It’s a nickname, but only close friends and family call me that.”

“Alright, Eli.”

My name sounds different in Hartley’s southern accent, but I find that I like it. She makes it sound sweet and even charming, instead of outdated or old fashioned.

“Is pink your favorite color?” I ask, desperate to change the subject.

“It was my grandma’s. We had our own bakery all planned out when we lived back in Georgia. We were going to have light pastel pink walls and these cool old school light fixtures. We planned out everything, except the name, and I’m going to make it a reality.”

She sounds so determined and certain. It’s kind of cute.

“You miss her,” I say.

It’s a statement. I can hear the grief clear as day in her voice and you can see it in the set of her shoulders and the downward tilt to her lips.

“I wish that she was here to do this with. She was the best. She... she raised me after my mom died. She was my parent and my best friend and my biggest cheerleader. It’s been lonely doing all this by myself,” she says, looking over her shoulder at the empty bakery.

“Well, now you’re not alone. I’m here to help you.”

“At least for the next week, huh?” she says with a small smile.

“Yeah,” I say, dipping my roller into the paint once more.

We work in silence for a bit. I think Hartley is still lost in old memories of her grandma and their big plans. We finish one of the walls together and I help Hartley move the ladder and paint over to a new section.

“So, tell me about your parents. What do I need to know as your loving, devoted, girlfriend?”

“Well, my mom grew up here in Honey Peak. My dad was passing through on his way home and he stopped at the diner that my mom was waitressing at. The story goes that they took one look at each other and fell in love right then and there.”

Hartley smiles at the story and I pause my painting as she starts to climb up the ladder.

“They were married a month later and my dad moved here. They bought a little house in town and took over the Grove Trading Post from my grandpa when he retired. Then they had me a few years later.”

“So the Post is a family business then?” she asks, running her roller along the tape on the ceiling.

“Yeah, I took it over from them when I got back from college and they officially retired and moved south a few years ago.”

“So you like it here in Honey Peak then? This is where you always wanted to live?” she asks, dipping her roller into the paint once more.

“I thought about leaving when I was in college, but I like it here. I’m an outdoorsy guy, so being surrounded by the mountains and having hiking and kayaking and everything is kind of a dream come true for me. What about you? Were you sad to leave Georgia?” I ask as we finish up the second wall and head over to the third one.

“I liked Georgia, but it just wasn’t home without Grams there. I couldn’t stand to live in our apartment without her.”

“So you came to Honey Peak.”

“So I threw a dart at a map and when it landed on this town, I packed up and moved here,” she says with a small laugh.

“And what do you think of your new home so far?”

“I like it. The people seem friendly and nice. For the most part,” she says with a smirk and side-eye aimed in my direction.

“I’m here helping you! That should count as friendly.”

“You have ulterior motives,” she reminds me, and I roll my eyes.

Hartley laughs at that and comes down off the ladder.

“Yeah, I like it here. The scenery is beautiful, the town is charming, and hopefully, will be the perfect place for my

bakery.”

“I’m sure it will. Brennan is already talking about all of the sweet treats he’s going to get when you’re open.”

“Who’s Brennan?” she asks, her eyes curious as we move onto the final wall.

This one has the front doors and windows, so I know that we’ll be done soon. I find myself disappointed by that.

“Brennan is Patrick’s nephew. Although, he’s also Brennan’s guardian too, ever since his parents died.”

“Who is Patrick?” she asks as she sets the ladder up and starts to climb up to paint above the front window.

“He’s... my best friend,” I admit reluctantly and I smile when Hartley laughs.

“You two sound close,” she teases.

I chuckle.

“We are. I don’t talk to many people in town. You might have noticed, but I’m a bit of a loner. Patrick and Brennan wandered into the Trading Post one day and then they just kept coming back.”

Hartley smiles and climbs down off the ladder, setting her painting supplies down and wiping her hands on her shirt.

“What do you think?” she asks, looking around at our handy work.

“We’re going to need a second coat, but it looks nice. It’s brighter in here already.”

Hartley grins, looking around the place.

“Same time tomorrow?” she asks, and I chuckle.

“Yup.”

NINE



Hartley

I FINISH ORDERING the last of the new kitchen equipment. Ordering two mixers and a new oven have left a big dent in my savings account, and I can't look at my bank account balance without wincing now. At least all of my big ordering is done.

The lights should be delivered in the next few days and the tables and chairs are already here. It will probably take Eli and me another day or two to put together all of those.

It's getting late and Eli should be here any minute to help me with the second coat of paint. I painted the kitchen area this morning before I came up here for lunch and to work on some new recipes.

I put on some old clothes and lock my apartment door behind me before I head downstairs to unlock the bakery. I'm just turning on the lights when Eli's black truck pulls up out front.

I smile and wave at him as he climbs out. When I see the pizza boxes in his hand, I almost weep.

"Oh, you're the best fake boyfriend ever," I say, holding the door open for him.

"I aim to please," he says with a smile as he heads past me and into the kitchen.

I'm right at his heels and I practically dive on the pizza as soon as he sets it down.

"Hungry?" Eli jokes and I nod, shoving another bite of the cheesy goodness into my mouth.

"Starving! I haven't eaten in a few hours," I admit.

Eli frowns at that statement but lets it slide as he grabs his own slice of pizza.

"It looks nice in here. Did you paint this morning?" he asks as he nods to the kitchen walls.

"Yeah," I say, rolling my shoulders back to try to ease the ache in my sore muscles.

"Without me?" Eli jokes, looking wounded.

"Sorry," I say with a laugh. "I didn't think you would mind too much."

"What else are you going to do in here?" he asks and I look over to see the empty space where the industrial mixers will go and where the other oven will go.

"I ordered the last of the equipment today. Hopefully the mixers and new oven will be here this Friday. The lights should be here any day now and the new display cases will be here this weekend."

"Then you'll be ready to open up?" he asks, grabbing another slice of pizza.

"Almost. I need to figure out a name, nail down the menu, order boards to write the menu on and order a sign for out front and maybe for the front window."

"Oh, is that all?" Eli asks, looking shocked.

"Then, I'll need to plan the grand opening, set up some advertising and social media pages, and a website."

"I guess I never realized how much work went into opening a new place. I went the easy route and just took over once it was already established."

I laugh as I grab a second slice of pizza and look around the kitchen.

“It looks good in here though. Right?” I ask.

“Yeah, totally,” Eli says, eyeing me as he finishes off his slice.

Doubts have started creeping in more and more. I mean, part of me thought it was crazy to move across country and start my own bakery, but I was motivated by honoring my grams and finally fulfilling our dream.

Now that I’m here, alone, spending most of my savings, I’m starting to have second thoughts.

What if I fail? What do I do then? Find some job working as a line cook or cashier in some café here in town? I wouldn’t have enough money to move again. How awkward would it be to fail and then have to see everyone in town every day?

“You’re going to do great, sweets. You have to know that. Everyone in town is ready to line up and buy everything that you put out. There will be nothing but crumbs left.”

I smile, nodding my thanks as I shove the last of my pizza in my mouth. Eli does the same and wipes his hands on a napkin before he follows me back out front and we grab our painting supplies again.

We’re quiet for a few minutes as we start applying a second coat of paint to the walls. I had the fans going all night to make sure the walls were dried for today.

“I never asked, but why are you so against dating and relationships, and girlfriends and all that?”

Eli’s brush strokes pause and he seems to get lost in thought for just a minute. I let him think, not wanting to press in case it’s a sensitive subject.

I have a feeling that I know, or that I know at least part of his reason why he doesn’t date. He had seemed pretty down when I had said something about his height and I noticed how he seemed to flinch when I brought it up.

I think his height is a little sexy, if I'm being honest. Who doesn't love a strong, tall, dark, and handsome outdoorsy man?

"It always seemed weird to date here. I mean, it's a small town and we all grew up together. For the most part, anyway. It's almost a little incestuous since everyone has dated everyone else. Problem of living in a small town, I guess."

"I never thought of that, but yeah, it must be hard to find someone that doesn't have a connection to one of your friends or something."

"Being six feet seven doesn't help either. Who wants to date the giant?" he tries to joke but I can hear the hurt in his voice.

"I would. You know what girls would say about you?" I ask.

Eli shakes his head, his eyes wide and curious as he pauses his painting and studies me. There's something almost vulnerable in the glint of his eyes, and I swallow before I answer him.

"They'd say that they wanted to climb you like a tree," I inform him with a small laugh.

Eli's eyes are wide and I notice a slight pink tinge creeping across his cheeks.

"I bet there are a bunch of other women in town who would love to be with you too. Especially if you were wearing those sweatpants," I say with a laugh.

"What's so good about my sweatpants?" Eli asks, totally clueless.

"Seriously? You've never heard of sweatpants season?" I ask, wiggling my eyebrows at him.

Eli looks confused, glancing between me and his sweatpants.

"Sweatpants have soft fabric..." I say suggestively, raising my eyebrows at him.

When he still looks confused, I sigh and continue.

“Soft fabric that molds and shows outlines of certain body parts...” I go on, flicking my eyes down to the outline of his cock that is visible in his pants. “Congratulations, by the way,” I say with a wink.

Eli’s mouth drops open, his eyes going wide as his cheeks flame a bright shade of red.

“That’s what girls are looking at?!” he asks, sounding outraged.

“I mean, some girls, maybe.”

Eli glares at me, tugging his shirt lower as I laugh.

“I won’t look. Promise,” I say, holding my pinky out to him.

He grumbles but takes it and we both lean in, kissing our hands and sealing the pinky promise.

There’s a moment of awareness that passes between us as we stare into each other’s eyes. We both jerk apart and get busy cleaning up our painting equipment.

“Why are you so against dating and boyfriends and all of that?” Eli asks me as we clean up.

“I just never had the time. Culinary school was so competitive that I never found anyone that I trusted enough to go out with. Not that anyone was asking anyway. After that, I was busy taking care of my grams and trying to save up to start our bakery.”

“I’m sure you weren’t missing out on much,” Eli says, trying to make me feel better.

“Yeah, who needs all that. Romance and dates and all that.”

“Gross,” Eli deadpans and I giggle.

We clean up in silence and Eli waits as I turn off the lights and lock up. When we’re standing on the sidewalk, we both pause and glance at each other.

I don't know what to say, but it feels weird to leave things like this.

“So, the chairs and tables tomorrow then?” Eli asks, breaking the silence and I nod, grateful that he broke the weird energy between us.

“Yeah and maybe the lights. I'm not sure when they'll be delivered though. I'll have to check the status and let you know.”

“Let me give you my phone number then. You can just text me and let me know,” Eli says as he digs his cell phone out of his sweatpants and unlocks it.

He passes it to me and I enter my contact information, sending a quick text to myself so that I have his phone number too before I pass it back.

“I'll see you tomorrow then,” he says quietly and I nod awkwardly at him.

He raises a hand and waves, which seems just as awkward as my nod, before he turns and heads to his truck. I hurry up my apartment stairs and let myself in.

As I listen to Eli's truck start up and pull away from the curb, I can't help but wonder what is happening between us. I just need to remember that we agreed to no relationships. I need to keep my eye on the prize, and that's not Eli. It's opening my bakery and making my grams proud.

TEN



Elijah

I'M GRABBING some burgers at Wayside Diner the next night before I head over to the bakery to help Hartley with the tables and chairs when my phone rings. For one brief moment, I hope that it's Hartley. I've been checking my phone more than usual today, and if I'm being honest with myself, I know that it's because I've been hoping that Hartley would reach out to me.

It's not Hartley though. It's Patrick.

I answer right away, hoping that nothing is wrong with Brennan.

"Hello?" I answer, passing some cash across the counter and nodding as I grab the bags of food and push out the diner door.

"Hey, man," Patrick says, and he sounds like shit.

"What's wrong with you?" I ask, hurrying over to my truck and hopping in.

It's freezing outside and I crank the heat up as I wait to find out if I'm going to be headed toward the bakery or to Patrick's place.

"So Brennan is better, but now I have it," he rasps out.

"You want me to grab you some Gatorade or something?" I ask.

“Can you watch Brennan for a day or two? Just until I’m over this?”

“Uh...”

“He’ll have school tomorrow so it will really just be tonight and then maybe tomorrow night if I’m still throwing up.”

“You’re trusting me with Brennan?”

“Of course, Eli. You’re family. Now, I’m about to go and throw up again. Front door is unlocked and Brennan is in his room packing a bag. He’s very excited to be spending the night with Uncle Eli.”

The line goes dead after that and I’m grateful that I don’t have to listen to Patrick hurling. I send Hartley a message, letting her know that I’ll be a few minutes late before I shift into drive and head over to Patrick’s place.

All of the lights are on and I jump out of the truck and jog up the front steps. Brennan is struggling to drag his backpack and small duffel bag down the stairs, and I hurry to help him. I can hear Patrick in the bathroom upstairs and I wait for a break in the vomiting before I yell that I’m locking up and to get some rest.

Patrick grunts back and I chuckle as I grab Brennan’s bags. I turn off the lights and make sure that the back door is locked while Brennan gets his hat and coat on.

I help him into the truck and he finds the food almost immediately. I make sure he’s buckled up before I back out of the drive and head toward the bakery.

“This is really cold,” Brennan says, tossing a fry back into the bag.

“Yeah, I forgot about it when I went inside to pick you up. We’re headed to the bakery. Maybe we can convince Ms. Hartley to make us something better to eat than cold burgers and fries.”

“Bakery?” Brennan asks, his whole body perking up.

I chuckle, steering us through the light traffic. We pull up outside of the bakery a few minutes later and Brennan's little hands scramble to unbuckle and open the truck door. I help him hop down from the truck and he bolts over to the bakery doors.

Hartley is in the middle of the main room surrounded by open boxes and metal parts.

"Getting started without me?" I ask, grabbing Brennan before he can trip over what looks like a table leg.

"I was trying to, but I think I just made a bigger mess. The lights came this afternoon and I thought that I could get most of this done myself so that we just had the lights tonight, but none of the screws fit in the holes and line up and oh my god this is a nightmare. I just want to scream and—Oh! Hello there," Hartley says as she looks up and spots Brennan.

"Hi," Brennan says shyly, tucking himself close to my legs and peeking out to watch Hartley.

"Patrick is sick, so I'm watching Brennan for a day or two. Do you mind that he's here?" I ask, realizing that I probably should have asked her before we just showed up.

"Of course not! It's nice to meet you, Brennan," Hartley says with a big smile and Brennan grins back at her.

"I had grabbed burgers for us but they got pretty cold in the car," I say as Brennan looks around the bakery.

Hartley seems to catch on and she nods slightly at me.

"Let's see if we can make something better to eat then, shall we?" Hartley asks, gingerly stepping through the minefield that is the bakery floor.

Brennan nods and takes Hartley's outstretched hand and follows her outside. I trail after them, trying not to stare at Hartley's ass in her tight black yoga pants as she walks up the stairs in front of me. I wonder if she knows that yoga pants are to guys what sweatpants apparently are to girls?

She lets us into our apartment and Brennan freezes when he sees all of the baked goods lined up and piled on the

kitchen counters. There's even more in Tupperware on the coffee table and desk in the living room.

"This place is awesome," Brennan whispers and Hartley laughs, leading him over to the kitchen.

"Let's make dinner and then you can taste test some of the things I'm thinking of selling downstairs."

"Okay!" Brennan says excitedly and I smile as they head over to the fridge and stick their heads inside.

I use their distraction to look around her place. It's small but tidy. Well, tidy aside from her baked goods piled everywhere. The couch and other furniture are a little outdated and I'm assuming it was either here when she moved in or was her and her grandma's from back in Georgia.

"Homemade macaroni and cheese alright with you, Eli?" Hartley asks, and I turn and nod.

"Sounds good."

Brennan and Hartley get to work in the kitchen and I smile as she shows him how to test that the noodles are done and lets him stir in the cheese and some milk. By the time that they're done, Brennan is beaming with pride. He carries a big bowl over to me and I thank him before I join Hartley and him in the living room.

"Sorry, the table is a bit of a mess. I can try to clean it off if you'd rather sit there," Hartley offers but I wave her off.

"The couch is fine," I assure her.

We all dig in and I play it up, groaning and telling Brennan that this is the best thing I've ever eaten. He grins, shoveling more of the creamy macaroni and cheese into his mouth but I can tell that he's happy that I like it. I'm sure that Patrick will be hearing about this for days and probably eating macaroni and cheese for weeks.

We eat quickly and help Hartley do the dishes before we all head back downstairs. Hartley grabbed a few different treats from upstairs and she clears out a spot for him at the

counter. Brennan has some homework to finish up and I grab his backpack from my truck as he digs into his desserts.

We leave him to his homework as we look around at the mess that is the bakery floor.

“So it’s separated into legs,” she says, pointing to one section. “Seats, and backs.”

I nod as I look around at the piles.

“The parts and tools are over there,” she says, pointing to a section of counter where a bunch of screws and a screwdriver lie.

“Do you have a power drill?” I ask, knowing that we’ll need that if we want to finish all of this tonight.

“Nope, but I do have a Phillips head screwdriver,” she says proudly.

“That’s good, but I think we’re going to need a power drill if we want to get all of these done in the next month.”

“Do you think the hardware store is still open?” Hartley asks, chewing on her bottom lip as she studies the parts.

“No, but I have a drill at home. How about I bring it tomorrow? Tonight we can just do the lights since those will be easy.”

“Sounds good. Is Brennan going to be okay sitting there?”

“Yeah, we can work around him. I should probably mention that I might have him tomorrow too. Patrick caught the flu so I’ll be watching Brennan until he’s better.”

“That’s fine. He’s a good helper,” she says and I notice Brennan perk up in his seat.

We get to work, pushing all of the parts to the side of the room and working together to unbox the new lights. I grab the ladder and start taking down the old light fixtures and passing them to Hartley. I already told her that I would take these lights and donate them to the local church who was looking to replace a few of their fixtures.

We work quickly together and have all of the new lights up in a few hours. Hartley helps me load the old lights into the truck bed as Brennan packs his homework back into his backpack. I smile when Brennan walks over to Hartley and gives her a hug.

“We’ll be back tomorrow,” I say when it looks like Brennan isn’t going to let her go and Hartley nods.

“See you tomorrow!” Hartley says as she makes sure that he climbs up into the truck alright.

“Let me know if you two need anything,” she says to me once his door is shut.

“Thanks,” I say. “I’ll stay here while you lock up and head upstairs.”

“Thanks,” she says, waving at Brennan one last time before she locks up and hurries up the steps to her apartment.

I wait until she’s safely inside before I pull away from the curb.

“Ready for bed?” I ask Brennan and he nods.

He looks tired already and I have a feeling that he’s going to be out before we even make it home.

“I like her. She’s nice,” Brennan says quietly as we head toward my house.

“Yeah, I like her too.”

I’m just afraid that I might like her a little too much.

ELEVEN



Hartley

I'M CLEANING up in the kitchen when I realize that I might be cooking dinner with Brennan again tonight. I've been avoiding texting Eli because I have a feeling that once I start, it will be hard to stop. He's really my closest friend in this town. Now though, I need to make sure that I have enough in my fridge to feed all of us.

HARTLEY: Are you and Brennan eating here tonight?

Eli: Are you offering to cook for us again?

Eli: We can grab something on our way too.

Hartley: I can cook. I was thinking spaghetti since Brennan had so much fun with the macaroni last night. Or should we feed him something else? Something with more vegetables?

Eli: Hold on. I'm about to pick him up from school. Let me ask him.

Hartley: Okay

Eli: He said spaghetti and asked if we could have garlic bread too.

Hartley: Of course! I'll grab some French bread from the store and we can make our own.

Eli: Let me swing by my house and grab the power tools. Brennan and I will swing by the store and grab the French bread. Just one loaf, right? Do you need anything else?

Hartley: No, just the bread. Are you sure you don't need to be back at the shop?

