



way past

Mistletoe

THE MORGAN FAMILY ~ BOOK FOUR

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

BROOKE ST. JAMES

Way Past Mistletoe
Morgan Family Book 4
Brooke St. James
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Chapter 1

Adeline Baker

Houston, Texas

Early December

“This is Luna Boutique. How can I help you?”

“Addie, I need you. Where are you? I need to borrow something to wear right now.”

It was my best friend and roommate, Josie. She had called the landline, but I knew the sound of her voice.

“I’m at work. You just called me here.”

“I know. I knew you were at Luna, but I don’t see you from here. I’m coming down the street right now. I’m looking in your window.”

“I’m in the back,” I said. “Wrapping presents. Are you at the coffee shop? What’s the matter?”

“I’m walking over now. I need to ask a favor—a big favor. Hang on... dang it. I’m... let me take care of this call and I’ll see you in a second. I’m coming to you. Wait there.” She hung up the phone, and I smiled and shook my head.

“Of course, I’ll wait here. I’m working, Josie.” I said those words, but not to anyone in particular. I was mostly just mumbling as I set aside my work and walked toward the front of the store.

I worked part-time in an upscale boutique where we sold clothing, perfume, and accessories. We had a few men’s items—cologne, sunglasses, etc., but our clientele was mostly women.

I had no idea Josie was coming to this neighborhood tonight, and I walked toward the front of the store with a questioning expression on my face. Josie had ended her other call before she came inside. I could tell right away that she was in a hurry.

One of my coworkers was at the front of the store, and she started to greet Josie, but then she realized Josie was there to talk to me.

“I need you to bail me out,” Josie said as we converged in the store.

“Bail you out of what?”

She opened her jacket, and I saw an obvious red stain on her off-white shirt. I could not help but laugh. It was basically the worst-ever food stain.

“It’s not funny. I had to get Landon to drop me off two blocks over because it’s all blocked off down on Main.”

“Yeah, I know. They’re doing some kind of Christmas-lighting thing.”

“Can you help me?” she asked, looking desperate.

“Clean your shirt? We can try.”

“Can you get me a new shirt? I don’t have time to go home and change. We’re already running late for the show. I can’t go to a musical like this. I can’t wear my coat the whole time, and I am not going in there with a big spaghetti stain.”

“How did you even get that?” I asked, looking down at it.

“Catherine and Michael brought their kid,” she said. “He was with us at the restaurant. He threw a meatball.”

“He threw a meatball?” I asked, laughing.

“I don’t even want kids right now,” she said, looking mad. “We’re going to be late for the show, and Landon’s dad got us those tickets. If we go in after it starts, his dad is going to get mad.”

“What am I supposed to do? Do you want to buy a shirt from here?” I gestured to the racks of clothing all around us.

“All these clothes cost like two hundred each. Can you just give it to me? Let me just wear it for the night and then bring it back right after the show is over.”

“Josie. No. I can’t. Belinda’s right there, and even if she wasn’t... no. I’ll just...” I hesitated, thinking. “I’ll give you my shirt.”

I had on a pink sweater. It was pretty with discreet flecks of glitter thread that made it have a whimsical sparkle. I wore it frequently to work in the winter because it was one of my few nice sweaters. Josie had on black dress pants, and I knew the sweater would match them. “Follow me to the back,” I said. “I’ll be right back!” I announced to Belinda from across the store.

She waved and nodded at me, and I went toward the changing rooms with Josie walking behind me.

“Thank you for this,” she said. “What are you going to wear?”

“I have on a black bodysuit under this. I’ll put on one of our necklaces or scarves to dress it up until I leave. It’ll be fine. We close in two hours.”

I went in one changing room, and she went into the other. “I’m going to toss it over the top,” I said.

“Thank you,” she replied.

It was two minutes later when Josie walked out of the store, a cold gust of wind blowing in behind her. She waved and blew me a kiss through the opening of the door, and I smiled and waved back at her.

“Was that your friend from school?” Belinda asked.

“Yes. Josie. She’s my roommate, too,” I said, turning to look at her as she made her way over to me.

“They’re just browsing,” Belinda explained, nudging her head and referring to people who were in the store with us. I nodded nonchalantly as she came over to where I was standing.