Eli: No, I have someone watching the place. It's pretty slow this time of year anyway. Besides, those tables and chairs are going to take a while.

Hartley: Okay, if you're sure.

Eli: Alright. See you soon.

I SPEND the next forty minutes tidying up my apartment and changing into something a little nicer. I try not to analyze why I'm getting dressed up when I'm going to be getting dirty downstairs. It's definitely not because I'll be seeing Eli.

There's a knock at my door and I check my reflection in the bathroom mirror before I head out to let them in.

Brennan rushes past me and dumps his backpack on the couch before he hurries over to the kitchen.

"We got the French bread, Ms. Hartley," he says excitedly.

"Thank you, Brennan! Are you ready to help me make some spaghetti and garlic bread?"

He nods excitedly and I take the bread from Eli before I join Brennan in the kitchen.

"If it's alright with you two, I'll head downstairs and get started on the chairs," Eli says as I help Brennan wash his hands in the kitchen sink.

"Are you sure you don't want to wait until I can help you?" I ask, but he waves me off.

"I'll be fine," he assures me and I nod, giving him a small smile before I turn back to help Brennan.

"We'll come get you when it's done," I call to him as he grabs my key ring off the hook by the front door and heads

downstairs to the bakery.

Brennan is very excited to help me cook, so I let him fill up the pot with water. We turn the stove on and I slice the bread in half before I show Brennan how to make garlic bread from scratch.

Seeing him concentrate so hard as he spreads the butter and garlic across the bread. Watching him and seeing how enthusiastic and engaged he is reminds me of cooking with my grams. It reminds me of when I discovered my own love and passion for cooking.

I make Brennan watch as I slide the bread into the oven and set the timer. I don't have much experience with kids, but returning him with a burn or injury doesn't seem like a good idea.

We check the noodles and I drain them when Brennan nods that they're done. I double-check that the stove is off before we grab dishes and parmesan cheese from the fridge.

"Should we go get Eli now?" I ask him and he nods, grabbing my hand and pulling me over to the door.

We hurry down the stairs and over to the bakery doors. I'm surprised by how much Eli has already gotten done.

"Maybe you should change careers. You could be putting furniture together instead!"

Eli chuckles, dusting his hands off and standing to survey his work. He's already got three of the fifteen chairs put together and one of the tables.

"I should buy a power drill," I murmur and Eli laughs.

"I'll lend you mine whenever you want," he says, and I grin at him.

"The food is done, Uncle Eli," Brennan says, and seeing those two together has something funny happening to my heart.

Eli picks Brennan up, listening intently as he tells him all about what we made and how we made it.

I lock up and follow the two upstairs to the apartment. The oven goes off right as we walk in the door and I hurry to take the bread out of the oven before it burns.

“It smells delicious,” Eli says as he sets Brennan down in a chair at my newly cleaned off kitchen table.

Eli helps me carry over the plates and we all sit down to dig in. We’re almost done eating when Eli’s phone goes off. He excuses himself and Brennan and I finish eating.

“That was Patrick. He’s feeling better and he’s out grabbing some Clorox wipes and food. He said he’ll swing by and pick you up in a few minutes.”

Brennan seems sad to have to leave, but I’d be lying if I said that I wasn’t excited to spend some time alone with Eli.

“Let’s get you some treats to take home,” I tell Brennan and he jumps out of his chair and heads over to look through all of the Tupperware containers.

I help him fill up his own Tupperware and we stuff it into his backpack just as someone knocks on the door. Eli answers it while I help Brennan into his jacket.

“Patrick!” Brennan shouts and I look up to see an attractive man standing next to Eli at the door.

He grins at the little boy, his blond hair briefly falling into his eyes, and if I didn’t know better, I would think that he was Brennan’s biological father. They certainly have the same coloring.

“This is Ms. Hartley,” Brennan says, and I wave slightly as Patrick straightens and smiles at me.

“Ah, the famous Hartley,” he says. “I’d come closer but on the chance that I’m still contagious...”

“Oh, yeah. I appreciate the distance,” I say with a laugh.

“Well, thanks for watching Brennan. I’m sure I’ll talk to you later,” Patrick says, nodding at Eli. “Hartley, it was nice to meet you!”

“You too!” I call as he bundles Brennan close to his side and they disappear down the stairs.

“Tables and chairs?” I ask Eli once they’re gone and he nods.

I follow him downstairs and we spend a few minutes in comfortable silence as I hand Eli parts and he drills them together. We’ve finished another chair when I finally break the silence.

“So, what do I need to know about your parents before they get here next week?”

“Just be yourself. I told them that we just started seeing each other, so it won’t be weird if you don’t know everything about me and my family.”

“Right, but what’s our story?”

“Our story?” he asks as he screws another chair together.

“Yeah, like what are we telling them. How long have we been together? When did we meet? How did you ask me out? Where was our first date?” I list off all of the questions that I know we’ll be asked next week.

“Oh, um, let’s say that we’ve been dating for three weeks. You’ve only been in town for a few weeks so it wouldn’t make sense to say much longer than that.”

“Makes sense,” I say, passing him another chair leg.

“We met in town? At the grocery store? You asked me to grab something that was on the top shelf.”

“Alright. That’s kind of close to the truth.”

“Our first date was over here. You cooked for me and I helped you narrow down desserts to make for the bakery. That’s how you asked me out.”

“*I* asked *you* out?” I ask, shocked.

“Yeah. My parents know that I’m against relationships, so I don’t think that they would buy that I would just ask you out.”

“My beauty and sparkling personality wouldn’t have swayed you?” I tease.

“It will just be more believable if it’s you asking me.”

“Okay, so you grab something from the top shelf for me and then I asked you out to dinner?”

“We got to talking and you told me about the bakery and how you were trying out some new recipes and needed to narrow it down. I offered to help as a joke but you took me up on it and we started hanging out together.”

“Alright. I guess that’s believable.”

Eli finishes up with the last of the chairs and we move onto the tables. They go faster and since there are only a few of them, we’re done in no time.

“There. All done,” Eli says, dusting his hands off.

I smile. It’s starting to look like a real bakery in here now.

“When will the mixers and everything be here?” Eli asks.

“Tomorrow. They gave me an eight-hour window so literally anytime tomorrow, but then I’ll be done with the big stuff down here.”

“Do you need me to be here for that?” he asks and I shake my head no.

“I hired them to install everything, so I’m good.”

“Okay, so I won’t see you until my parents are here then. I’ll text you and let you know definitive plans once I know.”

“Sounds good,” I say as he grabs his jacket and heads for the door.

“There’s one more thing, Eli,” I say and he stops and turns to face me.

“We’re going to have to act like a couple next week... maybe we should practice before we have to do it in front of other people.”

“Practice what?” Eli asks, but I could swear that he looks almost hopeful.

“Touching, holding hands, kissing, the usual couple stuff.”

I hold my hand out to him and he eyes it like he’s not sure what to do with it. I wiggle my fingers at him and he glances at me warily but slips his hand into mine. His palm is rough against mine and tingles spark in my fingertips.

I wrap my fingers around Eli’s and swing our hands lightly. When I glance up, Eli is staring at our hands in wonder and for a brief second, I wonder if this is the first time that Eli has done this.

I step closer to Eli, getting in his space and he watches me, his eyes wide and trusting.

“Now, kiss me,” I order.

My mouth waters, my whole body leaning into Eli. It’s like I have to taste him. My hips brush against him and pleasure slides into my belly, sticky and hot.

I lean up on my tiptoes, dropping Eli’s hand so that I can wrap my arms around his neck. Eli bends down, his hands landing on my hips as he steps closer to me. His chest brushes against mine and I shiver at the contact.

His lips brush against mine, delicate at first, like a whisper, and I let out a soft sigh. Eli makes a hoarse sound, his fingers tightening on my hips until I’m sure that he’s leaving bruises.

The kiss changes then.

What started out as soft and exploratory quickly turns heated. Eli’s mouth goes to battle with my own, his lips angling against mine as we both breathe each other in. I can feel every hard plane of his body against mine, but it’s not enough.

I push closer, my hands tugging at his clothes. Our lips clinging and molding against each other the same way that the rest of our bodies are. Eli’s tongue slicks across the seam of my lips and I moan under his lips, opening for him instantly.

“Hartley. Sweets,” Eli breathes against my lips and his rough voice scrapes across my skin.

I jerk in his hold, the spell that his kiss put on me breaking at the sound of my voice falling from his lips.

Eli looks just as dazed as I feel and we both just stare at each other for a few heartbeats before I take a step back.

“Alright. I think we’ve got that covered,” Eli says, clearing his throat and heading for the door. “I’ll... uh, I’ll see you later,” he says gruffly before he disappears into the night.

I stand there staring after him for far too long.

This isn’t how this was supposed to go. It was just supposed to be a favor for a favor. I wasn’t supposed to feel anything. I certainly wasn’t supposed to *like* him.

I lock up and head upstairs intending to work some more, but I can’t seem to clear my head. All I can think is that I might be in trouble here.

TWELVE



Elijah

IT'S SUNDAY AND MY PARENTS' plane was supposed to land fifteen minutes ago. I thought about texting Hartley and giving her a heads up that they're here in town, but I changed my mind and deleted the text message at the last minute.

I've been avoiding her since that kiss Friday night. I spent all day yesterday and this morning at the Trading Post, making sure that the store was set for Nick, my one employee, to run next week.

All weekend, I've been plagued by memories of Hartley. Thoughts of Hartley holding my hand, her fingers wrapped tight around mine, or of her lips against mine. I've never held hands with someone before and I wasn't sure what to expect, but it was nice. Hartley's hand was so small in mine and it reminded me of how much bigger I am than her. Her hand was so soft and smooth against my own rough fingertips. Another difference between the two of us.

It's more than just her hands that I keep replaying in my head. I can't seem to stop thinking about that kiss either. No matter how hard I try.

I've lain awake the last two nights replaying that moment over and over again in my head. I've kissed a few girls before but it's never felt like that. Like I was being wrapped in a blanket. It was like I was coming home.

I pull up in front of the airport, finding an empty spot close to the arrivals door. It doesn't take long to spot my parents. My dad is six and a half feet tall and he towers over everyone else who is outside waiting for their ride. I wave when my mom turns and sees me, and she excitedly waves back before she nudges my dad and takes off toward my truck.

"Eli!" my mom yells as she continues to barrel toward me.

I hop out of the truck to help them with their bags as she reaches me. My mom might be thin, but she makes up for it by being energetic. She runs toward me, throwing her arms around my neck and nearly tackling me in the process.

"It's so nice to see you, dear. You look good. Have you been eating enough? You look a little thin," she says as she holds me at arm's length to get a better look at me.

"Hey, son," my dad says when he joins us, dragging both suitcases behind him. "Let's do this at the house. It's freezing out here," my dad suggests, prying my mom off me and helping her up into the cab of the truck.

I help him with the bags, hefting them into the truck bed before I climb back behind the wheel and pull out into the light airport traffic. It's about an hour back to Honey Peak and I settle in for the drive. I have a feeling that I'm about to spend the whole trip fielding questions from my mom about Hartley.

"When do we get to meet your girlfriend?" my mom asks a minute later, leaning forward in her seat in the back.

"Hi, Mom. It's nice to see you too. How was your flight?" I say sarcastically.

That earns me a warning look from my mom in the rearview mirror and I duck my head, mumbling an apology.

"It was fine. Our layover in Chicago was a nightmare though. It's snowing there and I thought that we were going to get snowed in or that there would be too much ice on the wings or something, but we didn't."

"Yeah, I heard that we're going to get snow here over the next day or two."

“We should meet your girlfriend tonight then. What if we get snowed in and I have to wait until the wedding? That would be awful.”

“I think Hartley has plans tonight,” I say, trying to come up with an excuse to put off them meeting for just a little bit longer.

“So, dinner tomorrow then?”

“I’ll have to ask Hartley, Mom. She’s been busy getting her bakery ready for the grand opening.”

“Well, you should be helping her with that! Maybe we can help too,” my mom tries again.

She nudges my dad and he nods dutifully.

“Of course we can help.”

“I have been helping her. I spent all last week helping her paint and set up chairs and lights.”

“Then she should take a break and join us for dinner.”

I can tell that my mom isn’t going to let this drop. I shoot my dad a pleading look but he just smiles and shrugs at me in return. He’s not going to be any help, so I hit the phone button on my steering wheel, bringing up my contact list and finding Hartley’s name.

“Before I hit dial, please do not start asking her a million questions. I promise that you will be able to ask her whatever you want when you meet her this week,” I say, looking in the rearview mirror at my mom.

She nods, reluctantly, and I know before I say “call Hartley” that this is a mistake.

Maybe she won’t pick up.

Hartley picks up on the third ring and I freeze when I hear her sweet southern accent.

“Hello?”

“Hey, sweets. We’re just headed home from the airport and—”

“Hi, Hartley! We can’t wait to meet you!” my mom yells from the back seat and I wince slightly before I shoot a warning look in the rearview mirror.

“Hi, Mrs. Grove!”

“We can’t wait to meet you, honey!” my mom repeats and I suddenly regret dragging Hartley into this.

My mom is going to fall in love with her and we’re going to have to pretend to be together forever. No way would she forgive me for dumping the sweet girl, and I’m sure I’d be in trouble if I said that Hartley ever dumped me.

“I can’t wait to meet y’all too,” Hartley says with a sweet laugh.

“Anyway,” I interrupt, trying to keep this call from going off the rails. “My mom would like to know when you can come over for dinner this week.”

I send up a silent prayer that she doesn’t say tonight. I just need one more day to figure out why I can’t stop thinking about her. One more day to shore up my defenses so that no one can tell that this is all pretend.

“Um, I can maybe do tomorrow? I’ve got to get some more work done here tonight,” she says apologetically.

“Perfect! Five o’clock work for you?” my mom asks and I want to roll my eyes.

“Sounds good!” Hartley says and I’m surprised to hear a thread of excitement in her voice. “I’ll see you then. Bye!”

“I’ll text you later, sweets,” I say before I hit the button to end the call.

I glance in the mirror at my mom and she shrugs.

“You said that I couldn’t ask her a bunch of questions. I merely said hi and that we were excited to meet her.”

She gives me a look that it seems only mothers can give and I let out a sigh.

We spend the rest of the drive catching up. My mom tells me stories about their friends down in Florida and what

they're remodeling in their house. My parents both like to keep busy, so my mom spends her days volunteering and joining her friends for water aerobics or yoga classes.

My dad prefers to stay a little closer to home, so he does work around the house. He has a long list of things that my mom wants done around the place, and I listen as he tells me about the back deck that he just got done building. Now my mom is trying to figure out if she wants flower boxes or a raised garden bed built next. My mom tells me about how she's thinking about redoing the guest bathroom and how if they're doing one, they might as well do the bathroom in the master bedroom as well.

"Remember that dark blue vanity that we saw at Home Depot, honey?" my mom asks my dad and I grin as he nods. We both know what's coming.

"I think that it would look great in our bathroom. We can redo the tile too. I've been on this website called Pinterest. Have you heard of it, Eli? It's great for inspiration."

"Yeah, I've heard of it, Mom."

"I love it! I've been flagging all of the ideas that I like and saving them to this thing that they call boards," she continues.

"Uh huh," I hum, letting her tell me all about her Pinterest boards and all of the things that she's saving.

By the time that we pull into the drive outside my house, snow is starting to fall. It's just a few flurries now, but I know that I'll be out here plowing the driveway in the morning. I make a mental note to pick Hartley up. She shouldn't be driving her little car around in this weather.

That thought stops me in my tracks and I gulp.

I'm excited to see her again, I realize.

I have fun with Hartley. She's sweet and funny and kind. I liked seeing her with Brennan, watching the two of them bond over cooking. She's patient and her sweet southern accent calms me and excites me all at once.

Those thoughts have my stomach dropping and dread fills me.

Shit.

Leave it to me to develop some kind of feelings for the one girl who isn't interested in a relationship.

You're not falling for her. You two are just friends. You've never had a friend who was a girl before, so that's why it seems like it's something more than it is. There's nothing else going on here.

I try to push thoughts of Hartley from my mind as I help carry in my parents' luggage. They get settled in the guest room and I head to the kitchen to make a quick dinner. We catch up and they head to bed early.

I should do the same. Lord knows that I'm going to need my energy to keep up with my mom tomorrow, but as I lay in bed staring at the ceiling and listening to the wind howl outside, all I can think about is Hartley.

THIRTEEN



Hartley

WHAT ARE you supposed to wear when you're going to meet your fake boyfriend's parents? I've been standing in front of my closet for close to twenty minutes now, staring at all of the T-shirts hanging inside.

I'm a baker and I've spent all of my time in kitchens where fashion doesn't matter. I've never met anyone's parents before, but showing up in yoga pants and a loose T-shirt doesn't seem fancy enough.

I should have thought of this before. Maybe I could have gone somewhere and grabbed something nicer. I have one dress tucked into the back of my closet, but I'll need that for the wedding on Friday. I definitely can't show up wearing the same thing all week.

I bite my lip, flipping through the hangers for the millionth time. When I still come up empty, I groan and fall back onto my bed.

I'm supposed to be heading over to Eli's house any minute now and I should leave soon because it's still snowing and I'll need to drive slower. I'm sitting up in bed when there's a knock on my door. I know who it is before I even go to answer.

Eli is bundled up, shifting from foot to foot on the little landing outside of my door.

“Is that what you’re wearing?” I ask when I notice he’s just in jeans and a thermal shirt.

“What’s wrong with what I’m wearing?” Eli asks, frowning down at his attire.

“It’s casual. I’ve been freaking out for like half an hour trying to figure out what to wear.”

“Oh, yeah, it’s just at my house, so jeans and a shirt is fine. You should have just sent me a text. I could have told you that,” he says.

“What are you doing here?” I ask as I step out of the way and let him into my apartment.

“I’m here to give you a ride. You shouldn’t be driving around in the snow in your car.”

“I can’t tell if you’re being sweet or a dick again,” I say as I narrow my eyes and study him.

“Hartley. I can’t have you getting in an accident and not holding up your end of the deal.”

“Oh, that’s so sweet of you. Thanks for thinking of me,” I say sarcastically over my shoulder as I head toward my bedroom.

“It’s no big deal.”

I glare at him, nodding once before I disappear into my room. I leave the door cracked an inch as I head over to my closet and pull out a plaid long sleeve shirt. I grab a pair of skinny jeans from my dresser and hurry to get dressed.

“Speaking of sweet!” I call when I remember his call yesterday.

“What? Who was talking about sweet?”

“I called you sweet like thirty seconds ago. Pay attention,” I say with a laugh as I hop around, pulling on my jeans.

“Right, sorry. Go on,” he says with a chuckle.

“You called me sweets yesterday. Twice. Is that my pet name?”

“Yeah, sorry about that. It just slipped out.”

I can't see his face but he sounds almost embarrassed and I feel bad for bringing it up.

“No! It's okay. I... liked it,” I admit.

“Good,” he whispers close to the door.

I tug on my shirt and check my reflection in the mirror once more. My face is flushed from running around the room getting dressed, I assure myself. My eyes look bright and when I look into them. I look happy. I look like a girl excited to go on a date with a guy.

That's not what this is, I remind myself, giving myself a shake to clear my head.

My eyes snag on the picture of grams and I tucked into the frame of the dresser mirror.

I'm caught off guard by my grief.

I've been so wrapped up in getting the bakery ready and then getting ready for my week as Eli's girlfriend, that I've barely thought about anything else. She creeps in every now and then though.

When I was picking out paint colors, I could hear her voice in my head, cracking jokes about an orange color that I had briefly considered. She always hated the color orange and I knew that I never would have heard the end of it if I had painted any part of our bakery orange. I heard her in my head when I ordered the mixers and when I picked out the light fixtures.

I also heard her when I first ran into Eli. She would have said something inappropriate when we first met if she had been here. She would be encouraging me to go out with him, for real, to see if what we have is real. And if it wasn't real, she would still be encouraging me to sleep with him.

I smile at that thought.

“You okay in there?” Eli asks and I clear my throat.

“Yeah, let’s go,” I say, forcing a smile onto my face and stepping back into the living room.

“Hey,” Eli says softly when I try to brush past him. “Are you alright?”

My throat burns as I blink rapidly, trying to keep the tears at bay.

“You don’t have to be nervous or scared. They’re harmless. Well, my mom is energetic, but she’s going to love you,” he says softly, like he’s afraid I’m about to burst into tears.

“It’s not that. I was just thinking about my grams. I don’t have any family left. Who am I going to bring you home to meet?”

I didn’t even know that I was thinking about that. About bringing someone home, or not being able to bring someone home rather.

“Oh, sweets,” Eli says a second before his arms wrap around me and I’m crushed against his chest.

He smells like pine needles and fire and I breathe him in as I try to get myself under control. Tears slip free, wetting my eyelashes before they make tracks down my cheeks. I’m probably leaving a wet spot on his shirt, but he doesn’t seem to mind.

“It’ll be okay. You’re never going to get rid of my mom now anyway. We can split her.”

I choke out a laugh, wrapping my arms tighter around Eli’s waist.

“Thanks,” I whisper but I know that he hears me.

We stand like that for a few minutes, until my tears have stopped and I’ve got myself under control. I clear my throat, stepping away from him and turning to grab my coat.

Silence hangs in the air between us and I wish that I could say something to break the tension, but my mind is blank. I grab my coat off the hook by the front door and slip it on.

“Want help with that?” Eli asks and I look up to see him grinning at me.

“Leave all that flirting for your parents.” I close my eyes in pain. “Oh my god, that came out wrong.”

Eli laughs, like a full-on belly laugh, and that sound has me mesmerized. I’ve seen him chuckle and even laugh, but never like this. It’s beautiful but a little shocking after seeing him so stoic for most of the past week.

“Let’s go, sweets,” Eli says, resting his hand on the small of my back as we walk down the stairs and over to his truck.

I gasp when his hands land on my hips and he boosts me up into the passenger seat. Before I can say anything though, Eli is closing the passenger door and rounding the hood.

We talk about his parents and go over our story one more time as Eli drives us back to his house. I’m not sure where I expected Eli to live, but the wood cabin fits him perfectly.

It’s a two-story and the dark wood of the cabin stands out against the white snow. All of the lights in the place seem to be on and with the smoke coming out of the chimney and the snow and trees as a backdrop, it actually looks really cozy. I try to take it all in as he pulls into the drive.

Eli parks out front and hurries over to open the door and help me out. Before my feet have even touched the ground, the front door is ripped open and a tall, slight, energetic woman steps out.

“Hartley! It’s so nice to finally meet you,” she says, hurrying down the front steps.

Eli sighs as he sets me on the ground and closes the truck door.

“Come on, sweets,” he says, wrapping his arm around my shoulders and leading me over to greet his mom.

She meets us over halfway and throws her arms around my shoulders, crushing me in a bear hug. For someone so thin, she sure is strong. She’s got a dark green wool sweater on and the fabric tickles my nose as she continues to squeeze me to her.

“It’s nice to meet you too, Mrs. Grove,” I say with a small laugh as Eli practically wrestles her off me.

“Come in, come in! It’s freezing out here.”

Mrs. Grove wraps her arm through mine and drags me up the front steps and inside.

“Have you been here before?” she asks me and I look to Eli.

Will it be weird if I say no?

“No, Mom. This is the first time.”

“We’ve been busy over at the bakery. Eli has been helping me get the place up and running,” I tell her and she looks at her son lovingly.

“He’s a good boy. Now come meet Frank. I’m Susan, by the way. You can call me that... or Mom,” she says with a wink.

“Mom!” Eli says exasperatedly from behind us.

“Whatever you’re comfortable with,” she says as she pats my arm and leads me into the living room that’s off the main hallway where a tall man is piling some more wood by the fireplace.

“Hartley, this is my husband, Frank. Frank, this is Eli’s girlfriend, Hartley.”

“Nice to meet you, Hartley,” Frank says, the low timbre of his voice reminding me of the men on the audiobooks that Grams and I used to listen to.

“Nice to meet you too,” I say, shaking his outstretched hand.

His parents are both tall, but Eli still has a few inches on both of them. He gets his dark coloring from them too. They all have dark brown hair, although his parents’ hair has a bit more gray in it than brown.

Eli wraps his arm around my shoulders and I glance up at him. He smiles down at me and for just a moment, I can almost believe that this is real.

“We were just about to get started making dinner. Did you want to give me a hand?” Susan asks and I nod.

“Let Eli give you a tour first. I’ll go get everything ready,” she says before she disappears into the next room.

“Come on,” Eli says, taking my hand in his and leading me back out into the hallway and then up the stairs to the second floor.

The floors are all the same dark hardwood, the walls painted a really pale gray. He shows me the bedrooms, letting me poke my head into each before we move onto the bathrooms.

“How long have you lived here?” I ask him as he leads me back downstairs and all the way down the hallway.

“About three years. I bought it right before my parents moved to Florida and I took over the shop,” he says as he leads me into another room.

I glance around the small den at the back of the house. The furniture all looks comfortable, the leather chair in the corner by the back window looking like the perfect place to curl up on a winter day with a good book and a cup of hot chocolate.

Eli leads me across the hall and into the kitchen and I swear I almost moan when I see it. It’s a chef’s dream kitchen and I eye him suspiciously.

“Can you cook?” I ask him.

“A bit,” he says with a shrug and I can’t tell if he’s being modest or not.

“Oh, don’t listen to him. He can heat up a frozen pizza or meal and that’s it,” his mom says with a laugh and I can’t help but gasp.

“You can’t cook, but you have this perfect kitchen?” I ask, outraged.

“It just came with the house,” Eli says, holding up his hands in front of him as he backs for the door.

I ignore him, turning back to take in the splendor before me.

The cabinets and drawers are all painted a pale green that complement the dark wood floors and black marble countertops perfectly. A six-burner stove, black farmhouse sink, and a double gleaming oven finish out the area and have me wanting to cry all over again.

“Do you need help?” Eli asks and I know that he’s trying to throw me a lifeline before he just leaves me alone with his mom.

“No, dear. Go visit with your dad. Let Hartley and I get to know each other a little better.”

Eli looks like he doesn’t know if he should argue or not and his eyes ping pong between me and his mom until I finally rescue him.

“We’ll be fine,” I say, giving him what I hope is a reassuring smile.

He still looks like he wants to stay, but finally he turns and heads back into the living room.

I wash my hands, trying to give myself a pep talk.

We’re in a kitchen. This is a safe space. You can make one meal with Eli’s mom and survive.

I dry my hands off and join her at the counter, all of my confidence evaporating with his first question.

“What are your intentions with my son?”

“Uh...”

Susan laughs, letting me know that she was just messing with me, but I have a feeling that this is far from the only thing she’ll be asking me tonight about Eli’s and my relationship.

Now, I just need to survive the interrogation that I’m sure Susan is about to put me through.

FOURTEEN



Elijah

I CAN HEAR my mom and Hartley laughing in the kitchen and I start to relax. Things seem to be going alright, although that doesn't stop me from leaning forward in my seat on the couch to watch them in the kitchen.

My dad is busy watching some documentary on the History Channel and ignoring me spying on my mom and girlfriend. He and I already caught up on what's going on at the Trading Post and in town. He asked me a few questions about Hartley, but I'm sure that he knows that he'll hear all of it from Mom later tonight.

I had been uncertain about leaving my mom and Hartley alone together. I know how my mom can be and it feels wrong to subject someone who is just doing you a favor to all of her excitement.

When I had first left them alone in the kitchen to cook, the tense silence had me struggling not to pace around the living room or dart back into the kitchen and insist that I help them make dinner.

What if they hated each other? What if my mom said something over the top and freaked Hartley out? What if my mom somehow knew that we were lying to her?

I was about two seconds from sprinting back into the kitchen to try to defuse the situation or to just confess to

everything or to make up some excuse that Hartley had to leave right now when my mom had spoken.

“So, what are your intentions with my son?”

I think that my heart stopped when she asked Hartley that and I had been moving forward to rescue her when my mom had laughed, breaking the tension.

That had been far from the last of the questions though.

With each new one that my mom had asked, I had another moment of true panic. This was a terrible idea. There was no way we were going to be able to pull this off. I was lying to my parents and they were going to find out and never trust me or let me hear the end of it. Poor Hartley.

I swear my whole body relaxed up at the sound and I almost sagged with relief onto the couch. They’ve been chatting and giggling in there ever since. I hate to admit it, but hearing them have fun together has a weird ache forming in my chest. I almost like it.

My dad probably thinks that I’m losing it. I’ve gone from pacing and staring eagle-eyed at the kitchen to practically passing out on the couch. He’s been ignoring me though, watching the TV, although I’m sure that he’s been listening to the noises coming from the kitchen as well.

“Dinner’s done!” my mom calls and my dad grabs the remote, turning the TV off before he climbs to his feet and makes his way into the kitchen.

I hurry to follow him. It smells delicious and I smile at Hartley, studying her face and checking to see that she’s comfortable before I take the bowl of roasted potatoes from my mom and carry it over to the kitchen table.

“It looks amazing,” my dad tells them, and my mom beams as she places a basket of rolls on the table in front of him.

“Hartley showed me so many new tips and tricks. She promised to send me some recipes too.”

Hartley nods as she carries over some kind of green beans. I pull a chair out for her and she smiles at me as she sits down. I take the one next to her and try to ignore the way her leg brushes against mine.

Dinner goes surprisingly well. Maybe it's because the food is so delicious, or maybe it's because my mom is finally getting her wish. Me with a girlfriend.

My mom is on her best behavior, the food is delectable, and Hartley seems to be having a good time. Hartley tells us about growing up in Atlanta with her grams and about opening the bakery in town. My mom promises to come back and visit once the bakery is up and running.

We help her brainstorm names and my dad is all too happy to offer suggestions for which baked goods she should make and sell. Hartley promises to make some of them and bring them over for the next dinner. I think she wins my dad over right then and there.

My parents tell us stories about Florida and my mom spends at least an hour telling Hartley stories from when I was younger. I send up a silent prayer of thanks that all of the photo albums are at their place in Florida.

"Well, it's getting pretty late," I say, standing from the couch.

Hartley joins me and my mom shoots to her feet as well. For one brief second, it looks like she's going to try to convince Hartley to stay. I place my hand on Hartley's lower back and usher her closer to the door.

"I'm sure Hartley has a big day at the bakery tomorrow. We should let her go home and get some sleep," I say as I nudge her closer to the door.

My mom follows us all the way to the front door and gives Hartley a hug as she pulls on her parka and hat and mittens. When she doesn't let her go right away, I have a moment of panic that I'm going to have to drag them apart, but then my mom lets go. She beams at Hartley as I tug my own jacket on and grab my keys.

“We’ll see you soon, honey!” my mom calls after us as I help Hartley up into my truck.

“Bye, Mrs. Grove,” she calls back and I hurry to get into the truck and back out of the drive.

“That wasn’t so bad.”

I groan, banging my head on the headrest. Hartley laughs at that.

“No, really! I really like your parents. Your mom is hilarious.”

“Well, she certainly loves you,” I say as I pull up outside of the bakery. “I’ll walk you up,” I tell her as I shut the car off and jog around to help her out of the passenger side.

The night is clear but even though it’s not snowing, it’s still below freezing out. We hurry up the stairs and I wait as Hartley digs her keys out of her pocket and unlocks the door.

“Did you want to come in?” she asks me and I’m not sure what to say.

“Uh, sure,” I say awkwardly.

I follow her inside and watch as she takes off her jacket and winter wear and hangs it up on the hooks by the door.

“Did you want something to eat? I’ve got a bunch of baked goods. I meant to bring some over for dessert tonight, but I forgot all about it.”

“I can take some back with me, if you want.”

“Great! I’m starting to lose counter space with all of this lying around.”

I help Hartley package up some of the cookies, brownies, and cupcakes that are stored in Tupperware all over the place. I try to sneak a few cookies, but I know that Hartley sees me. She just smiles to herself and stuffs some more cookies into the container.

“They’re good. Your place is going to be a huge success. Nothing left but crumbs.”

“Thanks,” she says shyly.

“Have you figured out a name yet? Did our brainstorming session help?” I ask her as I shove another cookie into my mouth.

“No, not yet. I’m narrowing it down though. I think,” she says with a soft laugh.

“If you need any more help, just let me know.”

“Thanks. I might take you up on that,” she says sweetly.

Her accent makes everything that she says sound like honey and hot tea. It slides over me, coating my skin, filling me with a sense of ease.

“Do you think it worked?” Hartley asks, leaning against the counter.

“Do I think what worked?”

“Tonight. Do you think they believe that we’re really together? Is there anything that we should do at the wedding or at the other dinner later this week?”

I try to think if I saw any suspicion on either of my parents’ faces, but they both just seemed happy and excited.

“No, I think they believed it.”

Hartley nods, glancing down at her shoes.

“Maybe... maybe we should touch more? Or kiss?” I say.

As soon as the words leave my mouth, I wonder where the hell they came from. I need to get out of here before I embarrass myself further.

“I’ll let you know if they say anything about it when I get home. See you later,” I say, practically bolting for the door.

“Thanks for the ride home,” Hartley says, following me back to the door.

“No problem,” I say as I grab the doorknob.

Something makes me pause though and before I can second guess things, I lean down and brush my lips gently against hers.

The kiss is barely a whisper, there one second and gone the next. It shouldn't be a big deal, but for some reason, it feels monumental to me.

I don't say anything else, just pull the door open and hurry down the stairs and back to the safety of my truck. It isn't until I've started the truck and started to pull away from the curb that I realize that I left the Tupperware of desserts back in Hartley's place.

FIFTEEN



Hartley

ELI PICKS me up the next night around the same time. He had messaged me earlier letting me know that his mom had invited Patrick, Brennan, and me over and that she wasn't taking no for an answer.

Part of me had been excited. I actually liked Susan and Frank and I'm excited to spend more time with both of them. Plus, Brennan will be here and I love hanging out with that little boy. Mostly though, I'm just looking forward to spending some more time with Eli.

That thought is also what has me worried.

I know that when we started this, we both agreed that we weren't looking for a relationship, but my feelings are starting to change. Or maybe they already have changed. How do I broach that subject with him though? What happens if his feelings haven't changed? How awkward would that make the rest of the week?

"What's in the bag?" Eli asks as he helps me up into his truck.

"Some groceries for tonight. We're making lasagna. I thought that was a good idea since Brennan seems to like pasta so much. I thought little kids were supposed to be picky eaters and I wanted to make sure that we had something that he would eat."

“I think Brennan eats pretty much anything. Patrick told me that he’s been really excited about cooking now. Patrick said that he ordered some kids cookbooks so they can cook dinner and stuff together now.”

“That’s so cool! I love that he enjoys it. I feel like I brought someone over to the dark side. Soon he’ll be making soufflés and asking for a KitchenAid Mixer for Christmas.”

Eli laughs at that, grinning as he pulls into his driveway. There’s a fancy looking SUV already parked there which I assume is Patrick’s car.

“Before we go in there,” I say, stopping Eli before he can get out of the truck. “What does Patrick know? About us?” I clarify.

“He knows this is fake,” Eli says and even though I know that it shouldn’t, those words still cause an ache to for in my chest.

“He won’t say anything,” Eli assures me.

“Good, good,” I say, turning forward.

I’m about to get out of the truck when my eyes snag on Susan. She’s spying on us from the front window and I giggle when I see her try to duck back behind the curtain. I can still see her peering out though.

I nudge Eli, nodding toward the window and he rolls his eyes.

“She’s acting like I’m a teenager sneaking home with my date,” he groans.

“I think it’s cute,” I say, trying to hide my giggles.

Eli glares at me, turning in his seat to face me.

“Yeah, I’m sure that it’s really funny when it’s not happening to you.”

“It is! It really is,” I say, letting the giggles slip out.

“What do we do now? We’ve been sitting out here for too long with her watching,” Eli says, trying not to look to where Susan is still watching us.

“I think your dad just joined her,” I point out.

“Oh my god,” Eli groans, resting his head on the steering wheel.

“Don’t do that! They’re going to think that I’m breaking up with you or something!” I say, grabbing his arm and pulling him upright. “Come here,” I order, tugging him toward me.

“Why?” he asks, his voice low and husky as he inches closer to me.

“For this,” I whisper, closing the distance between our lips and slipping my tongue past his lips.

Eli groans low in his throat, his hands tangling in my hair. He knocks my hat off, but neither of us care. His tongue tangles with mine and I want to climb over the center console and into his lap. I want to feel him pressed against me.

Eli shifts, facing me more and his elbow bangs off the steering wheel. The horn blares shortly and Eli and I both jerk apart at the sound. The windows are fogged up and we’re both breathing heavily as we watch each other.

My lips feel puffy and I’m sure that they’re swollen and red. My fingers are still tangled in the stiff material of Eli’s jacket and my hair is still wrapped in Eli’s hands.

It’s starting to get chilly in the truck cab and I know that we put on a good enough show and we should go inside now, but neither one of us moves.

In fact, Eli’s hands tighten in my hair, his fingers gently pulling the strands. My scalp lights up at the contact and I moan softly. That sound is all it takes to have us wrapped around each other again.

Our lips connect and Eli groans. I’m practically climbing over the center console to get closer to him when there’s a knock on the driver’s side window.

Eli growls as he reluctantly pulls back. We both turn to see Patrick standing there, grinning at us.

“Hey, you two!” he greets us as we clamber out of the truck.

It takes me a second to right my clothes and smooth my hair out. I meet Eli and Patrick in front of the truck, and Eli takes my hand like it's the most natural thing in the world.

“Just a quick reminder that there is a kid in here. Let's try to keep all of the kissing and touching PG, alright?” Patrick asks with a laugh over his shoulder as he heads inside.

Brennan runs up to us as soon as we step inside. He wraps his thin arms around Eli's legs, grinning up at him, and my heart melts at the love I can see on the little boy's face. Eli bends down, scooping Brennan up in his arms.

I take off my coat and hat and hang them on the rack by the door as Brennan tells Eli and me all about the recipes that he's found and how Patrick got him his own measuring cup and spatula. He's so proud about it all and I love that I was able to help him find something that he seems to love so much.

“Yeah, we'll need to get together with Hartley and get a list of some things that we'll need to cook,” Patrick says as he comes back into the room with a glass of water.

“Of course! Maybe we can get together once a week or something and make dinner together. I can show you all of the tips and tricks that I know,” I offer and Brennan perks up.

“Really?” he asks, bouncing slightly.

“Sure! As long as it's alright with Patrick,” I tell him.

“Absolutely,” Patrick says with an easy grin.

Susan comes out of the kitchen then and takes the bag of groceries that Eli set on the table by the front door.

“Are you going to help us make dinner, Brennan?” Susan asks and Brennan nods quickly.

“Let's go wash our hands and get started,” I tell him, and I have to laugh when I see him bolt into the kitchen.

I help Brennan wash his hands and then show him how to make lasagna. Susan helps us take the lasagna out of the oven before she goes to set the table. Brennan helps me with the garlic bread and I smile when he insists on doing it all himself.

“You did really good, buddy,” I tell him as I slide the tray into the oven.

“Yeah?” he asks, leaning against the counter next to me.

“Yeah! I remember learning to do this with my grams when I was like *way* older than you! You’re already ahead of the game.”

“Patrick said that you went to school to cook,” Brennan asks as Eli comes in to check on us.

“I did. I learned how to do a bunch of stuff, but my specialty is baked goods. I can make croissants and any dessert that you want,” I brag and Brennan’s eyes go wide.

“I want to do that,” he whispers shyly and I smile at him.

“Stick with me, kid. I’ll teach you everything that I know.”