“I’ve seen your friend in here before, but I’ve never met her.”

I nodded as I straightened a display. “I’ll introduce you next time. She was in a hurry.”

“She talked you out of your shirt?” she asked, coming to stand next to me. She began working on straightening the same display. It was a section of office supplies, fancy paperweights, and letter openers, things of that sort. People loved to pick them up and look at them because everything was interesting and beautiful. We were constantly straightening this section.

“She had a big spaghetti stain on her shirt,” I said.

“And so she left you without a sweater?”

I shrugged. “I didn’t mind. She’s going to a big production. Some musical.”

“Didn’t she go to something else last week?”

“Yes. She goes to everything. Her boyfriend’s rich, and his dad gets them tickets. She has money too. They’re always doing cool stuff.”

“Maybe you have to be rich to get a rich boyfriend,” she said.

“Maybe. But Josie is the reason I have that nice room. That’s how we met—her dad is my landlord. Her parents rented the house for her when she came to college here. She has the master bedroom and they rent two other bedrooms—one of them to me. It’s walking distance to campus, and it’s a much nicer place than I would have been able to afford otherwise.”

“Is that why you gave her the shirt off of your back?” she asked.

“Bye, thank you!” I said as the customers walked out of the door without buying anything. “I didn’t mind giving her my sweater,” I said.

“Look at you, always being so charitable.”

“Oh, my gosh, don’t remind me.”

“What?”

“I need to look for a place to volunteer. I lied to my mom today, and now I have to rearrange my life to fit with the lie.”

“Is it that you have a boyfriend, because my son would gladly stand in as your fake fiancé.”

I laughed. “She does not want me to have a boyfriend,” I said. “That would be her worst nightmare.”

“What lie did you tell her, then?”

“She’s been bugging me about going home for Christmas, and I’ve brushed her off this whole time. I just can’t bear to go, and I had to lie to her today. I told her I volunteered to serve at a soup kitchen this year. Then she started asking me exact questions and pushing in different ways, and I had to lie more and tell her specifically that I had promised to work on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. It’s terrible. I hate lying to my mom.”

“Good thing she didn’t ask the name of the place,” she said.

“Oh, she did ask me. I told her I didn’t remember. I said it was something Josie’s dad set up. She asked so many questions that I had to tell about twenty lies to get out of the conversation. It was horrible. I can hardly remember the details of my fake plans.”

“Why would you having a boyfriend be your mom’s worst nightmare?” she asked, going back to what I said before.

“Because she’s terrified that I’ll get married and stay in Houston. She’s got my future all planned out in Many—my work and everything. That’s the whole reason I went to nursing school. This was her dream. She used to clean at a local doctor’s office, and she always said it was her biggest dream for me to work there—as someone on staff. She wanted me to go straight to work without going to nursing school first. She wanted me to work as a receptionist or in billing. I had to talk her down off a ledge when I told her I was going to college.”

Belinda stared blankly at me, looking confused like she didn’t identify with my mother at all. “How far is Many?” she asked. “Like the dude’s name, short for Emanuel?”

“Yeah, but it’s spelled M-A-N-Y. And it’s three and a half hours from here. I picked the closest college I could, and you would think I’m in outer space right now. Mom’s never even been over here. We only see each other when I go back home.”

“You go home quite a bit, don’t you?”

“Only because she needs me. She’s got health problems, and she stays at home now. She expects me to come home once a month, and even that doesn’t seem like enough.”

“She expects you to drive home once a month?” Belinda asked, disbelieving.

“Yes.”

“Three-and-a-half hours?”

“More, by the time I stop. And I pay for gas,” I added.

Belinda laughed. “And she’s expecting you to get your butt home for good directly after graduation?”

“She didn’t put it like that, but she definitely expects me to come home. It sounds crazy when I say it out loud, but it’s just my life. My mom wants me home as much as possible. It’s always been that way.”

“Well, sometimes we don’t get what we want. If you don’t want to go back home, you don’t have to. You’re a grown woman. You can get a job and live somewhere else. I wouldn’t think of telling my kids they had to live near me and work a certain job.”

I smiled at how easily she said it. She wasn’t dependent on her kids. She had no idea what it was like to be in my situation.