Brennan grins up at me and I hold my hand out for him to high five.

The oven timer goes off a second later and I send Brennan ahead to wash his hands before dinner as I pull the bread out and cut it.

“Smells great,” Eli says, coming to stand beside me.

“Thanks. You should tell Brennan that though. He did most of the work.”

“I bet,” he says, stepping closer.

I look up into his eyes and my breath catches in his throat. His eyes are heated, filled with something that I’ve only seen right before we kiss.

“Eli,” I whisper, stepping closer to him.

My lips start to tingle and it feels like we’re two magnets being drawn closer to each other. It feels like us kissing is inevitable.

Eli steps closer, closing the distance between us and I tilt my chin up, offering my lips to him. He leans down and then leans down some more. Our lips are a breath away from meeting when Brennan comes back into the kitchen.

“Can I carry the bread in, Hartley?” he asks and Eli and I jerk apart.

“Of course you can,” I tell him, passing him the bread basket and watching as he skips into the dining room.

“We should go eat,” Eli says, his voice a little gruff and I can only nod as he turns and heads into the kitchen.

What the hell was that about?

I follow Eli into the dining room and take the seat next to him.

“This looks so good,” Susan gushes to Brennan and I smile when I see the way the little boy perks up.

I help Brennan fill his plate with food and compliment him on how good everything turned out.

“You’ll have to ask for some more cooking stuff for your birthday or Christmas,” Susan says with a wink.

Brennan looks to Patrick and I have a feeling that Brennan will be getting more kitchen stuff before then. I think Patrick would do anything to make Brennan happy.

“What did you get for Christmas this year?” Susan asks him and I listen as he tells us about some toy from a kid’s show that I’ve never even heard of before.

“Did you have lots of family come in?” she asks him, leaning closer to his chair.

Brennan gets a sad look on his face and stares down at his plate.

“It’s just us, Mrs. Grove,” Patrick says quietly.

“Oh, I’m sorry, dear. Well, you can join us for all of the holidays then. You too of course, Hartley.”

“Thanks, Mrs. Grove. That sounds really nice,” I say with a smile.

Eli gets a weird look on his face when I say that, like he’s wondering if I’m being honest.

Should I not have said that? Maybe he doesn't want his mom to get her hopes up for something that is close to a year away?

“We’ll have to buy the biggest ham we can find. And we can make mashed potatoes and yams, green bean casserole of course and what else? What did you usually make, Hartley? Any special traditions?” Susan asks and Eli reaches under the table, squeezing my hand.

I know that he’s worried that I’ll be upset since I lost Grams right before Christmas. I wait to see if the familiar sharp stab of grief that comes whenever I think of Grams to come, but it doesn’t. Instead, it’s more like a dull ache.

“We used to make soup. It was just my grams and me and she always said that she was so sick of making turkey and ham and all of the fixings, so we would make a bunch of different kinds of soup. We’d have to borrow crockpots and ladles from all of our neighbors,” I tell Susan with a soft smile.

“Most of our neighbors were older and all alone so we’d invite them over to eat and say that it was the least we could do to pay them back. We used to make bread and rolls and a whole table full of desserts and we’d all crowd into our tiny living room to eat. It was a mess,” I say, struggling to hold in the laugh. “But it was fun. Plus, this way everyone got to go home with some leftovers and no one was alone.”

“That sounds lovely! I’m always so sick of turkey and ham by then too. We should try that this year. What do you think, honey?” Susan asks, turning to look at her husband.

“What kind of soup?” Frank asks, a doubtful look on his face.

I laugh and start telling them about all of the kinds that we could make. Brennan is hanging off my every word and I have a feeling that Patrick is going to be eating nothing but soup for the next couple of weeks.

As we finish up dinner, a thought hits me.

I’m looking forward to spending Christmas with all of these people.

SIXTEEN



Elijah

“SHE’S AWESOME, MAN,” Patrick says as soon as I get back from dropping Hartley off at home.

“I know,” I tell him as I help my mom clean up the dishes from dinner.

“She is! I’m so glad that you two met. You make such a cute couple too. And did you see the way that she was with little Brennan?” my mom asks as she gazes over to where Brennan is fast asleep on the couch.

“We’re not having kids, Mom,” I interject before she can go too far down that road.

“Well, not right now, of course, but I’m sure you two will have some one day. Oh, I can just imagine how cute they’ll be. Can you picture it, Frank? Our grandbabies?” she asks, holding her hands to her chest.

“Sure can,” my dad says, shooting a smirk my way.

“You two are getting way ahead of yourselves,” I say as Patrick chuckles from where he’s standing, leaning against the kitchen table.

“We just like her, dear. You two are so cute together and she’s such a sweetheart. She’s a phenomenal cook too! That bakery of hers is going to be huge. You don’t want to come

home and eat that food every day?” my mom asks and I instantly know that answer.

“Yeah, I do,” I whisper to myself but my mom hears.

“Have you thought about getting her a ring?”

“MOM!”

“I’m just saying. When you know, you know. Look at your father and me,” she says, aiming a loving look over her shoulder at my dad. “You two were pretty hot and heavy in your truck. I didn’t think you two were ever going to come in.”

“Mom, I’m begging you. Please stop,” I plead.

How come the floor never opens up and swallows you whole when you want it to?

“I think it’s a great idea,” Patrick pipes in and I shoot him a warning look.

“I knew that I liked you,” my mom whispers to him, but I pretend not to have heard.

“You can’t tell me that you don’t care for Hartley, dear. I’m your mother and I can see that way you look at her. Your father noticed too,” she says and my dad nods obediently as he pokes his head in the fridge, looking for the last of the chocolate cream pie that Hartley brought over for dessert.

“I don’t like her that much,” I say, but there’s no force behind the words.

“Not yet,” my mom says quietly.

I don’t think I like her. Not like that, I mean. I’ve only known her like two weeks and people don’t fall in like that fast. Definitely not two people who don’t even want a relationship. I just... like her. Like a friend. There is a huge difference between like as a friend and liking a girlfriend.

Then why did you kiss her? Three times.

I do my best to ignore that annoying voice in the back of my head.

It wasn't for your fake relationship. There wasn't anyone around to see. So that means that you did it because you wanted to. Because you liked kissing her and holding her hand.

I need a distraction.

I help Patrick get Brennan strapped into his seat in the car. The kid never even wakes up and I smile as I gently close the door.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Patrick asks, leaning against the driver’s door.

“Talk about what?”

“You know what. What’s going on with you and Hartley?”

“Nothing. It’s just pretend. You know that.”

“Yeah, maybe I would have believed that before, but I saw you two going at it in the car. I saw the way that you were looking at her all throughout dinner. You like her,” he says gently and I look anywhere but at him.

“We agreed it would just be pretend. Neither one of us is looking for a relationship,” I say quietly.

The words taste like poison now. *How could I be so stupid? How could I agree to all of this?*

“Maybe that’s how you started, but I don’t think that either of you wants that anymore. She was looking at you too. Sneaking glances when she thought that no one was looking and all that. She kissed you in the truck too,” Patrick reminds me but I shake that off.

“She was just doing that because my mom was watching us,” I tell him.

“*Sure.* I’m telling you, man. She’s into you. You should tell her that you don’t want to pretend anymore.”

“And what happens when she says no?” I ask, humoring him and his theory.

“She won’t,” Patrick says with such conviction that I almost believe him.

“She will. What woman wants to date the town freak? The giant?”

“Uh, *Hartley*,” he stresses, looking at me like I’m insane. “Besides, Eli, you’re not the town freak,” Patrick says gently, worry etched into every line of his face.

“You should get going. It’s freezing out here,” I tell him, taking a step toward the house.

“You’re a good guy, Eli. *Hartley* sees that. You just need to too,” Patrick says before he climbs behind the wheel, waves once, and backs out of the drive.

I watch him go until his taillights disappear before I head back inside.

There’s no relief inside the house either. My mom is talking about wedding rings and funny proposals that she’s seen on Pinterest. My head is pounding by the time we all head to bed and I try to clear my thoughts and go to sleep.

I can’t get what Patrick said out of my head though. His words stay with me all night.

SEVENTEEN



Hartley

I TURN SIDEWAYS, checking out my reflection in the bathroom mirror. It's the night of the wedding and I just finished getting dressed. The little black dress that was hanging in the back of my closet fits snugger than I remembered but it still looks good on me.

My bra is digging into me but it was the only strapless bra that I owned. I'm starting to see why I stopped wearing this dress. I try to adjust it, but the wire just digs into my skin more. I wince, studying myself in the mirror closer.

I bet I could go without a bra. This dress is so tight anyway. Who would even be able to tell?

I debate it for another second, but the clasp starts to dig into my back and makes up my mind for me. I have to wiggle and shimmy to get the bodice down enough for me to undo the bra and pull it out. A knock sounds at the door and I grunt, struggling with the dress.

"Just a second!" I call out.

More wiggling and dancing around ensues as I make my way toward the front door. I've just got my dress righted again when Eli walks in.

"Ready to go?" he asks, looking me over.

His eyes snag on my bodice and I glance down sharply.

“Is it obvious?” I ask, panicked.

I can't see anything out of place, but then again, my vantage point isn't great.

“Is what obvious?” Eli asks, stepping closer to me and closing the front door behind him.

“That I'm not wearing a bra! Can you tell?” I ask as I tug self-consciously on the bodice of my dress. “The strapless bra was killing me so I took it off. I didn't think it was obvious.”

“Uh...” Eli stammers and he looks a bit like a deer trapped in headlights.

“Why were you staring at them?”

“I wasn't!”

“I saw you!” I shout back, my cheeks flaming.

“You've got great tits. That's it. It's not obvious,” he says, holding his hands up in surrender.

His cheeks are a bright shade of pink and his eyes keep bouncing around the room, looking anywhere but at me.

“Really?” I ask, surprised but pleased.

“This feels like a trap,” he groans and I giggle.

“Can you really not tell? 'Cause I don't want to embarrass myself in front of your whole family.”

“You can't tell,” he reassures me, grabbing my coat and holding it out to me.

I slip my arms into the sleeves and turn around to smile at him.

“Thanks. Are you going to zip it too?” I ask cheekily.

“Fuck,” Eli whispers a second before his lips land on mine.

“Not my hair,” I yell against his mouth and he jerks back. “No! Come back! Just don't mess up my hair. It took me an hour.”

My fingers grab the collar of his coat and I tug him toward me, stepping on his boots to try to get closer to him. His lips

mold against mine and I moan, opening for him.

He tastes like mint and the cold. His hands land on my hips and his fingers dig in there.

“You’re gorgeous, Hartley,” Eli whispers against my mouth.

“Thank you,” I whisper back, slowly opening my eyes open to stare up at him. “You’re not so bad yourself.”

He smiles slightly at that.

“We should get going.”

“Right,” I say, blinking out of the spell that his kisses always put on me.

My black clutch and a pair of heels are waiting by the front door, along with my hat and mittens. I hurry to tug them and my boots on before I take Eli’s hand and follow after him down the stairs and over to his truck,

Eli is just driving me, having already dropped his parents off this morning. Susan wanted to help set up and be there in case anything went wrong, so he dropped them off bright and early this morning.

“So tell me about your family. The ones that I haven’t met,” I say as Eli climbs into the truck beside me.

We spend the whole hour-long drive talking about his family, his cousin who is getting married, and about the work that I’ve been doing on the bakery. I laugh as he tells me a story from one summer when he was just a kid and his cousin and him got stuck in a tree. They had dared each other to see who could climb the highest and then had been too afraid to climb back down.

We pull up outside of the church and I see that it’s been decorated. There’s a hall next door and Eli points it out, explaining that the reception will be held there afterward as I tug off my boots and put my heels on.

We’re one of the last guests to arrive and I take Eli’s hand as we scramble out of the truck and hurry inside. Susan and

Frank are sitting close to the front and they wave us over, scooting over in the pew to make room for us.

The ceremony starts a few minutes later and I stand with everyone else to watch the bride walk down the aisle.

She looks so happy.

I can't remember the last wedding that I went to. Probably when I was just a kid, but I don't remember the bride at that one looking this ecstatic. She steps forward, sliding her hand into her soon-to-be husband's and he smiles down at her like she's his whole world.

My heart thunders in my chest. It's so loud that I can hear it in my ears and I wonder if the rest of the church can too.

Eli's hand lands on my hip and he squeezes slightly. I glance back at him as we take our seats once more.

"You alright?" he whispers in my ear as the priest starts the ceremony.

"Yeah," I whisper back, but there's no missing the emotion in my voice.

"Hartley," Eli whispers and I look up into his eyes.

"I want that," I admit, my eyes searching his face. "I just want to be that happy."

"You will be," he whispers back.

He wraps his arm around my shoulder and tugs me tight against his side.

"I'll make sure of it," he promises and my heart flips over in my chest.

The ceremony doesn't last long and soon we're standing and clapping as the priest introduces them as Mr. and Mrs. Hurst. We cheer as they head back down the aisle and I grin wider when Eli tangles his fingers with mine.

"Let's hurry next door," Susan leans over to say. "I'm starving and I know that they set out some appetizers."

We file down the aisle and head next door. Eli's hand tightens on mine when I skid on some ice in my high heels. When it happens again, he swoops me up in his arms and hurries to catch up with his parents.

"I think only the groom is supposed to carry someone like this today," I joke and Eli rolls his eyes.

"Can't have you slipping and breaking your neck in those ridiculous shoes."

"You don't like my shoes?" I ask, pretending to pout.

"I've never seen anything sexier."

"What about my tits?" I whisper in his ears and he closes his eyes like he's in pain.

"Not here, sweets," he whispers as he sets me back on my feet outside the reception hall doors.

We stand in line with his parents, stacking our little plates with fruit, cheese, and crackers. Eli and Frank head off to fetch us some drinks and I head off with Susan to find our table.

"What a beautiful ceremony. Wasn't it a beautiful ceremony, Hartley?" she asks me as soon as I sit down next to her and I nod.

"It was lovely."

Susan pops a grape into her mouth and looks around, checking our surroundings before she leans in and whispers, "You'll serve better appetizers at your wedding, right?"

I laugh, trying to cover it with a cough when we get some curious looks from people nearby.

"Oh, absolutely. I'd serve more finger foods. Maybe some bacon-wrapped scallops. Brennan could make macaroni and cheese bites."

"Oh, that sounds delicious. I'll have to make sure that Eli proposes to you soon," she whispers with a wink before she leans back in her seat.

Frank and Eli join us a moment later, and I'm distracted from her words. We talk about the ceremony and how pretty

the bride's dress was and the color of the bridesmaid's dresses as we finish our appetizers.

Susan and Frank excuse themselves to go mingle and I turn to Eli.

"Should we mingle too?" I ask him but he shakes his head.

The decision is made for us though when some of Eli's uncles and cousins join us at our table. Eli introduces me to everyone and I sip my glass of wine as I watch them all catch up.

The bride and groom come in a little while later and I clap with everyone else and they make their way to the head table where the bridal party is already sitting. Susan and Frank rejoin us at the table and the food starts to come out.

"I guessed and said that the chicken was okay," Eli leans over to tell me and I nod.

"Sounds good. I'm starving."

We eat dinner and Susan spends much of the meal asking me what I would do differently for the food and then introducing me as Eli's girlfriend to anyone who will listen.

By the time the music kicks on and the dancing begins, I think Eli is relieved. We watch the bride and groom have their first dance before other guests join them on the dance floor.

"Did you want to dance?" I ask Eli when it's just the two of us alone at the table once more.

I don't expect him to say yes. Eli doesn't seem like the dancing type. He's practically hiding at our table, but he surprises me by standing and offering me his hand.

A slow song starts as we reach the edge of the dance floor and I grin up at him.

"I promise not to step on your toes," I joke as I place my hands on his shoulders.

Eli's hands land on my waist and pull me closer to him. We're both quiet as the music plays and we sway along.

“Did I tell you that you look beautiful tonight?” Eli asks once the song has ended.

“You told me I’m beautiful. I think that counts,” I tease him.

“You look beautiful, Hartley.”

“Thanks, Eli,” I whisper back, straightening out his tie.

“Your hair looks pretty like that,” he says, brushing a few loose strands away from my face.

“Thank you,” I whisper back, stepping closer to him.

Our bodies brush up against one another and I gasp softly as I feel his arousal rub against my stomach.

“Hey, Hartley?” Eli asks.

“Yeah?”

“I really want to mess up your hair now.”

EIGHTEEN



Elijah

I BARELY REMEMBER DRIVING Hartley back to her apartment. One minute we were on the dance floor and I was whispering that I wanted to mess up her hair and the next we were telling my parents goodnight and practically running for the door.

I drive as fast as I possibly can all the way back to Honey Peak. Hartley does her best to drive me out of my mind. She leans across the center console and whispers dirty words in my ear. She kisses trails up and down my neck, nibbling on my skin, on the ear of my lobe, until I'm sure that my zipper is permanently imprinted along the length of my cock.

The truck wheels squeal as I slam on the brakes outside of her place. I rip my seat belt off and hurry to help Hartley out of the truck. She grabs my hand, interlacing our fingers, and giggling as she leads me up the steps to her apartment.

We crash through the door as soon as she has it unlocked. My hands are tangled in her hair, messing it up just like I said I would.

I pull her closer to me, smothering her mouth with mine as we stumble our way toward her bedroom. She bumps into the couch and I know that we should pull apart and just run for the bed, but I can't pull my mouth off of hers.

She moans and opens for me. I slip my tongue inside, tracing every ridge and recess of her mouth as I do my best to commit her taste to memory.

We reach the bedroom and fall down onto the mattress together. Hartley's hands land on my shoulders and she pushes me onto my back before she moves to straddle me. My hands grip her lush ass and I pull her roughly against me, rubbing her against the ridge of my dick in my pants.

I'm so hard right now that I'm sure my cock is about to rip through my zipper. I can feel her hot center rubbing and down my length through the thin material of her dress. With each pass of her pussy along my dick, I grow harder, until it feels like if I don't get inside of her, I'll explode.

Hartley moans, throwing her head back and tipping her face up to the ceiling as she grinds against me. I'm pretty sure that all of the blood in my body has now drained to my dick. I need to come so badly.

My hands fumble with the zipper on the back of her dress and together we pull it over her head, exposing her ripe tits. My hands cup them as soon as they're bared to my gaze and Hartley arches her back, pushing them farther into my palms.

She cries out as I lean forward, taking a nipple between my lips and sucking hard.

"You're so fucking pretty. So pretty and so sweet," I moan against her plump flesh.

My lips wrap around the stiff peak of her nipple and I tongue the bud until Hartley is a whimpering, quivering mess. She sags forward and I catch her, rolling her beneath me and taking her nipple back in my mouth.

"Eli," Hartley says, her tone pleading and I know that she needs more.

It takes effort, but I pull my mouth away from her breasts and kiss my way down her body. Hartley's legs are shaking and her whole body seems to vibrate as I settle between her curvy thighs.

Her pussy lips part, allowing me to see all of her. She's so wet and pink. She's tiny, and I wonder how I'm ever going to be able to fit inside of her. My cock leaks at the thought of trying, and I do my best to stop from humping the bed beneath me.

My mouth waters at the sight of her pale pink flesh spread out before me, and I know I need to taste her. I need to see if she's as sweet as I've been imagining.

I dip my head, bringing me eye level with her dripping core. I can't wait another second. I lick a path up her center, moaning as I lap up her sweet sugar. I don't want to miss a drop.

I bury my face in her sweet pussy, getting lost in her scent and taste. Hartley's thighs clamp down around my ears as I lick her, sucking her clit into my mouth and rolling my tongue over the bundle of nerves.

"Eli!" Hartley cries out, her head thrashing on the pillow as she gets closer and closer to her first orgasm. "Don't stop!" she begs me, and I double my efforts, driving her higher and higher.

As if I could.

I reach up, cupping her full breasts in my hands and rolling the peaks as I continue to lick her closer and closer to her release.

Her orgasm hits her suddenly. She screams, her whole body shaking as she comes against my lips and face.

I lick her through her peak, making sure to wring out every ounce of pleasure until she collapses back breathless on the bed.

Her eyes are dazed with lust and passion, and pride fills me at being the one to put that look on her face.

"Your turn," she says, reaching for my belt buckle, but I stop her before she gets there.

"If you touch me right now, I'm going to embarrass myself."

Hartley looks confused for a second before recognition dawns in her eyes.

“Ohhh.”

“Yeah,” I say as I stand from the bed and strip off my clothes.

I almost rip off a few buttons in my hurry to get my clothes off, but soon I’m naked and crawling back on the bed to where Hartley is still sprawled.

I slip between her spread thighs. My cock rubs along her skin, the inside of her thighs already drenched and glistening for me.

“Are you ready for me?” I ask, my voice coming out deep and husky.

“God, yes,” she says, hooking her heels around my hips and trying to pull me forward.

My cock lines up with her opening and I meet her dark gaze as I slowly push into her. Her pussy is so slick and hot and it clenches around the head of my cock as I sink another inch into her. She’s so tight that it’s almost painful but that doesn’t stop me.

I’m about halfway when I encounter some resistance. I frown, not realizing what it is, and thrust forward, filling her completely and popping her cherry in the process.

She cries out as I stuff her full and I feel her pussy squeeze my dick, almost to the point of pain.

“Hartley, sweets, you should have told me,” I say as I lean forward onto my forearms and pepper kisses all over her face.

I do my best to distract her from the pain, staying perfectly still even though the pressure in my cock has me close to passing out.

When her grip on my cock finally eases a little, I start to move. It’s slow and tentative at first. I want to make sure that she’s used to me filling her before I take her harder.

Hartley sucks in a sharp intake of breath and I rest my head against her chest, gritting my teeth as I try to stop from coming already. My lips find her nipple again and I suckle on one and then the other as Hartley adjusts to my size.

Sweat breaks out on my forehead and I mutter a curse as I do my best to take things slow. When her hips start to move with mine, begging for me to give it to her harder, faster, I snap.

“Oh god, Eli!” Hartley cries out as I take up a hard, punishing rhythm.

I know that I should go slower, get her used to me stretching her like this, but my control snapped as soon as I sank inside her.

Hartley’s moans grow louder until it’s like a symphony just for my ears.

I can already feel fireworks starting at the base of my spine. My balls grow heavy with seed and I know that I’m close to coming already. I need to make this good for her though.

I reach between us, my fingers finding her clit and rubbing over the sensitive nub in short, tight circles. Hartley cries out at the contact, her pussy walls clenching and pulsing around my thick cock.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck,” I chant, closing my eyes tight.

“Don’t stop!”

“I don’t think that I could if I wanted,” I admit, my pace growing erratic.

If I see that look of pleasure on her face for another second, I’ll come before I can get her off.

“Eli,” Hartley cries out and it’s the only word on her tongue as she starts to come apart under me.

I bury myself deep inside of her as I find my own release.

“Sweets, fuck,” I grit out as my cock jerks and I come deep inside of her.

I kiss her softly, gently, as we both try to catch our breaths. I notice her wince when I pull out and I head into the bathroom to grab her a warm washcloth.

“That was...” she says, dazed.

“Incredible,” I supply and she nods.

I clean up the small traces of blood from the inside of her thighs.

“Do you want me to grab you anything?” I ask, suddenly feeling shy.

“No, just you.”

She holds out a hand to me, and I take it, sliding into bed beside her. My arms wrap around her without a second thought and I hold her tight against me as her breathing evens out.

Soon, I know that she’s asleep and I smile, burying my nose in her hair and breathing her in. She smells like me now and I like it.

I close my eyes and fall asleep with a smile on my face.

NINETEEN



Hartley

WELL, this is a mess.

I can't believe that I slept with Eli last night. Don't get me wrong, it was great sex, but what's going to happen between us now?

I don't have that much time to ponder it. Eli is supposed to be here soon to pick me up. We're having one last dinner with his parents before they leave tomorrow. It seems weird, but I'm more nervous now than I was before the first dinner that I had with his parents.

I'm kind of freaking out a little bit. Eli and I didn't talk about last night when he left this morning. He was in a hurry to head back to Great Falls to pick his parents up from his aunt and uncle's house.

I hadn't thought anything of his silence this morning, or even this afternoon, but his text half an hour ago seemed strange.

ELI: I'll be there in fifteen.

HE'S NOT REALLY a man of many words, but he's never been so... I don't know how to describe it. There's just

something almost cold about his message.

I'm probably just reading too much into it. You can't really get tone from text messages. I'm just anxious to see Eli and make sure that we're okay.

I want us to be okay.

He's probably just as freaked out as I am. I'll just act normal and I'm sure things will go back to normal.

My phone beeps with a new text and I frown when I see that it's Eli letting me know that he's outside. He's always come up here to get me, so why is he texting me this time?

He's probably just running late. Or maybe he wants to keep the truck warm since it's so cold outside.

I slip my parka on and grab my keys and phone before I head down the stairs. Eli's truck is idling by the curb out front and I jog over, opening the passenger door and hopping in before Eli can get out to get my door.

"It's freezing out!" I say, shivering and aiming the passenger side heat vents at me.

"Yeah, it's the wind," Eli says as he turns one of his vents my way too.

"Thanks," I say with a smile and he seems to relax.

See? He was just nervous about last night too. Just act like it was nothing and everything will go back to normal.

He tells me about seeing his aunt and uncle and having to dodge the usual questions about when he's getting married all day. I laugh at how tired he sounds by all of it and he glares at me.

"I also got some questions about where *we* disappeared to last night. Be prepared for my mom tonight," he warns and now it's my turn to groan.

When he pulls up outside his house, I stop him before he can get out.

"Should we talk about last night? Do we have a story or something that you already told them?" I ask.

He looks up at me, his dark blue eyes clashing with mine.

“I just let them assume that we went off to have sex,” he admits.

“We *did* go off to have sex,” I say with a giggle.

“Yeah, we did!” Eli says, holding his hand up for me to high five.

I slap my palm against his and laugh.

“Okay, just be coy and—”

“And avoid talking about sex with my parents at all costs,” Eli finishes.

“Agreed,” I say, holding out my pinky to him.

He hooks his around mine and we both lean in and kiss our fists at the same time.

“So, we’re alright?” I ask as we climb out of the truck.

“Yeah, we’re okay.”

I let Eli lead me into the house and I paste on a wide smile as I greet his parents. Susan bustles over and wraps me up in a bear hug.

His mom has surprised me and already made dinner for us.

“I thought that maybe the fancy chef would like a break for one night,” she says as she wraps her arm around my shoulder and gives me a tight squeeze.

“Thanks, Mrs. Grove. It smells delicious,” I tell her as she leads me over to the kitchen table.

The table is already set and there’s a roast with all of the fixings laid out in the middle of the table. Frank follows us into the dining room and gives me a quick hug before he makes a beeline for his chair. Susan sits down next to her husband, leaving Eli and me to sit across from them.

We all pile our plates with food and listen as Susan talks all through dinner. I don’t know how she manages to clear her plate and talk but she does. Susan tells us about the wedding decorations and food, as if we weren’t there at the wedding

too. She moves on to how the bridesmaids almost got into a fistfight when they went to catch the bouquet. She shares some gossip about who got drunk and made a fool of themselves and about how the maid of honor disappeared with one of the groomsmen for half an hour and came back all ruffled.

She gives us a knowing look after that story, and I can feel my face flush. Eli ducks his head, shoving half a roll into his mouth to avoid answering.

I listen and laugh at all of the appropriate parts, but Eli remains silent throughout the whole meal. I can tell that he's tired, and I'm sure that this isn't the first time today that he's heard all of these stories, so I don't think anything of it. I can tell that his parents are trying to figure out what's going on between us. His mom probably wants to ask me what happened last night and I promise myself that I'll try to avoid her for the rest of the night so I don't have to answer her questions.

That plan is quickly dashed.

"I'm going to take a look at the snowblower with Eli," Frank says as he carries his dishes over to the sink.

"Have fun," Susan says, clearing her own dishes.

I try to give Eli a warning look. *Don't leave me alone with her*, my eyes scream at him and he gives me a helpless look as his dad passes him his coat.

I HELP Susan clear the table and do the dishes while Frank heads outside to help Eli fix the snowblower in the garage. Susan waits until the garage door closes behind the guys before she pounces.

"Are you and Eli alright? You seemed a little quiet at dinner tonight?" she asks, studying my face for answers.

"I think we're both just tired. Too much excitement at the wedding last night," I say with a grin.

I'm hoping that bringing up the wedding helps distract her from what's happening between Eli and me. It doesn't work.

“Or maybe after the wedding,” she says with a knowing look and I blush again.

I shrug, trying to think of something to change the subject to.

“He’s never had much experience with women. I wasn’t sure that he was ever going to settle down,” she muses as we start to do the dishes.

He still hasn’t.

“He’s happy with you though. You have no idea what that means to me. To see him so happy.”

The back of my eyes start to itch and my throat starts to burn as I try to hold in the tears. I hate that I’ve been lying to these people. That they think that we’re a real couple when it was really all just some ruse.

“He’s going to mess up. He’s a man,” she says with a laugh and an eye roll. “Please, give him a chance to make it right. He needs you.”

Frank and Eli come back in then and save me from having to respond. Susan squeezes my hand as I hang up the dishtowel and I give her the best smile that I can manage. Eli gives me a look, silently asking if I’m alright. I give him a small nod.

Frank and Susan hug me goodbye. Their plane leaves really early tomorrow morning and they still need to pack, so they head off to do that as Eli and I bundle up and head back out to his truck.

The ride home is just as silent as the rest of the night. As the miles pass and we get closer and closer to my place, I start to get nervous. What the hell happens now? When his parents leave tomorrow, do we just never see each other again?

We’ve been getting along so well together. He’s my closest friend and confidante in this town. Hell, he’s the closest friend and confidante in the world. I don’t want to lose him.

Eli slows down and pulls over to the curb outside of my apartment. I unbuckle and have the passenger door open

before he comes to a full stop.

“I’ll see you later,” I say as I hop out. “Tell your parents I said goodbye again and that I hope that they have a good flight!”

Eli gives me a confused look as I slam the truck door closed and jog up the stairs to my apartment. I guess that was pretty jolting. I just didn’t want to sit in the truck and listen to his awkward goodbye.

I thought it would be easier if I just ripped the Band-Aid off but it still stings. I tried to make things less awkward for us, but I have a feeling that I’ve only made it worse.

I groan as I head into the bedroom to get ready for bed.

TWENTY



Elijah

“GOD, I’M AN IDIOT.”

I sit in my truck, idling outside of Hartley’s place. I’ve been sitting here for five minutes trying to figure out what the hell I should do. I don’t think that I’m going to figure it out in the next five minutes since I’ve been thinking about it all day.

Last night was incredible. Best night of my life. Even when I woke up with Hartley’s hair in my face and her elbow digging into my arm, it had still been great. Like a dream.

Then it had hit me.

What happens now? Was last night just a fluke for Hartley? Does she still not want a relationship? Would she want a friends with benefits thing instead? Jeez, why can’t I just be better with women?

I had gotten dressed quietly and been halfway through scribbling her a note when she had woken up. I wasn’t sure how to react, so I had just said that I had to go grab my parents and would see her later.

She had seemed normal. Maybe things were a little awkward or weird between us, but it’s hard to tell when she was still half asleep and I was bolting for the door. *Maybe I made it weird?*

My phone rings and I grab it, praying that it’s Hartley.

It's not.

"Hey, Patrick. What's up?" I ask as I stare up at Hartley's apartment.

None of the lights are on and my gut starts to churn. Is she alright?

"Hey, I'm just calling to check-in. Brennan has missed seeing you. How's your parents and Hartley? How was the wedding?"

"I slept with Hartley," I blurt out.

There's silence on the other end of the line and then I hear some shuffling.

"Okay, sorry, I had to take you off speakerphone. Thanks for that, by the way. Really looking forward to explaining what that means to Brennan later tonight," he says sarcastically and I wince.

"Sorry, man. I'm just freaking out here. We agreed to no relationships when we started this and she hasn't said that she wants to change that."

"But you do?"

"No. Well, I don't know. I really like her,. Besides you and Brennan, she's my closest friend," I say as I bang my head against the headrest.

"Then tell her. Swoop her up in your arms and confess your undying like for her. Girls love that."

"How would you know? You have less experience with women than me."

"And yet, I'm the one you turn to when you need advice."

"Point taken," I grumble.

"So, take my advice and tell her that you want this to be real."

"I don't want this to be real. I just don't want to lose my friend," I say quickly.

“Whatever you say, man. Just know that Hartley is a catch. She’s pretty, funny, kind, charming, patient, can cook—”

“Okay, I get it. She’s perfect and I’m me. What’s your point?”

“My point, is that there’s going to be other guys who man up and ask her out. Who can admit their feelings for her. Do you really want to watch her walk around town with some other guy?”

My stomach and fists clench just thinking about it.

“Hartley doesn’t want a relationship.”

“She might have said that, but I don’t think she means it. Not anymore.”

“She hasn’t said anything to me that makes me think that she’s changed her mind.”

Patrick sighs on the other end of the line and I glance back up at Hartley’s apartment door.

“Listen, Eli, Hartley doesn’t seem like the kind of girl to sleep with someone that she doesn’t have feelings for. Besides, I’ve seen the way she looks at you. It’s time for you to man up and get your girl. Just admit that you want her too.”

“I don’t,” I argue and he sighs again.

“Whatever you say. Now, I’m going to go explain to my nephew that you were just making a dumb adult joke. Good luck with whatever you decide to do!”

The line goes dead and I take a deep breath.

I glance back up to her apartment. All of the lights are still off and I wonder if something happened.

Maybe she slipped on the stairs?

My heart starts to race as a million different worst-case scenarios flash through my mind.

Before I can second guess myself, I turn the truck off and step out. I jog up the stairs, hesitating for just a second before I

raise my fist and knock on the door. When she doesn't come to the door after a minute, I try again.

"Hartley? It's me. Are you alright?" I ask when I don't hear any movement from inside the apartment.

There's still no answer and my heart starts to race. Is she hurt?

I try the doorknob. It's unlocked, so I push the door open and step inside.

"Hartley?" I call.

All of the lights are off and I reach over, flipping the one in the living room on. Hartley isn't in the living room or kitchen and I head toward the bedroom, calling her name again.

"Hartley?" I call as I step into her bedroom.

The bed is still mussed from last night and my cock starts to harden at the memory.

The bathroom door is slightly open and I step toward it. My footsteps falter when I hear the water running in the shower and I hesitate, wondering if I should just leave or if I should stay and talk to her.

The water turns off and Hartley steps out, her eyes meeting mine in the crack of the door.

"Eli?" she asks as she grabs a towel and wraps it around her dripping body. "Are you okay?" she asks as she opens the door and joins me in the bedroom.

"Hartley, I like you. You've become my friend, and I just wanted to make sure that we're okay. I don't have many friends and I don't want to lose you."

That gets her attention. She stares up at me wide-eyed, her face clear of makeup, and her dark hair plastered to her head, the ends dripping water droplets onto her shoulders. I have to tear my gaze away from watching one of the drops run down her body. She should look like a drowned rat, but she's still beautiful.

“I don’t want to lose you either. We’re alright. I think we both just got nervous since your parents are leaving tomorrow and it means the end of our deal. I was afraid that you were just going to start acting like you had never even met me,” she confesses.

“I would never do that,” I promise her.

She steps forward and wraps her arms around my waist, resting her head against my chest. I wrap my arms around her back and hold her close, not caring that she’s getting the front of my clothes all wet. Having her in my arms feels right and helps to calm any of the remaining doubts and worries that had been swirling around in my head.

“Okay,” she says after a minute, pulling back so that she can look up at me. “The deal is over. From now on, we’re just friends. No rules,” she says, holding out her hand and I slip mine into it, shaking once.

“Deal,” I say, teasing her, and she rolls her eyes.

“I should get home and check on my parents. I’ll see you tomorrow?” I ask as I take a step past her.

“Sounds good,” she says, stepping forward to hug me goodbye.

Her towel starts to slip and my cock hardens further in my pants.

“Hartley,” I whisper, her name sounding like a prayer and a plea on my lips.

My hands reach for her, wrapping around her waist and dragging her tight against me at the same time that Hartley wraps her arms around my neck, shifting closer to me as her lips inch closer to mine.

“What about your parents?” she teases and I groan.

“Let’s not talk about my parents right now,” I suggest and she shrugs.

“Why not? What did you want to do instead?” she kids me.

“Smartass.”

Hartley grins, her eyes bright and mischievous until my hands tangle in her hair and angle her head so that my mouth can capture hers. Her eyes darken and she shifts even closer in my arms as our lips finally meet.

It's easy to get lost in her. In the taste and feel of her beneath my fingertips. In the sounds she makes when I shift closer or tangle my tongue with hers in a certain way.

Soon, just holding her to me isn't good enough and I back her up until we hit the bed.

We're still wrapped around each other, each of us sighing as we peel our clothes off. I kiss lower, capturing a pert nipple in my mouth and sucking softly. Hartley moans above me, her cries starting slow and growing as I kiss lower, settling between her legs.

She's drenched for me but I still lick her to one orgasm, wanting her taste on my lips and her moans in my ears when I finally enter her. It doesn't take long before her thighs are clamped around my ears, her head thrown back on the pillow, as she comes around my fingers.

I kiss my way back up her body, licking a path up her neck and my cock finds her snug opening. We both sigh as I enter her, moaning together as I rock into her at the same slow, maddening pace.

She's still so tight and every time that I sink back into her, I swear my eyes roll back in my head.

"Eli," Hartley breathes out, her heels digging into my ass as she wraps her legs around me. "More," she pleads and I'm powerless to deny her.

My pace picks up, our breaths coming in harsh pants as our bodies move together. Sweat coats our bodies, easing our movements. When Hartley's legs start to shake, I know that she's close.

I look down, meeting her eyes, our gazes holding as we both fly over the edge.

"Hartley, Hartley, Hartley."

I'm not even aware that I'm chanting her name like some kind of talisman as we both reach our peaks.

Hartley's eyes are heavy, her cheeks flushed, and I know that she must be tired. I'm tired too, but when she gives me the most beautiful smile, suddenly, I'm ready for round two.

She yawns, reaching down to tug the blankets that got tangled and bunched up by our feet higher and I move closer to her, letting her cuddle into my side and curl around me as we both close our eyes and finally find sleep.

TWENTY-ONE



Hartley

“YEAH, it’s going to go right under those lights,” I tell one of the workers who showed up first thing this morning to set up the display cases in the bakery.

I watch as they set up the first case, double-checking that it’s in the right spot. There are three cases being set up, two up front by the register and one along the wall. I pushed all of the tables and chairs up along the opposite wall so that they wouldn’t be in the way.

They bring in the second display case and line it up with the first one. I love seeing them in here. It feels more real now. With all of the work that I’ve been doing, and all of the time that I’ve been spending with Eli and his family and friends, I seem to have lost track of time.

I love knowing that this place will be open soon though. I love seeing Grams’ and my dream finally come true. Some days, when I look around the bakery, I swear it’s like I can feel her here with me. I think she would love this place and I think that she would like that it wasn’t opened in Atlanta even though that’s what we had planned. She would have appreciated the adventure of it all.

I sent Iris a message this morning. She invited me to a girls night but I know that I’ll be too busy with the bakery to make the trip down to Destiny Falls. I sent her a few pictures of the bakery and she promised to come up for opening day.

Eli texted me this morning to let me know that he had just dropped his parents off at the airport and is headed home. I told him that the mixer, oven, and display cases were all being installed this morning so I would be busy at the bakery all day. He has someone watching the store today and he offered to pick up lunch for the two of us.