“She’s not like you. I wish I had a nickel for every time my mother said she can’t wait until I’m done with college or she’s holding her breath until I’m done with college. You would think she’s suffocating until I get back.”

“That’s too much pressure,” she said. “I would have hated my life if I was forced to go to college for my mom’s dream and then go back to the country and take care of her. I’m sorry, but I can’t stand when people act like they hate life without

me. I had a needy husband one time, and I tell you what, I put an end to that real quick.”

“Yeah, but I can’t break up with my mom.”

“You can stand up to her. You can tell her you want to stay in Houston after you graduate.”

“Well, Josie will be graduating, so our lease is up, and I just always assumed I’d go back and work at the doctor’s office.”

“But you can stay here and get a job and an apartment. You can go to Austin, or Boston, or New York, or Timbuctoo. It’s not your mom’s life. It’s your life. Hey, speaking of... we’re dead. Nobody’s coming in here. Do you want me to cover till close and you can get out of here?”

“No, I’m good, I don’t mind staying. And I need the hours.”

“Do you mind if I go, then?” she asked, ready with the question.

“Uh, no, I guess not.”

“I have to get my Christmas shopping started, and I was going to see what’s going on down the street. I wonder if we can see any of it from here.”

There was a Christmas tree lighting happening nearby. Our store was near a district with a lot of shopping, and there was a three-block area adjacent to us that did a ton of decorating for Christmas. Our boss would end up putting some lights outside, but we didn’t have them up yet. These festivities would remind her, and she would inevitably have strings of lights set out next week for us to hang. We would hang them, and then she’d say ‘it’s not enough’ and bring more the following day. Belinda had only been working with us for a few months, so she wasn’t privy to this knowledge, otherwise, I would make a joke about it.

“We usually can’t see it from here,” I said. “But we’ll put some of our own lights up soon.”

“Do you care if I leave early?” she asked.

“No,” I said.

“Okay, well, good luck with your mom. Don’t forget it’s your life, though.”

“Thanks,” I said.

And within a few minutes, Belinda was gone and I was alone in the store—me and my thoughts about life. People walked by on the sidewalk, and some came in, but not a lot. I could see action outside with groups coming and going at the coffee shop across the street. It didn’t surprise me that we would be slow tonight since all the festivities were happening down the street.

I helped a few customers, cleaned, and prepared for closing, but I could not get Belinda’s words out of my mind. It was near the end of the night when I stood near the windows that lined the street and peered down the block, toward Main Street. I adjusted the sheer drapes at the edge of the display.

I already longed to be back in Houston, and I hadn’t even left yet. I knew I was dreading going home before I had that conversation with Belinda. She wasn’t telling me anything I didn’t know when she said I should try to change my situation.

But how could I? I would graduate in May, and then hightail it home to start work at the doctor’s office. My mom had known Dr. Bosco for years. They had put off hiring someone new because they were specifically waiting for me to get back.

Nothing against Many, because it was a nice town and everything, but the idea of working for Dr. Bosco felt like a prison sentence. *How could struggling through college on scholarships, assistantships, and part-time jobs be the pinnacle of my life? Life was supposed to get better after college, wasn’t it?* I was supposed to build and grow into a good life, but all I could do was dread the time six months from now when I would have to move home. It was difficult juggling work and school, but this would still seem like a dream compared to going back.

I stared out of the window, feeling all sorts of forlorn emotions. I felt invisible. I felt like I was in a state of needing rescuing, and no one was coming to save me. *If only I had a reason to stay. If only someone at the hospital would offer me twice as much money to stay and work in Houston.* Surely my mom would understand if I was making double the salary starting out.

But that wasn't going to happen. My friends in nursing school talked about jobs constantly, and I knew what the current working wage was. It was a little more than I would make in Many, but the cost of living was almost double here. And I would no longer be living with Josie, so I would have to find a room for rent or a small apartment.

My mom would never understand me staying here just so I could struggle to make rent. I straightened the window display as these thoughts continued to play in my mind. My anxious thoughts gave me a feeling of smothering claustrophobia, and I took a deep breath and did something I did when I felt anxiety. I prayed.

"Help me," I said out loud since no one was in the store. "Give me an excuse to stay. Please help me come up with a way to stay here." I stared out of the window, taking deep, calming breaths. "If it's Your will that I stay here, then please make it happen."

As soon as those words came out of my mouth, light appeared and shone down on me. I squinted up at it, smiling at the timing. I blinked and focused on the light.

A star. It was a star, hanging on the nearest street light. It was gorgeous, and I smiled as I stared out of the window, taking in the beauty and marveling at the timing.

I scanned the area and saw other people react to it, pointing upward. I hadn't noticed the lights when I came to work because I came in through the back. I had no idea this one was hanging there. It was a new decoration this year. I noticed the people pointing at other things and I peered down the block, taking in the other lights that had come to life as

well. I even saw some people stop and cheer. I stared at the star nearest me, still smiling.

Reassurance washed over my body in a sudden, soothing rush. I took the timing of the light as a promise from God that everything would be okay. I vaguely wondered if it was legitimate to draw such a conclusion, but then I remembered that God would probably want me to feel like everything will be okay, anyway.

Chapter 2

Beck Morgan

A few weeks later

Almost Christmas

Beck's studio was overcrowded at the moment. He had two collections worth of art—one that was not for sale and had just come back from one museum and was bound for another—and one that was mostly sold but would soon be on display at a local gallery.

The majority of Beck's work was abstract, landscape, or a mixture of the two. Beck had a gift with color and he painted scenes with intensified shapes, patterns, and colors. He sold pieces to some individuals, and they had been purchased for upscale offices and boutique hotels all over the world.

Beck's paintings were always full of repetitive lines and shapes. He did not paint people. He was not a people painter. When people appeared in his paintings they were always tiny and faceless—nondescript figures in the distance. He had only painted the face of one person, and that was because there was only one person who had a face that was interesting enough to paint.

Adeline Baker.

Beck had met her years ago when she got a student job at his dad's medical office. Her function in the office was associated with her degree, and she was only there for a year or two. Beck stopped by to see his dad more often than necessary during that time because he wanted to see her. He didn't like her, though. He barely talked to her. He only liked her face. She had the most interesting face with an aesthetically pleasing sequence of shapes. It was the one face he felt the urge to paint. He enjoyed painting it, actually. He had made a few paintings of Adeline Baker over the years. Her face basically beckoned him to do it.

Knowing exactly how insane that sounded, Beck never showed these paintings to another soul. He never spoke of

them. He just painted them, and looked at them for a day or two as he contemplated her facial structure and the various combinations of shapes that could happen in any given human face.

Then he would paint over it. No harm no foul. He didn't follow Adeline or care about her personal life. He didn't even take a picture of her. He painted her from memory, and he didn't feel bad about it. But he still didn't go around announcing it to anyone since he knew it would sound much creepier than it was. He had painted three or four paintings of faces in his whole life, and all of them were Adeline Baker. All of them except this latest one had already been painted over.

He had just finished this one yesterday. He looked at it from across the studio, smiling at it. It was on a large canvas, and it was the first and only one like it. It was his traditional cityscape style but with a portrait of a lady worked into it. There were images of other people in the scene, but they were in the distance. Adeline's whole body only took up about ten percent of the canvas space, but she was the star of the painting.

Beck loved it, and that was saying a lot because he was hypercritical of his own work. He stared at it from across his studio, smiling at the composition and the expression on her face. He hated to paint over it, but he knew he would. He considered keeping the painting and covering only the part she was in. But he knew the memory of her in it would stick with him, and he would need to paint over the whole thing. He would give himself a day or two to enjoy it.

He walked that way as he inspected it. Now that it was dry, he could appreciate the true colors. He captured her face. He smiled at the sight of it. It was one of his favorite paintings he had ever made.

"No! Get back," he demanded instantly.

"What?" his sister, Lila, asked, confused.

"No, no, no, go back. Get out. Go that way."

“What?”

“What are you doing here?” Beck asked, charging the door, walking quickly and wearing a *don't you dare go a step further* expression.

His sister stopped in her tracks looking wide-eyed and stunned.

“How did you get in here? Look over there, Lila.”

“What’s going on?”

Beck rushed to the painting and took it off of its easel. He instantly swiveled it where his sister couldn’t see, and he stood there, looking at her like she had lost her mind.