That was over an hour ago.

My stomach growls and I check my phone. There are no new messages but I know that he must be close.

The movers haul in the last display case and I help them get it centered on the back wall. This one will have the donuts on one side and slots for fresh-baked bread and rolls on the other side. They get to work, spacing out the shelves the way I want and then installing the glass on the front of the display cases and installing the doors on the section that the donuts will be.

They're just wiping down the glass and packing up when Patrick and Brennan show up.

"Hey, you two! What are y'all doing here?" I ask as Brennan runs over to me and wraps his little arms around my legs.

"We were just driving by and saw you down here. We thought that we would stop in and see how you were doing. See if maybe you had some baked goods that you needed someone to take off your hands," Patrick jokes, pretending to look around.

"I'm afraid that I don't have any sweets here. Not yet anyway," I tell them with a smile.

"We're all set here, ma'am," one of the men says and I step forward to thank them and show them out.

The door has barely closed behind them when it opens once more and Eli strides in, carrying two paper bags of food.

"Hey," he says, obviously surprised to see Patrick and Brennan here with me.

Brennan skips over to Eli and gives him a quick hug before he takes one of the bags from Eli and heads over to a table.

“Help yourself,” Eli calls after him, and Patrick and I both laugh and head to join Brennan at the table.

“It looks really good in here,” Eli tells me as he takes the chair next to me.

“Thanks!”

I lean over and kiss Eli’s cheek quickly before the boys start to pull out all of the food. I let them divide it as I look around the new bakery equipment.

Eli brought four hamburgers and two large fries since he had missed breakfast and was starving, so we have just enough food to share with everyone.

I’ve only taken a bite of my burger when another big truck pulls up outside the bakery doors.

“Ah, that will be the new oven and mixer.”

“I’ll let them in, sweets,” Eli says, standing and brushing past me.

I hurry to finish up my burger and share of the fries so that I can show them where it’s all supposed to go, but Eli takes care of it for me. I’m sure that it’s pretty easy to guess where it’s going to go since there are two large spaces next to the other oven and mixer.

“Have you made anything new?” I ask Brennan when Eli comes back to the table to join us.

“We made a soup!” Brennan says excitedly, hurrying to finish chewing so he can tell me all about it.

“Broccoli cheddar,” Patrick supplies when Brennan can’t remember the name.

“Yeah and Patrick bought these round loaves of bread and we cut a hole in the top and then ate the soup out that way. It was so cool!”

“Oh, I love that. And you can dip the bread in the soup. So good,” I tell Brennan, and I can see the wheels turning in his

head.

I bet Patrick and him make soup again tonight.

I spend the rest of lunch telling everyone about what types of bread and donuts I'll be making for the display case against the back wall and all of the goodies that I'm planning on stocking in the front display cases.

"Can you show me how to make bread?" Brennan asks hopefully. "Then we could make our own garlic bread!" he says, turning excitedly to Patrick who looks like he wants to object.

From what I've heard, Brennan has been making pasta and garlic bread. A lot. I'm sure that he's sick of eating it over and over again.

"Of course I can," I say, shooting an evil smirk at Patrick. "I can even teach you how to make your own pasta!"

Brennan's eyes light up, but Patrick looks like he's just lost the will to live.

They finish installing the oven and mixer and I head into the kitchen to check them out. My eyes start to water when I see that the bakery is finally complete. I ordered the sign for outside and to be etched on the door and front window last night, but it will be another few days before either get here.

I haven't told Eli that I finally came up with a name for the bakery. He was actually the one to inspire it. It's simple and clean, but also reminds me of home. I'm sure that my grams would approve of it too.

Eli, Patrick, and Brennan help me reset the tables and chairs and I give them all a quick tour of the kitchen and tiny office. Brennan is fascinated by everything, even my tiny cramped office and the employee bathroom that looks like it could use some work.

"I brought you something," Eli says as we head back out into the main room.

"What?"

“It’s out in the truck,” he says and I’m not sure if Patrick, Brennan, or I am more excited.

I grab my coat, bundling up as I follow him outside and around the corner to where he’s parked.

“You’ve been inside so much lately. I thought that we could go do something outside. Get some fresh air,” Eli says as he hands me a rolled-up pair of black snow pants.

“I have no idea how to ski. If that’s what you had in mind,” I say as I hold the pants up to my waist. Perfect fit.

“We can go sledding!” Brennan says excitedly, already turning to Patrick with puppy dog eyes.

“Sure,” he says right away, like we all knew that he would. “I’ll have to head home and grab our snow gear and the sleds.”

“We’ll lock up here and meet you at the hill,” Eli says and they both take off toward Patrick’s SUV.

I hurry inside, kicking off my boots and tugging the puffy snow pants up. Eli makes sure that all of the lights are off and that the back door is locked.

“How do I look?” I ask, holding my arms out wide and spinning in a circle.

“Like you’re ready to sled.”

“I’ve never been sledding before either,” I admit.

“Really?”

“It doesn’t snow much in Atlanta or in Georgia in general. Even if it did, there aren’t that many hills to do it on,” I tell him as we lock the front door and make our way back to his truck.

Eli explains the finer points of sledding to me as we head out of the city and toward the mountains. It seems easy enough, just put your feet inside, hang on tight, and lean left or right to steer. I’m feeling pretty good about it.

And then I see the “hill.”

“It’s so big!” I say as Eli parks off to the side in the little gravel lot.

There are a few other families here, but the place is big enough that I’m not worried that we’ll be running over each other on the way down.

Patrick and Brennan pull in a few minutes later and we hop out. They’re both all bundled up and I wonder how Brennan can even move with all those layers.

“Ready to go?” Patrick asks and I can see that he’s just as excited about this as Brennan is.

Eli helps him grab the sleds out of the back of his SUV and I help Brennan make his way over to the base of the hill. The guys join us as we start to trek up the hill. Eli tucks the sled under his arm and grabs my mittened hand with his.

“Are you nervous?” he asks, watching as Brennan and Patrick race to the top of the hill.

“A little. You’re going to ride with me though, right? You’re not just sending me down by myself.”

“Yeah, we only have the two sleds, so we’ll have to go together or take turns.”

“Go together then.”

He squeezes my hand, giving me a reassuring smile as we finally reach the top. Patrick and Brennan are already climbing into their sled and I watch as Brennan grips the side of the plastic with his tiny hands. He looks so happy, not scared at all, and I try to tell myself that if he’s not scared, then I don’t need to be either.

Eli sets our sled down close to theirs and climbs in, spreading his long legs out in front of them. They don’t fit and he looks almost comical. Like an adult trying to ride in one of those little kid cars.

“Come on,” Eli says, holding his hand out to me with a boyish grin.

He’s excited to do this too. I take his hand, climbing shakily between his legs onto the sled. I feel a lot better when

Eli wraps his arms around my waist, grabbing the nylon string attached to the front of the sled.

“Ready?” Patrick calls and Eli nods while I shake my head.

The guys laugh and I tighten my hold on Eli’s legs.

“It’s going to be fine, sweets. I’ve got you.”

We push off and my breath catches in my throat. It’s like we’re flying.

We race down the hill, bouncing slightly off dips or smaller bumps in the snow. Eli has his arms and legs wrapped around me tight and I feel safe like that. Smothered in him.

We reach the base of the hill and Eli turns us to the side, stopping the sled. We’re facing Patrick and Brennan and I’m not sure what look is on my face, but it has both of them cracking up.

“Are you alright, sweets?” Eli asks, turning me in his arms.

“Yeah, that was so much fun!” I yell, throwing my arms around him and tackling him back into the snow.

“Let’s go again!” Brennan yells and I look over to see Patrick dragging him back up the hill.

“Do I get that treatment too?” I ask Eli and I turn back to see him giving me a weird look. “Eli? Are you alright?”

“Yeah, I’m fine,” he says as I climb off of him and back into the sled. “You can have whatever you want, sweets.”

Eli drags me up the hill and we go again and then again. We try to race Patrick and Brennan down the hill and then we have a race to see who can pull who fastest up the hill. By the time that we’re cold and out of breath, the sun is starting to set. We do one last race before we catch our breath and pack up.

“Want to go back to the bakery and check out some of the baked goods I’ve been testing for downstairs?” I ask as we start to pack everything back into the cars.

“Yes!” Brennan shouts, bolting for the back door and buckling in.

Patrick laughs and goes over to make sure he's got it, and Eli and I finish putting the sleds in the back of their car. He wraps his arm around my waist, steadying me when I almost slip on a patch of ice right between our two cars.

"That reminds me. I need to order some salt for the sidewalk," I say as I grip on to Eli's sleeve.

"I have an extra bag that I can bring over until yours gets here," he offers and I smile up at him gratefully.

"Thank you. Did your mom and dad make their flight this morning alright?" I ask as he helps me up into the passenger seat of his truck.

We wave at Patrick and Brennan as they back up and Eli climbs behind the wheel. We pull out of the lot after them, heading back to town.

"They did. It was so early though. I'm not sure that my mom was even fully awake. She says that they are going to come back for Easter by the way, and she wants to come back for your grand opening."

"She might as well have stayed here then. I'll be opening the bakery next weekend."

"Really?" Eli asks, sounding surprised.

"Yeah, I ordered the sign for the front and they should be here Monday to do the etching on the front window and door. All I have left to do is the marketing side of things and even that is partway done. I'll be open in time for Valentine's Day. I'm hoping that I get a lot of business for that day."

"Guess they'll be using up those frequent flyer miles," he says as we follow Patrick's car back to the bakery.

Brennan hops out right away and hurries up the apartment steps, Patrick following behind him and reminding him that the door is locked and that he needs to slow down. I laugh as I hop out of Eli's truck and rush after them.

I hurry to unlock it for them so we can get out of the cold. We all take our winter gear off, hanging it all on the hooks by

the front door. I head into the kitchen, taking out the chili that I made for dinner and pouring it into a pot to heat.

Patrick and Brennan are busy looking at all of the desserts lined up on the counter, but Eli joins me in the kitchen, leaning against the counter as I stir the chili.

“Well, maybe they won’t come back. They said that they wanted to give us our space for our first Valentine’s Day as a couple so that I could properly woo you. That was my mom’s wording, by the way,” he explains, like I didn’t already know that.

“Do they usually come back for Easter?” I ask as I grab some bowls, spoons, and the box of saltine crackers.

“Sometimes, but usually they only come for Thanksgiving and Christmas.”

“Do y’all like cheese or sour cream or anything on your chili?” I call and they both say no, joining us at the counter as I divide up the chili into the bowls.

We eat at the tiny table in front of the window and I smile when everyone practically licks their bowl clean.

I show the guys all of the sweet treats that I’ve been taste testing. They’re only all too happy to redo the taste testing of everything for me. I take notes of which flavors they like best even though I’ve already narrowed down what I’ll be making each day.

Patrick and Brennan leave a little bit later with leftover baked goods and some of my old cookbooks. I promise to teach Brennan how to make bread soon and they both promise that they’ll be there for the bakery’s series grand opening.

As soon as they’re gone, I lock the door behind them and run toward Eli. I jump and he catches me, grinning as I wrap my legs around his waist.

“The bakery is all set up, the menu is set, my ingredients are ordered, and the last of the stuff is on its way and should be set up this week. I’ve got all of my stuff done and you have the day off work. So, what are we going to do now?”

“I’ve got a few ideas,” Eli says a second below his lips claim mine.

TWENTY-TWO



Elijah

IT'S late on Wednesday and I'm with Hartley at the grocery store. She had ordered most of the ingredients but she's worried that she'll run out of ingredients, so here I am helping her load up bag after bag of groceries that I'm pretty sure she won't actually need. I've seen her apartment and the bakery. They're both stocked full of ingredients.

"Is this all of it?" I ask as I close the truck bed shut and lean against the tailgate.

Hartley is frantically checking lists on her notepad and scanning her phone.

"Sweets."

When she doesn't look up, just gets closer and closer to hyperventilating as she continues to check her lists, I try again.

"Sweets. You have to calm down. The place is going to be a hit. You're going to be a success. Trust me. There's going to be nothing left but crumbs."

"How can you be so sure?" she asks, looking up at me with panic shining in her clear blue eyes.

I brush some loose strands of hair away from her face.

"Sweets, I've tasted your cooking. I think we're going to need more ingredients 'cause you're going to be selling out every day."

Hartley steps closer and wraps her arms around my waist, laying her head against my chest.

“I wish I was as sure as you are.”

“Just wait, you’ll see on Saturday.”

I wrap my arms around Hartley, holding her for as long as she wants even though it’s freezing outside. We’re still in that pose when Sheriff Hull and his wife Maggie pull into the lot.

“Hartley!” Maggie calls as she steps out of the truck and heads our way.

Maggie wraps her arms around Hartley in a tight hug and I reach out, taking Hank’s hand in a firm handshake.

“It’s nice to see you, Elijah.”

“You too,” I say as the girls finally separate.

“Hartley, this is my husband, Hank. Hank, this is Hartley. She’s opening the bakery around the corner from Wayside Diner. Remember? We drove past it the other day.”

“Yeah, it’s nice to finally meet you, Hartley. Everyone in town is impatiently waiting for you to open,” Hank says with an easy smile.

“Yes! Only a few more days now. Are you excited?” Maggie asks as Hank pulls her into his side.

“More nervous than excited,” Hartley admits with a high-pitched laugh.

I can tell that she’s getting close to freaking out again, so I wrap my arm around her, nudging her closer to the passenger side door.

“It’s going to be great!” Maggie reassures her.

“We should let you go. We have to grab a few things before the store closes anyway,” Hank explains as they get ready to say their goodbyes.

“We’ll see you at the grand opening,” Maggie promises.

“See you there,” I say as I lead Hartley over to the passenger door.

I see Maggie signaling between us and giving Hartley a thumbs up, and I try to hide my grin as I help my girl up into the truck.

“I didn’t know you knew Maggie,” I say as I slide behind the wheel.

“Yeah, I ran into her and Juliet when I went to pick up my car from the mechanic. We just talked that one time, but they both seemed really nice.”

“They are.”

We drive back to her place in comfortable silence and as I park out front, I sigh.

“You know by tomorrow, the whole town will know that we’re dating.”

“Oh, Eli, it’s adorable that you think that they all don’t already know,” she says with a sarcastic grin.

“Smartass,” I mumble but I’m grinning as I turn to study her.

I check to make sure that she’s alright with everyone knowing and I see her smiling. She doesn’t look embarrassed or nervous for the news to spread and so I relax.

“Good,” I say as I help her out of the truck and then carry load after load of groceries into the bakery.

“There,” I say as I help her cram the last of the ingredients onto the shelves in the kitchen.

“Thank you. For everything,” she says as she wraps her arms around my waist.

“No problem, sweets.”

“Did you want to come upstairs? We could give this town something to really talk about,” she says, adding in an eyebrow wiggle in case I didn’t catch her meaning.

I throw her over my shoulder, taking the stairs two at a time up to her apartment. Hartley giggles, bouncing against my shoulder. The sound is like music to my ears and I can’t decide if I like her moaning or laughing more.

I carry her into her bedroom and we both start to pull at our clothes. Soon we're naked and tangled together on the bed. Hartley crawls on top of me, kissing me quickly and slipping her tongue into my mouth before she pulls away.

My mouth tries to chase hers but she moves faster, trailing a line of kisses down my chest to my cock. My whole body tingles with sensations as she wraps her tiny hand around my length and gives me a few tentative strokes.

"Hartley. Give me your mouth, sweets," I plead and she gives me a devilish grin before she sticks her tongue out and licks a path up the underside of my cock.

She leaves behind fire in her wake. My hands fist in her sheets and I do my best not to beg her to wrap her lips around me.

I don't need to. A second later the warm wet heat of her mouth envelops me.

"Fuck, Jesus, sweets," I moan out as her head starts to bob along my length.

"I love that I can do this to you," she says, her voice husky as she strokes me, using the moisture from her mouth to glide along me.

"Don't talk dirty to me. I'll come in seconds," I grit out.

Hartley laughs and I close my eyes. She wraps her lips around me again and sucks hard. My hips rise and I almost come off the bed. Her hand continues to pump me as she licks and sucks and slurps around my dick.

"Hartley, I need you. I need your pussy."

She moans, the sound sending vibrations down my cock to my balls. My fingers twist in her sheets tighter and I grunt out a curse.

"Hartley, sweets, please," I say, but I can feel my balls starting to tighten.

Hartley doubles her efforts, gripping me tighter as she takes more of me into her mouth. She hums and moans around me as my cock swells in her mouth.

“I’m going, I’m going to come,” I warn her and she sucks harder in response.

“Fuck!” I shout as I find my release and come down the back of her throat.

She swallows every drop, and I swear I think I see heaven for a brief moment.

I have her on her back under me in the blink of an eye and Hartley gasps as I shove her thighs up to her chest and bury my face in her soft folds.

“Eli!” Hartley screams and my cock swells at the sound of my name on her lips.

I listen to the sounds of Hartley moaning and screaming my name, begging me for more. She comes against my tongue, but I don’t stop. I flick her clit with the tip of my tongue, rub circles over it, plunge two thick fingers into her and fuck her with them until her juices are coating my face, fingers, and her thighs.

When she comes again, I can’t wait any longer.

I’m up her body and thrusting inside of her in one quick movement. She’s still coming and her snug channel grips me tight, trying to suck the cum from my balls already.

“So perfect. So fucking perfect,” I moan as I rut into her.

Hartley’s ankles hook over my shoulders and I bend forward, almost folding her in half as I fuck into her.

Hartley comes two more times as I pound her into the mattress. Her nails rake my back, her heels digging into the back of my shoulders as I finally follow her over the edge.

Her name is the one off my lips as I find my release.

“Hartley!”

Her breathing evens out and she passes out before I even pull out of her.

I have an early morning and I know that I should get dressed and head home, but instead, I find myself pulling

Hartley into my arms and kissing her forehead once before I close my eyes and let myself drift off too.

TWENTY-THREE



Hartley

“DOES THIS SOUND ALRIGHT?” I ask Eli as he lounges next to me on my couch.

He came over for a late dinner after work and has been helping me set up all of my social media. The bakery officially has a Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter account. I had hired someone to make me a website and it was finished this afternoon. I already showed that to Eli and he loved it.

The sweet pastel yellow and pink logo looks exactly like how Grams and I had imagined it and seeing it now still gives me a thrill.

It’s real now.

I know that the bakery is done, but seeing the logo and having people already like and follow it on social media changes it. I’m terrible at Facebook and all of that, so I’ll have to set reminders to check and update all of it. Eli said it will be easy. Just snap some pictures of whatever I’m making and post it. People will flock to the store then.

The menu boards came this afternoon and Eli helped me install them on the back wall behind the counter before we came up here to eat. I’ll have to write all of the items and prices on it tomorrow. The bakery name was stenciled on the door this afternoon and the sign should be installed tomorrow.

Eli had laughed when he saw what name I had picked.

Crumbs.

I told him that I had him to thank for it since it was him constantly telling me that there was going to be nothing left but crumbs. That had been stuck in my head for weeks and every single time that I tried to brainstorm name ideas, that was what I heard. He had joked that he would just take a small consulting fee, made payable in baked goods.

“I like it. It’s friendly, welcoming,” Eli says as he passes my laptop back to me.

I give the flyer I just got done making another once-over with a critical eye, scanning for spelling mistakes.

“Does it look, I don’t know, a little plain to you? Boring?”

“Sweets, it’s going to be printed out on neon pink paper. Trust me, no one will be missing it.”

“Alright. I’m printing it,” I tell him as my finger hovers over the button.

“Sweets,” Eli groans, reaching over and hitting the button for me.

“Ugh, I feel like I’m second-guessing everything. I’m a mess,” I groan as I sag back against the couch cushions.

“It’s just nerves. Next week, you’ll see that you had nothing to worry about and soon everything will be running smoothly.”