“What is your major malfunction?” she asked, staring at him.

“I thought you were going to Arkansas. Why are you here?”

“I am going to Arkansas. Me and Wes thought about staying when dad found out he has to work, but we’re going the day after tomorrow. Are you still going? What’s on the painting, Beck?”

Beck had been trying to back up discreetly and stash the painting while Lila was talking, but she caught onto him.

“Nothing,” he said. “It’s just not done yet, and I don’t want anyone looking at it.”

“You’ve never cared about me looking at your half-done paintings before. That one’s half-done right there.” She pointed at another painting before staring at Beck again.

“I just don’t want you looking at this one. It’s a subject matter I don’t normally paint, and I don’t like it. I mean, I like it, I like the painting. But I-I’m not done with it... I’m mostly done with it. I’m not interested in letting anyone see it, Lila. This one’s private.”

“Why are you so nervous?” Her expression was truly confused and then it turned teasing. She smiled. “Is it a woman?” Her eyes widened and she gasped. “Is it a nude?”

“No, it’s not a nude. Lila, please.”

“Please to you, Beck. I think it’s about a woman. Unless you correct me I’m gonna go right on believing that there is an image of a woman on that canvas.”

“There is an image of a woman, but she’s in one little corner. It has nothing to do with nudes. It’s just a different style than I normally paint, and I’m not letting anyone see it.”

“I can tell you’re acting weird,” she said.

“I’m acting weird because you’re acting weird,” he said. “You’re looking at me like you’re about to rush me and tackle me for this.”

“I feel like I am about to,” she said, taking a stalking step toward him.

“Lila. Don’t. I’m serious. I had the studio door locked for a reason. I don’t want anyone seeing this.”

Beck knew he had taken time and used care on the painting. He knew his sister would love it and make a big deal of it.

“One, Beck, I didn’t think you’d care if I came to your studio. You gave me a key. It’s not like it’s your bedroom, it’s a studio. I assumed you wouldn’t care if I came in. I saw your car outside, and I thought the door was locked by accident. I thought you’d thank me for unlocking it.”

“No, Lila, there’s no other way in, and I’m not thanking you.”

“I see that,” she said with her hands raised in a gesture of surrender.

“Just give me a second to put this up, and we’ll be cool.”

“I’m not going to give up until you let me see it. I’m too curious now.”

“Too bad, because you’re not seeing it. You’re going to make it a bigger deal than it is.”

“As it stands right now, I assume it’s an insanely big deal. I assume that it’s about women and that it’s inappropriate or

illegal.”

“You know it’s not.”

“Then why won’t you show it to me?”

“Because, Lila.”

Beck did not want his sister to barge in on him. He had absolutely no plans to show Lila or anyone else this painting. But he did love it, and if he showed it to anyone in the world, it would be Lila. If anyone would keep his secret, it would be his sister.

“I like the painting, which is the only reason I’m even thinking about showing—hang on, stay back. I can’t believe I’m doing this. I’m going to flip it around and show it to you, Lila, but do not, I repeat, *do not* get any big ideas about the content. You know her, and I’m telling you right now that this painting means nothing. It’s getting destroyed. It is not seeing the light of day.”

“Whyyy?” she asked in a pleading tone.

“See? You’re already starting to bug me about it.”

“But why does it have to be destroyed? I don’t understand. Who do I know?”

“There’s a woman in it.”

“I knew it!” she said.

“No. You’re wrong, though. You think I painted a woman because I like her and the truth is that I painted her because I like her *face*. There’s a huge difference.”

“Liking her face is the same as liking her.”

“No, it’s not. I don’t know her well enough to like her. I painted her from an artistic standpoint.”

“Fine, fine, it’s artistic, Beck. It’s nothing but art, so just let me—”

Lila took in a sharp breath of air, gasping at the sight of it. “This is the girl from dad’s office. What’s her name?” She

turned to her brother and stared at him. “This is that girl. The student. Addison? Allison?”

“Adeline.”

“Yes,” she said.

She stared at the painting, obviously focusing on the lower right corner of it where Adeline Baker was depicted.

“This is gorgeous, Beck. You cannot destroy this.” She blinked at him. “Is that what you said? You want to *destroy* it? I’m sorry, but I just can’t let you do that. It’s too beautiful.”