“As my best friend in town, well, second best friend in town, I’m going to need you to keep me from freaking out.”

“Second best friend? Who the hell is the first?” Eli demands, looking outraged.

“Brennan. Duh,” I tease him, rolling my eyes.

“Yeah, yeah. Alright, take a deep breath. You’re going to be great. I promise.”

I take a deep, calming breath, nodding at him.

“You’re right. I know you’re right, but it’s still hard to remember that all of the time.”

Eli leans over, wrapping his arm around my shoulders as we lean back against the cushions and sprawl on the couch. We're silent as we both stare around my tiny apartment.

Papers and desserts are strewn around the entire place. There's flour and sugar dusting the kitchen floor and trailing into my bedroom. Dirty dishes are piled in the sink and there's some kind of dark smear on one of the cabinets. It's probably chocolate. I hope it's chocolate.

"I need to clean this place," I mumble.

"You really do," he jokes and I elbow him.

The printer whirs to a stop on my desk and I gulp when I look over and see the stack of bright pink paper waiting for me. I printed off one hundred copies, not sure where all I would be able to hang them up.

"I'll hang some in the shop and around town tomorrow too," Eli says as he pushes to his feet.

"Thanks. For everything."

"Don't mention it."

I watch him over the back of the couch as he heads over to a bag that I didn't notice before. He must have brought it in with him when he first got here but I was too distracted by the flyers.

"I got you something," he says with a small smile as he carries the bag over to me and sets it at my feet.

"More presents?" I ask, studying the bag.

It's a pretty big bag with the Grove Trading Shop logo emblazoned on the side and my curiosity is piqued.

"You didn't have to get me anything."

"I wanted to," he assures me.

I grin at him, reaching forward to dig into the paper bag. I pull out a big box and I have to laugh when I see the logo on the top.

"Uggs?"

“Yeah,” he says with a grin as I pull off the top to see the boots that I had first tried to buy in his shop on the night that we met.

“I thought that these weren’t practical for this weather.”

“They aren’t, but since we’ve met, I’ve seen you run around in this weather in sneakers and high heels. I figured that at least these are warmer than those two options.”

I slide them on and grin when I see how cute they look, even with my yoga pants.

“I love them, Eli. Thank you so much. This was really sweet of you.”

I stand up, leaning up on my tiptoes to brush my lips against his.

“You’re welcome, sweets.”

I move to pick up the box by my feet but end up kicking it halfway under the coffee table.

“I’ll grab it,” Eli says as he bends down to fish the box out from under the table. “What’s this?” he asks, standing back up with the box that Grams and I had made.

I forgot that I had been looking it at last night and had left it out here.

“Our dream box,” I tell him with a soft smile.

“Can I look inside?” he asks and I nod, sitting back down on the couch.

Eli passes me the box and joins me as I flip the lid off and reach inside. I pull out the old recipe cards first since those are still on top from last night.

“Grams is the one who taught me how to bake. She took me in after my parents died and raised me. We used to cook dinner together every night, breakfast together on the weekends, and we baked. We baked every chance that we got.”

“Was she as good as you are?” Eli asks with a soft smile.

“Probably better,” I say with a laugh as I set the recipe cards aside and pull out the photographs next.

“Aw, a young Hartley Maverick,” he quips with a laugh when he sees the top picture is of me at about age seven, my dark hair in two pigtails, a smear of flour and chocolate on my left cheek.

“This was after the first time that we made chocolate chip cookies. We made the first tray perfectly. They were golden brown and chewy and just perfect. Then we celebrated a bit too much and burned the second batch to a crisp.”

Eli laughs, throwing his head back, letting the deep sound echo off the walls of my apartment.

“Good to know that you weren’t always perfect.”

“Hey!” I giggle, elbowing him in the side.

He just grins at me as he takes the photograph from me to get a closer look

I flip to the next picture, smiling when I see it’s of Grams and me at age twelve. Grams’ hair has more white in it than the first one and mine is shorter. It was when I was going through my pixie cut phase, which luckily, didn’t last for very long. I thought I had burned all of the pictures from those few months, but I guess she had snuck one into the box.

We’re grinning into the camera, our bright, garish Christmas sweaters standing out like a sore thumb against our beige walls and tan kitchen cabinets.

“That was at one of our Christmas parties. We did an ugly Christmas sweater contest and Grams won.”

“I’m assuming you got second?”

“Ha-ha. No, Mr. Winters next door got second place.”

I spend an hour flipping through the old pictures with Eli. He likes the one of Grams and I at my culinary graduation best. He said that he likes that we both look so proud.

It’s late by the time that I put the box away and snuggle into Eli’s side.

“Are you going home?” I ask him with a yawn.

“Do you want me to?”

Do I want him to?

If I’m being honest, no. I like when Eli is around. He makes me feel safe and more confident in myself.

“I want you to stay,” I whisper.

“Thank god,” Eli whispers as he tugs me closer and kisses me.

My hands tangle in his black hair, holding him to me as our tongues tangle together in a delicious mating dance. Eli’s hand circles my hips and he drags me into his lap.

I moan when I feel his stiff erection press against my hip.

“Eli,” I breathe against his lips and he groans in response.

“Take me to bed,” I order and he grins against my neck.

“Whatever you want, sweets.”

I giggle as I’m lifted up into Eli’s arms.

“I can see everything from up here,” I tease and Eli swats my ass, his blue eyes sparking.

“Smartass,” he says with a laugh as he carries me into my bedroom and spreads me out on the bed.

I don’t have a chance to respond before I lose myself in Eli, letting him make love to me until we both pass out.

TWENTY-FOUR



Elijah

“ARE YOU READY?” I ask Hartley as I help her clean up the last of the mess from the dough. She decided to make all of the bread tonight so that she just needs to wake up early to make the desserts and baked goods.

“Yeah, I’ve got all of the stuff ready and waiting for tomorrow morning.”

“That’s good, but I meant are you ready to see my parents again.”

Hartley giggles, washing off her hands and grinning at me.

“I can’t believe that they’re coming back so soon.”

“I told you, they wanted to be here for your grand opening. My mom loves the name, by the way. I told her that I was the genius behind it and took all of the credit.”

“Good,” Hartley says, laughing. “When are you leaving to go get them?”

“In a few minutes. Their plane lands in about an hour.”

Hartley nods, double-checking the bags of ingredients that she has sectioned and lined up all over the kitchen.

“Did you want to go with me? Keep me company on the drive?”

Also, so I can keep an eye on you because I have a feeling that if you're left here by yourself, you're going to start to freak out.

“Can we grab some food on the way? I’ve been working all day and forgot to stop to eat.”

“I guess,” I say with a dramatic sigh. “What am I going to do with you?” I tease as I wrap my arm around her shoulders and lead her out of the front door.

She hops into the passenger seat and we take off, stopping at a McDonald’s on the way to the airport. The wind picks up as we reach the arrivals gate doors and I try to hold back my groan when my mom spots Hartley in the seat next to me. They both wave at each other and Hartley is jumping out of the truck before I’ve even stopped completely.

“Mrs. Grove!”

“Hartley! It’s so good to see you again, honey!”

I hop out as the women embrace and greet my dad, helping him with the bags as my mom and Hartley jump into the back seat.

“Nice to see you, Mom,” I greet her as I climb into the driver’s seat and merge into traffic.

“Hi, honey,” she says distractedly from the back seat.

Hartley and my mom catch up the entire drive back to Honey Peak. I’m not sure how they have so much to talk about since they just saw each other like a week ago.

My dad and I talk about the weather and their flight on the drive back. He seems tired and I’m sure they both are with the long flights and the time difference.

“Are we dropping you off at home, Hartley? Or are you staying with us at Eli’s?” my mom asks with a wink in my direction.

“Oh, I’ll be getting up super early tomorrow morning, so I’m headed home,”

she says as we pull into town and head toward the bakery and her apartment.

“I can’t wait to see the bakery and taste everything! Do you need any help tomorrow?”

“No, but thank you. I’ll have everything made, so I’ll just have to run the register. I’m hoping that I can hire someone soon, maybe a few weeks, to help me with that and maybe with some of the baking, but we’ll have to see how it goes.”

I pull up outside of her apartment and step out of the truck to make sure that Hartley gets out alright.

“Why don’t you walk her up, honey?” my mom suggests as I lower Hartley to the ground.

“I will. Be right back,” I promise them but I’m pretty sure that I hear my mom tell me to take my time.

I lace my fingers with Hartley’s and try to shield her from the wind the best I can as we climb the stairs to her apartment. I wait until Hartley has unlocked the door before I turn to leave.

“Sweets, wait,” I say, grabbing her hand and pulling her into me.

I cup her face in my hands and tilt her head up until her blue eyes meet mine.

“Tomorrow is going to be great. You’re going to be great.”

“Everything is going to be great,” she deadpans and I bite back a grin.

“Smartass.”

The sound of Hartley’s giggle has me feeling lighter.

“Don’t stress tonight. Alright?”

“I won’t,” she promises and I lower my lips until they meet hers.

“Sweet dreams.”

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” she says, leaning up and kissing me before she steps inside and closes the door after her.

I tuck my jacket tighter around me as I jog back down the stairs and over to my truck. My mom talks the whole drive back to my house about how cute the bakery sign is and how nice it is to see the two of us together.

I carry her suitcase into the house and offer them something to eat or drink, but they're both almost falling asleep on their feet. I tell them goodnight and leave them in the guest bedroom before I head down the hall to my own room. It's late and I shower quickly before I crawl into bed. I should fall asleep right away. I'm exhausted from working all day and helping Hartley this afternoon, but I don't.

I toss and turn for over an hour and it takes me a while to figure out why I'm so restless.

It's because Hartley isn't here next to me.

We've been spending the nights at each other's place a lot, almost every single night, and this is the first time in over a week that we're not together.

My phone dings softly on the nightstand and I reach over, smiling when I see Hartley's name on the screen.

HARTLEY: I can't sleep.

ELI: Me either.

HARTLEY: I miss you. The bed is too big without you taking up all of the space.

ELI: Smartass.

HARTLEY: Wanna sneak into my bedroom?

ELI: I'm on my way.

I GRIN as I pull on some clothes and tiptoe down the hallway. I can hear my parents snoring as I pass by the guest room and out the front door. The streets are empty as I drive down them back toward the bakery.

Hartley has left the front door unlocked for me and I lock it and kick off my boots, hanging up my jacket before I make my way to the bedroom.

She's laying on her side, facing the door, and she smiles when she sees me. I hurry to undress and crawl into bed beside her.

"Scoot over," I tease as I sprawl out in the center of the bed.

Hartley giggles, cuddling into my side and resting her head on my chest.

"Do you feel like a teenager sneaking into your girlfriend's house? Trying not to wake her parents?" she asks.

"I wouldn't know. I never had a girlfriend and I've never snuck into anyone's house."

"I've never had anyone sneak into my room late at night either."

"I'm glad to be your first," I tease.

Hartley elbows me and we fall silent.

"I'm glad you're here," she says in a tired voice after a minute.

"Me too," I whisper back as I close my eyes and let sleep finally claim me.

TWENTY-FIVE



Hartley

ELI WOKE me up at three a.m. with his head between my legs. I was still half asleep when I came with his name on my lips.

I wish that I could have snuggled with him for a little bit but it was already getting late. Eli got dressed while I took a quick shower and threw on some clothes. We both bundled up and stomped down the stairs and around to the bakery.

A thrill races through me when I step inside. Today is the day. I'm finally doing what Grams and I always dreamed of.

“Are you staying? Or sneaking back home?” I ask Eli as I toss my parka on the chair behind my desk and change out of my boots and into my sneakers.

“I thought I would stay for a bit. In case you need any help.”

“You just want to taste test everything,” I tease as I tie an apron around my waist and bustle into the kitchen.

“You caught me,” he says as he leans back against the counter.

All of the ingredients are lined up on the counter for me, and I grab the first bag of flour and start measuring it out. Everything gets mixed into the first mixer and I get lost in the

process. The machines whir rhythmically as I preheat the ovens and get started on the next batch of dough.

Eli left to carry out all of the bread that I made last night and he passes by me on his way to grab the next batch. I had labeled the shelves the other day, so he knows where each type of bread should go.

I roll out the first balls of dough, lining them on a baking sheet and sliding them into the oven. Eli sets the timer for me and washes his hands so he can help me roll the next batch out.

We work together in comfortable silence, the mixers constantly moving in the background. By six a.m., we've made cookies, cupcakes, brownies, and six different kinds of donuts.

"I should get home and shower," Eli says as I grab my piping bag and frost the last of the cupcakes.

"Okay, thanks for helping me," I say as I follow Eli out into the bakery.

I slide the last tray into the display case and brush my hands off.

"It looks great, sweets," Eli says and I wrap my arm around his waist, laying my head on his shoulder as I survey all of the treats laid out in the cases.

Pride fills me when I see how perfect everything came out.

"Did you want to take something home for you and your parents?"

"Yeah, but I'm paying. I want to be your first customer."

"Eli, I can't let you do that! Not after you've helped me out so much."

"I insist. Besides, you should make sure that the credit card thing works anyway."

I don't want to, but I relent and go behind the counter. I grab a box, filling it up with a few donuts and some croissants. I ring him up and he inserts his credit card into the little white

square. It pops up on the iPad screen and I let out a sigh of relief.

“It works!”

Eli grins as he slides his wallet back into his pocket and grabs the bakery box.

“I’ll see you soon,” Eli says, leaning over the counter and giving me a quick kiss.

I watch him walk out the door before I head over and flip the sign to Open. I make a list on my notepad of everything I made today. I want to analyze how everything sells so that I can make adjustments if I need to.

My first customer walks in a little after seven and I grin when I see that it’s Iris and her friends.

“Hey, Iris,” I greet her, moving around the counter to give her a quick hug.

“Hey, Hartley. Wow, this place looks great! I love the name, by the way.”

“Aw, thanks! I’m glad that you could make it,” I tell them.

Iris introduces me to her fiancé, Arlo, and the rest of her friends before they start to look around the bakery.

“This place is awesome!” Sutton tells me as she gives me a quick smile.

“Aw, thank you,” I say with a smile as I grab a bakery box and get it ready. “What can I get for you?”

Sutton and her boyfriend, Teller, order a few donuts and cookies. Madelyn and Flynn argue over the cupcakes before they decide to get one of each. Lyla mulls over the bread choices before she lands on an asiago cheese one and some of the ciabatta rolls. I ring her up and thank them as they turn to leave.

“See you later!” They call out to me as they push back outside and heads over to their cars.

I watch them go and admire how much I’ve already sold this morning.

Patrick and Brennan are the next to arrive. Brennan runs all over the store, checking out everything and trying to do his best to pick just one thing like Patrick says.

“We had to come in before school. He was worried that there wouldn’t be anything left if we waited until this afternoon, and I can see that he was right. Congratulations, Hartley,” he says, giving me a quick hug as Brennan comes up to his side with a donut.

“That one?” I tease him. “Hmm, I guess I can set aside the special one that I made just for you this morning.”

“Special donut?” Brennan asks, his whole face lighting up.

“Yeah, just a second. Let me go grab it.”

Patrick gives me a grateful look as I turn to leave. Eli told me that he was worried about Brennan since his parents passed away, but I think that Patrick is doing a great job raising him. Brennan is such a sweet kid and he really seems to have opened up to me since we started cooking together.

I hurry into the back, taking out the small bag with the maple bacon donut that I made this morning just for Brennan.

“Here you go. You can have both of them,” I say with a wink and he shoves the strawberry cheesecake donut that he had grabbed from the case into Patrick’s hands as he rips open the bag I gave him.

“It’s got bacon on it!” he says gleefully, his eyes full of wonder.

“Yeah, this one is a maple bacon flavored donut. Do you want to try it? I won’t be offended if you’d rather have the strawberry cheesecake one,” I promise him.

“I want to try it,” he says with a smile and I grab a few napkins as Patrick and him head over to one of the tables and sit down.

I join them, passing the napkins across the counter and watching as Brennan takes a big bite. He chews, studying the donut before he looks over to me.

“It’s so good,” he says with a grin.

He lets Patrick have a bite too, and I move to pack up a few kinds of breads and rolls for them to take home too.

Patrick digs out his wallet but I wave him off.

“It’s the least I can do after Brennan helped out so much here.”

Brennan grabs the bread and makes his way to the door, but Patrick hesitates.

“Thank you. You have no idea what seeing him so happy like that does to me. He’s been really withdrawn since his parents died and I had no clue how to snap him out of it or if I even should, but then you came to town and brought him back to the sweet, curious kid that I know.”

My eyes water and I lean over, hugging him.

“It’s you too. You’re so good to him and I know that he loves you.”

Patrick nods, swallowing hard before he turns and hurries to catch up with Brennan who is pushing out the front door. I’m sure that they’ll have to rush to make it to school on time.

Things pick up after that with a steady amount of people stopping by to check out the shop and grab something sweet, and by ten o’clock, I’m running low on everything. I’m helping out a customer who wants to order a custom birthday cake when Eli, Susan, and Frank come in. I grin at them, finishing up with Trina and letting her know that I’ll have the cake ready on Saturday by ten a.m.

I turn back to Eli and his parents and smile when I see that Susan is beaming and Frank is practically licking his lips when he sees all of the desserts laid out before him. Eli’s eyes are locked on me and he gives me a questioning look. I grin at him, letting him know that everything is going well.

He seems to relax at that and gives me an easy smile as his parents look around the place at all of the baked goods.

Most of the donuts are gone and Eli nods toward the case.

“Told you, nothing left but crumbs.”

“I know! I’ll need to make more donuts tomorrow. Although, I think that sales for that will start to go down now that it’s closer to lunchtime.”

“We’ll take the last of them,” Frank says and I laugh as I move to box the last few donuts up for him.

“I’m surprised that you want more sugar. Didn’t Eli share the ones that he got this morning?”

“He did, but Frank has always had a sweet tooth. I swear, he’d eat nothing but desserts if I let him,” Susan says as she walks over to check out the bread section.

I watch as she starts to pull out a few different kinds and it doesn’t take long before she’s put a dent in the inventory.

“Patrick says that you made Brennan a special donut?”

“Yeah, a maple bacon one. He loved it,” I say, grinning up at Eli.

“Of course he did.”

Susan turns back to us and I notice that she has her arms full of bread. I can’t hold in the giggle when Eli rolls his eyes at her. He moves to help her though and I start to ring everything up. Susan adds a few cupcakes and cookies to the order too before she passes me her credit card.

“Can you take a break?” Susan asks me and I nod.

There’s a bit of a lull in customers, so I grab us each a bottle of water before I join them at one of the tables.

“It looks like Crumbs is a huge success!” Susan says as soon as I sit down.

“I think so,” I say as I look around at the half-empty display cases. “I think that I’m going to need to make more stuff tomorrow if I want to have anything to sell in the afternoon.”

Frank nods, agreeing with me whole-heartedly as he finishes off his donut. I sit and visit with them for almost half an hour, taking quick breaks to help customers who start to trickle in.

“We’re going to see the shop. Nick has a doctor appointment this afternoon, so I have to get over there to take over for him,” Eli says as they stand and get ready to leave.

“Join us for dinner tonight?” Susan asks. “We’ll take you out to celebrate the success of your big day. Plus, this way you won’t have to cook! Always a good thing,” she says with a wink.

“Sounds great,” I say honestly as she steps closer and wraps me up in a big hug.

“Congratulations again, honey. I’m so proud of you.”

My eyes start to water and my throat itches as I try to hold back the tears that her words cause.

“Thank you,” I choke out, blinking rapidly.

“Oh, and I’m glad that you two got things figured out,” she whispers in my ear.

I can barely keep up with the change in conversation.

“I’m sorry? That we got what figured out?”

“That you belong together. I’m glad that you both stopped pretending and made this relationship real. Eli can be so stubborn sometimes and I was worried that it would take him months to figure out that you two are so perfect for each other. And no, I don’t think that you two are moving fast. When you know, you just know.”

She pulls back and gives me a sly smile before she takes Frank’s hand and heads for the front door.

I gape after them, shocked that she knew this whole time that Eli and I were pretending to be together.

We still are.

Right?

What do I tell Eli? I have to tell him what she said to me. Will he think that she was just guessing, or hoping?

He steps in front of me and I look up, my blue eyes meeting his.

I swallow hard.

Why am I so nervous?

TWENTY-SIX



Elijah

“I’LL MEET you guys outside in just a minute,” I say as I pass my mom my truck keys.

She nods, giving the two of us a knowing look and I wonder if she thinks I’m going to make out with Hartley or something right here and now. What is she thinking? I mean, there are kids in here for Pete’s sake.

I wait until they’re outside before I turn to Hartley and step closer, not wanting to be heard by any of the bakery customers lingering around.

“Are you alright?” I ask her as I grab my coat off the back of my chair and pull it on.

I don’t want to keep my parents waiting too long and I know that the more time the two of us spend whispering to each other, the more the town gossip will grow. I can’t just leave Hartley now.

She got really pale there, and I wonder what my mom could have possibly said to her to get that reaction.

“Oh, god. Did she bring up babies to you?” I ask with a groan when Hartley still hasn’t answered me.

“No. Wait, what? Babies?” she asks, sounding like she’s about to faint or hyperventilate.

“Shh!” I say, looking around to make sure that no one heard that. The last thing that we need right now is people going on pregnancy watch around here.

“Yeah, she’s really excited for us to get married and have kids. She told me to buy you a ring the last time she was here.”

I roll my eyes, letting her know that I thought it was a joke, but Hartley just stares at me like I’m insane.

“She knows,” Hartley says and she looks shocked and maybe a little nervous.

“Who knows what?” I ask with a frown.

“Your mom knows that we have been faking it.”

“What?” I ask, disbelief replacing my good mood. “Are you sure? What did she say exactly?”

“She said, and I quote, ‘that she’s glad that we figured it out and stopped pretending.’ She’s glad that we’re really together now.”

Hartley’s dark blue eyes are wide and anxious as she meets mine.

“Are you sure?” I ask her.

“Am I sure that she just said that to me? Yep, but how did she figure it out? I thought that we had them fooled.”

More customers come into the bakery and I know that I have to leave so that Hartley can go help them, but I can’t leave her when she’s so clearly freaking out over this.

“I’ll talk to her. Everything is going to be fine,” I promise Hartley as I lean down and kiss her cheek. “Congratulations again on your first day. I’ll text you what time for dinner tonight and I’ll pick you up. Okay?”

Hartley nods distractedly and hurries behind the counter as I head out the door.

My mom and dad are climbing into my truck and I jog over, taking my keys as I slip behind the wheel. My mom talks about how good the food was on the short drive to the Grove Trading Post, but I can barely concentrate. All I can think

about is that my mom has known that we were faking it this whole time.

Nick is behind the counter when we walk in and he greets my parents as I take his place behind the register. There are a few people in the store and I help them find what they need as Nick packs up and heads out.

My dad heads into the back to look around the place and my mom comes and leans against the front counter across from me.

“Hartley told me what you said.”

“Hmm?” my mom asks, pretending not to know what I’m talking about.

“How long have you known that we weren’t really dating?” I ask her and she shakes her head at me.

“Eli, I’m your mother. I know you. I knew from the second that you said she was your girlfriend.”

I close my eyes in pain.

“I mean, you told me you weren’t together and then did a complete one-eighty and said that you were but you were keeping it a secret,” she goes on, pointing out how terrible I am at lying.

She rolls her eyes at that and I bite back a grin.

“So you just let us pretend for you?”

She gets serious then.

“Do you really think that you were pretending?” she asks as she studies my face.

I open my mouth to say yes, but then I think about everything that has happened in the last few weeks. Hartley and I kissing when no one was around. Holding hands and hanging out when the deal was over. Us sleeping together after the wedding and every single time after.

“I like her,” I mumble.

“No, you love her,” she corrects. “And she loves you too,” my mom declares as my dad walks out of the back.

Love?

I didn't think that I did that. I didn't think that any woman would ever give me a second look, unless it was in shock over my height. I sure as hell never thought that any woman would fall in love with me.

I'm gruff, and as Patrick pointed out, can be a bit of an asshole. I'm not polished. I never want to go out to fancy dinners or parties. I'd choose being alone in nature over hanging out with some girl.

No you wouldn't, my mind stops me. You've chosen Hartley over being alone every single day since you met her.

It doesn't matter. Hartley said that she didn't want a relationship either.

If it's changed for you, then maybe it's changed for her too.

“What are you two talking about?” my dad asks as he joins us at the front counter.

“Eli just figured out that he and Hartley are in love with each other.”

My dad snorts, giving me a look like he's wondering how I could have missed that.

“I think we should move back to Honey Peak, Frank. We'll want to be close once our grandbabies get here.”

My dad and I both groan, but I can see the spark in his eyes. He's excited about the prospect of grandkids too.

“You're about a million steps ahead of us, Mom. Hartley and I just started seeing each other.”

“Just a thought, dear,” she says, but I can see the wheels turning in her head and I have a feeling that she'll be looking for houses and listing their place in Florida as soon as she can.

I'm going to have to warn Hartley.

My heart flips when I think about seeing her again and talking to her, and it jumps into my throat when I think about telling her that I love her.

Will she say it back? Or will this ruin everything between us?

My parents take my truck back home, promising to bring some lunch back to the shop in a bit. They wanted to go visit some of their old friends and I have a feeling that my mom will be asking them about any houses about to go on the market.

I'm sure that by the end of the day, the whole town will know about Hartley and me. I wonder if my mom will tell them about how we pretended to be together before we really were.

What am I saying? We still aren't really together.

What am I going to say to Hartley? How do you just tell someone that you love them?

I'm going over different scenarios in my head when the door opens and Patrick walks in, carrying a bag from Wayside Diner.

"Your mom told me to come feed you," he announces as he sets the bag and drinks down on the counter.

"Thanks," I mumble, but I find that I'm not all that hungry now.

"What's going on with you, man?" Patrick asks as he digs into his own food.

"My mom knows that Hartley and I were fake dating," I blurt out.

"Oh, shit. Is she pissed?"

"No, she's happy about it or something."

"Really?" he asks, sounding surprised.

"Yeah, she asked me if we were really faking it and—"

“And you realized what literally everyone else in town has already figured out. That you and Hartley are in love.”

“Everyone in town knows that?”

“Well, everyone with eyes does, yeah.”

“I haven’t talked to Hartley about it yet.”

“Are you going to?” he asks, shoving one of my French fries into his mouth and chewing.

“Yeah, I think I am.”

He grins, excited for me, but I feel like throwing up. I push my food across the counter toward him, letting him eat it instead.

“What are you going to say? Do you want me to pretend to be Hartley for you to practice on?” he asks, pretending to shake hair out of his face.

“No thanks. Hartley always has her hair up in a ponytail or bun, so you’re already doing a terrible job of pretending.”

“Ohh, what else have you noticed about her?” he asks, taking a bite of my burger.

Everything.

“Nothing.”

“Right,” he says, drawing the word out. “What are you going to say to her?” he asks again.

“I don’t really know. I guess what my mom said when I talked to her. Maybe I can get a read on what she’s feeling before I tell her that I like her.”

“How romantic of you,” he deadpans and I flip him off.

“She’s my best friend, Patrick. I don’t want to tell her that I love her and scare her off or ruin what we have. I can’t lose her.”

“You won’t,” he says confidently. “Like I said, everyone in town can see that the *two* of you are already in love.”

His words make me feel better and I catch up with him, listening as he tells me about Brennan getting his first crush on

some girl named Marine in his class.

“He’s going to be a real ladies’ man. Unlike his uncle,” I tease and Patrick rolls his eyes.

When he doesn’t jump to say that he’s waiting until Brennan is older, my interest is piqued.

“Or maybe he is like his uncle?” I ask, giving Patrick a once-over.

His cheeks turn a slight shade of pink but he doesn’t say anything and I wonder who could have caught his eye and made him question his strict no woman or dating until Brennan was thirty and married.

“I’m going to get it out of you eventually,” I call after him as he balls up his food wrappers and heads for the door.

“We’ll see! Good luck with your girl!” he calls, making sure the last part is extra loud as he walks out of the door.

I curse under my breath, ignoring the looks I’m getting from the people on the street as I turn back to work and start doing inventory.

TWENTY-SEVEN



Hartley

I FINISH DRYING my hair and applying my mascara before I check out my reflection in the mirror. The red sweater clings to my curves and I wonder if Eli will like it. He said that he would be here soon to pick me up for dinner and I don't want to keep him and his parents waiting.

Today was amazing. The bakery sold out of everything and I've already made a list of what to make more of for tomorrow. There was another lull after lunch, so I was able to make the dough for more bread and set it to rise for a few hours. I'll have to bake them tonight once they're ready, but that won't take long.

I like that I'm already setting up a new routine. I wish that I had Grams here to help me with everything, but I know that she would be proud to see our dream come to life and to see it succeed.

There's already a bunch of reviews on the social media pages, and I make a mental note to take more pictures to post tomorrow. I was so busy today that I forgot to do that until it was too late.

There's a knock at the door and I hurry to answer it.

"Hey! I just need to grab my purse and coat and I'll be ready to go," I tell Eli as I let him inside.

“I like the boots,” he says with a laugh as I twirl around to show him the Uggs he gave me.

I grab my purse and stuff my keys and phone inside before I tug my coat and hat on.

“You look beautiful,” Eli says when I join him back at the front door.

“Thanks. You don’t look so bad yourself.”

I lean up to kiss his cheek, but Eli turns his head, capturing my mouth with his at the last second. I wrap my arms around his neck, molding my body against his as Eli slips his tongue past my lips.

“We’re keeping your parents waiting,” I gasp when we finally come up for air.

“I talked to my mom today,” he says and I can sense that he’s nervous about what he’s going to say next.

“Yeah? What did she say?”

“She did say that she always knew that we were pretending.”

“How? Was it something that we did?”

“No, she said that she knew from the second that I told her I had a girlfriend. Mother’s intuition and all of that.”

“Damn. Was she mad that we had lied to her? She didn’t seem mad when I talked to her.”

“No, I think she thinks we’re even since she didn’t tell us that she knew either.”

“Well, at least there’s that,” I say as I move to head for the door.

I’ve only taken two steps when he speaks again.

“And then she asked me if we were really faking it.”

That stops me.

“What?”

“She asked if we had really been faking it,” he repeats, studying my face, looking for a reaction.

I stare out the window, watching as a few snowflakes fall as I try to think over what she could mean.

I’ve been so busy with opening the bakery that I haven’t really thought about what Eli and I are doing. We’ve been spending time together every single day. Sleeping with each other and kissing, even though the deal was over days ago.

“She says that we’re in love with each other,” Eli says when I haven’t said anything for a few minutes.

“Yeah?” I choke out, trying to wrap my head around all of it.

“Yeah. And she’s right. At least about me being in love with you.”

I gape at Eli as he steps forward and takes my hands in his. He looks into my eyes, searching them, and I hold my breath, wondering what he’ll say or do next.

“I love you, Hartley. I don’t know when it happened or how, but it did. I know that we said no relationships when we first started this, and that hasn’t changed for me. I don’t want *relationships*. I just want one. With you.”

He seems to be holding his breath too now as he waits for me to say something. My mind is so scrambled with thoughts though that I can’t think clearly. I don’t know what to say.

“Hartley?” Eli tries, but I can’t look at him right now.

“Sweets. Do you love me? Because I love you. With my whole heart.”

That snaps me out of it.

“You’re right,” I say on an exhale as the answer suddenly becomes so clear. “I don’t know when things changed either, but I love you. You’re such a good man, so handsome and kind. I don’t know how other women couldn’t see that, but their loss is my gain. I love you, Eli, and I want to be with you too.”

His lips land on mine once more and I get lost in him. My hands sneak under his coat and start to pull at his shirt buttons. I've got the top two undone and am working on the third when a voice clears behind us.

I jump, jerking around to see Susan standing there with a smug smile.

"Ready for dinner?" she asks before she turns to head back down the stairs.

Eli groans behind me, tugging my back against his chest, and I squirm when I feel his stiff cock rub against my ass.

"We could be quick?" he suggests and I laugh.

"You could sneak back over here tonight and we could be slow?"

"Yeah, I like that idea more," he says as he threads his fingers with mine and leads me down the stairs and over to his truck.

"Just one more day and they'll be headed back to Florida," he whispers as he helps me into the back seat.

I wink at him as he closes the door shut behind me.

TWENTY-EIGHT



Elijah

FOUR MONTHS LATER...

I NEVER THOUGHT that this day would come.

I'm moving Hartley in with me. I'm going to be living with my *girlfriend*. That's something that I never thought would happen either.

"Can you grab that box by the door next? It's too heavy for me I think," Hartley asks, peeking over the top of the box that she has in her own hands.

"I got it," Patrick says as he jogs back up the stairs.

He and Brennan are here helping us move Hartley. We've already made one trip and then stopped for lunch. We should be able to get everything in this trip since most of her furniture will be staying in the apartment.

Brennan grabs the back door of Patrick's car and Hartley slides the box in. I stack mine on top of hers and then step aside for Patrick to set the box of Hartley's cooking books in next.

"I think that was it," Patrick says as he closes the back of his car and dusts off his hands.

“I’ll go double-check,” Hartley says and I follow her up the stairs.

“Are you sad to be moving out of this place?” I ask her as she double-checks that all of the cabinets in the kitchen are empty.

“Not really. I mean, I’ll miss the commute in the morning,” she teases as she moves onto the bedroom.

“Can’t beat the commute. You want to call this thing off? I’m sure Patrick would be happy to put everything back.”

Hartley laughs, peeking in her now empty closet.

“Nah, I think you’ll be able to make up for my longer commute in other ways.”

“I’d be happy to,” I tell her as she wraps her arms around my waist.

“This is your last chance, you know.”

“My last chance to do what?”

“To get rid of me. To change your mind. Are you sure that you want me to move in with you?”

“I’m positive,” I answer her immediately. “I love you, sweets. I never want to spend a night apart from you.”

“Good, because I feel the same way.”

“Say it,” I demand.

“Only if you say it first.”

“I love you, sweets.”

“I love you too.”

Those three little words have gotten easier and easier to say over the last few months and now they come so naturally. Hearing her say them back always gives me the same rush of pleasure.

Hartley rises up on her tiptoes, smacking a kiss on my lips before she turns and heads out to the kitchen. Brent, the property manager, told her to just leave her set of keys on the kitchen counter for him to grab later. We already scrubbed this

place clean when we packed up everything. Hartley had joked that she never thought we were going to clean up all of the flour and sugar from the kitchen, and I'm sure that there are still some traces around here somewhere.

I make sure the door is locked before I close it and follow Hartley down the stairs and help her into my truck. I wave to Patrick and he pulls out into traffic behind us, following us back to my place.

We spend a few more hours unloading the boxes and helping her unpack before we're finally done.

"Pizza?" I ask and Brennan seems to be the only one disappointed by that.

I know that he would rather cook and Hartley sees it too.

"Now that we live so close to each other, you can come over for dinner whenever you want. We can cook every night if that's what you want," she promises him and he perks up.

I order the pizza and we spend that night crowded in the living room watching some kids show that Brennan loves and finishing off two whole pizzas. Patrick and Brennan leave soon after but I have a feeling that Brennan will be back here tomorrow night to take Hartley up on her cooking offer.

"Ready for bed?" Hartley asks as she clears away the plates and loads the dishwasher.

I don't answer her, just scoop her up in my arms and carry her down the hallway. Hartley wraps her arms around my neck, grinning as we head into our bedroom.

As I lay her out on the bed, I realize how dumb I was to ever think that I didn't want this. Hartley is the best thing that has ever happened to me. She makes me happy, makes sure I'm alright, makes me laugh.

"I love you," I whisper against her skin as I pull her clothes off. "I love you," I tell her as I sink inside of her.

"I love you more," she tells me as our lips meet and we both reach our peaks.

I don't want to start an argument on our first night living together, but I know that's not true. She could never love me more than I love her.

"Goodnight, sweets," I whisper against the crown of her head.

"Goodnight, Eli," she whispers back, her voice cloudy with sleep.

Her breathing evens out and I grin when I know that she's asleep. Her things are lined up next to mine in the closet and on the nightstand and I smile as my eyes fall closed. They look right there.

Like that's where they've always belonged.

TWENTY-NINE



Hartley

TEN YEARS LATER...

“NOT THE!... FLOUR,” I finish as Sadie, our youngest child, drops the bag of flour onto the floor.

“Sowry, Mommy,” Sadie says, her dark blue eyes welling up with tears.

“Oh, honey. It’s alright. It was just an accident. We can clean it up.”

I help Sadie clean up the flour and measure out enough for the cookie dough. The front door bangs open and Brennan and our son, Sawyer, come racing in. Brennan tosses his car keys onto the counter along with his backpack as he rounds the kitchen island.

“Did you start without us?” Brennan asks as he looks around at all of the ingredients laid out on the counter.

“We were just getting everything out and ready,” I assure him.

The kids wash their hands and help me measure out all of the ingredients. Brennan stirs the dough while I get the baking sheets out and spray them.

Brennan practically lives over here. It's been good. Sawyer looks up to him like he's the big brother that he'll never have and it's been handy having someone else who can chauffeur the kids around if I'm running late at the bakery.

"Ready?" I ask, giving Sawyer a hard look when he tries to sneak a bite of cookie dough.

The kids roll the dough into balls and line them up on the sheets while I supervise. We're just slipping the first tray into the oven when the front door opens and Eli and Patrick come strolling inside.

"Smells good in here already," Patrick says as he joins us in the kitchen.

Eli comes in next and Sadie jumps down from her step stool and races over to him.

"Daddy!" she shouts as he bends down and scoops her up in his arms.

"Hey, honey. How's the baking coming?" he asks her and she starts to tell him all about baking chocolate chip cookies, like he hasn't made them with me a hundred times before.

The timer dings and I help Brennan take the sheets out of the oven. Sawyer is busy looking through the pantry for a snack, but when he sees that the cookies are out, he stops his search.

"They're hot. Let them cool," I warn him and he pouts.

"Are you staying for dinner?" I ask Patrick, but it's Brennan who answers for them.

"Yes, please. Can we make bread afterward? I found this new garlic and thyme recipe that I wanted to try to make."

"Oh, that sounds good," I say as he brings the recipe up on his phone to show me.

Brennan helps me make dinner as Patrick and Eli help the kids with their homework. Sawyer is in kindergarten so he doesn't have that much homework and Sadie is only in preschool so she has none, but she hates to be left out, so Eli helps her with the preschool workbook that we got her.

Sawyer sets the table while Brennan and I take the chicken and vegetables out of the oven and carry it over to the table.

Patrick and Brennan eat dinner with us at least twice a week. Always on days when Cate, Patrick's wife, is at work.

Frank and Susan moved back to Honey Peak after Sawyer was born. They didn't want to miss out on a second with their grandkids and they usually join us for dinner at least twice a week too.

Sometimes it's strange to have so many people around. I went from being alone to meeting Eli and gaining a whole group of friends and family.

I stare across the table at my husband, smiling as he helps Sadie with her glass of milk. We got married eight years ago in a small ceremony right here in Honey Peak. I made all of the food and Susan planned the rest.

Eli looks up and grins at me as his eyes lock with mine.

Who knew that my life would turn out this way? And all from throwing a dart at a map and uprooting my life. All from walking into the Grove Trading Post and getting trapped in some jacket. All from agreeing to some stupid deal to be his fake girlfriend.

It was the best decision that I have ever made.

Did you enjoy *The Trouble With Falling*? Then be sure to check out my other books!

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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