“You can’t stop me,” he said. “I can’t keep it. I’m not keeping it. Keeping it was never an option. It was just an experiment. It means nothing. Other than the fact that I think it’s cool that I wanted to paint a person.”

“It’s extremely cool, Beck. This is gorgeous. Look at those lights.”

“I sketched it when I was sitting there, and then she appeared in the scene. She had no idea, which is why no one can ever see or know about this.”

“You cannot destroy this painting.”

“Uh, yes, I actually can. It’s easy. Thank you for saying you like it. I’m glad you like it, because I honestly do, too. But I’m not keeping it. This is stalker stuff, Lila, and I’m not like that. She would be creeped out. I would definitely be creeped out if someone painted a picture of me.”

“You have fan art. I saw somebody tag you with fan art they did—that picture of you at the Astros game.”

“Yeah, but that’s different. I put myself out there on the Internet. This girl was just minding her business. I’m not showing anyone. I’ve done it before, and you didn’t care because you didn’t know about it. Just forget you ever saw this.”

“Are you saying you painted a picture of the *same girl* before, or are you saying you’ve just painted over other, unrelated paintings before?”

“Both.”

“You’ve painted this girl before? Adeline?”

“Yes, Lila I’ve painted her before, and I’ve already painted over them. It’s no big deal. It’s bones and skin, and objectively she’s interesting to paint.”

“This is your second time painting this woman? Are you kidding me?”

“No, I’m not kidding,” Beck answered, not bothering to tell her it was more than twice.

He could have hidden the painting and not shared any of this with her. He probably should have done that. But somewhere deep inside he probably felt guilty for painting a stranger and wanted to run this all past his sister.

“You like her,” she said, staring at it intensely.

“No, I seriously don’t. But she’ll think I do. That’s exactly what she’ll think. She’ll misunderstand like you, and get all freaked out, and I wouldn’t be able to blame her.”

“You could give her this one without telling her you painted another one.”

“No, I can’t. It’s all too invasive. I’m just painting over it. I just wanted to show you because I liked how it came out.”

She let out a frustrated sigh, looking at it. “It’s too bad, Beck, but I can tell I’m not going to be able to talk you out of it. At least give yourself a few days with it so you can lock it into your memory. I guess taking a picture of it with your phone is out of the question.”

“Yeah, no.”

“Oh, well,” she said, looking disappointed but understanding there was nothing she could do or say to talk him out of it. “When are you going to paint over it?”

“I don’t know. Tomorrow maybe, or the next day. I’ll give myself a day to look at it since it just dried.”

“This girl would totally go out with you Beck. I remember her. She was really nice.”

“I don’t want that,” he said. “She could be married for all I know. I just wanted to paint her. A muse. I never thought I’d say that word, but there must be some truth to muses existing because I just look at her face and I feel the urge to paint it. It doesn’t even matter because it’s the last time it’s going to happen.”

“Why?”

“Because I don’t see her. It was a fluke that I saw her here the other night.” He pointed at the picture, and she stared at it once again.

“I knew who it was the second I looked at it,” she said.

“I know. She’s got a recognizable face.”

Recognizable was an understatement, but Beck left it at that. He wasn’t going to tell his sister that Adeline had the most striking, proportionate face he had ever seen.

“I’m sad about this Beck. It’s too beautiful of a painting to destroy.”

“I’m sorry to say it, Lila, but it’s not an option to do anything but destroy it. I’m not keeping it, I’m not selling it. It is what it is. It was practice. It’s not the first canvas I’ve painted over, and it won’t be the last. I just wanted to show you because I thought it came out good, and I knew you would like it.”

Chapter 3

Adeline Baker

The following evening

It was cold out, and I had on my trusty pink sweater—the one Josie borrowed that night when she got a spaghetti stain. She ended up going backstage after that show, so my sweater got to do much cooler things without me than when I was wearing it. There are pictures of my sweater with the cast of *The Lion King*. Tonight, it was just at work with me, wrapping other people’s gifts.

I pushed up the sleeves for the fortieth time before adding tape to the final side of the newly wrapped, small, rectangular box. There were just a few shopping days left before Christmas, and I had already wrapped hundreds of gifts at Luna. I was fast at it, and often got asked to package and wrap online orders.

I had wrapped so many gifts at work that I neglected wrapping my own. I had a few friends I was buying for in Houston, plus I sent a package home, so I just put everything I bought in gift bags. My fingers were tired, and I wished I had some gift bags for Luna customers at the moment.

“Adeline, there’s someone here to see you,” Belinda came around the corner wearing a stunned expression that made me scowl.

“To see me? Who?”

She shrugged and as she got closer to me she whispered, “I think it’s that girl from Red Wall. She’s asking for you, and she has a big package.”

“What’s Red Wall?” I asked, having no idea.

“Shhh, she’s in the store! It’s a TV show. She’s an actress. I know it’s her, and she’s famous. Her name is Lila Morgan.”

“Oh, I know her. I didn’t know she was in that show but I’ve met Lila Morgan before. I used to work for her dad.” My expression turned confused. “She’s asking for me?”

“Yes!” Belinda said with wide eyes, obviously impressed.

I took a deep breath and straightened my shoulders in preparation to walk out from behind the corner. Nothing made sense. I couldn't believe Lila even remembered my name for one, and also there was no way she would even know that I worked here.

I walked toward the front of the store with all sorts of questions swirling through my head. But I smiled the instant I rounded the corner and could see Lila.

“Hello,” I said, grinning at her curiously as I approached.

She had a gigantic package with her—an oversized parcel, wrapped in brown paper. It was not anything she had gotten at this store. It was gigantic. It was large and flat and she kept it down by her side, but I couldn't help but notice it.

“Do you mind if I talk to you for a minute alone?” Lila whispered the phrase just before Belinda walked up behind me and was in earshot. She seemed oddly serious, and my first thought was that it might be something medical—that she remembered me from her dad's office and wanted to ask me something clinical.”

“Sure,” I said trying to be discreet.

“Yes ma'am, they're right over here,” I said gesturing to the front of the store and pretending she had asked me about a product.

“Is everything okay?” I asked once we were alone in the front of the store.

“Yes. Hi. Hey, Adeline. I see why he... you have a lovely smile,” she said, taking a second to stare at me.

“Thank you,” I said, trying to figure out what this was all about.

“I'm sorry. I realize this is an odd thing for me to do, but my brother is an artist, and he painted a picture of you. It's in this package.” She widened her eyes and tilted her head to the side in a tiny, stiff gesture, toward the gigantic package she was holding. She stared at me as if this were all a big secret.

“There’s a girl in the painting who looks like you. Well, she is you, and my brother was going to paint over this and destroy it. It was about to be destroyed, and I just couldn’t let that happen. I’m sorry if this is strange for you,” she whispered, looking guilty and apologetic. She glanced toward the window as if she was scared of something. “Look. I had to sneak into my brother’s art studio to get this package. He painted this picture, it has you in it, and he was going to destroy it because he thought it was too weird to paint somebody when they didn’t know they were being painted. Saying that out loud, it does kind of sound weird. But I promise, he just wanted to paint a picture of the street, and you happened to be in it. Either way, he would absolutely kill me if he knew I was here right now. Not actually kill me, but goodness, it would not be good.” She looked at the window again as if she expected him to come in any moment. “He’s honestly going to be so mad at me. I wrapped it in that paper because it’s all I had. It’s paper bags. But there’s a gorgeous painting under here. Beck was going to destroy it, and I’m sorry, but...” She trailed off with a sigh. “Bottom line is that if it were me in this painting, I would want it.”

She thrust the package toward me, and I reached out and took it from her by instinct.

“I’m sorry if this is weird,” she said, in a regretful but hurried tone. “He’s not in love with you or anything. He just randomly painted you. It was random. I’m about to lie and say it’s for my dad, okay? I’m leaving, and I’m going to lie to your friend. I’m sorry I’m in a hurry. I’m seriously scared of my brother finding me in here giving this to you.” She put her hand on mine and looked at me with a serious expression, like she needed to clarify. “He’s not anything to be scared of. I’m not scared because he’s a scary person. I’m just not supposed to give you that.” She looked me in the eyes. “I hope you enjoy it, Adeline, and I hope you’re doing well. It’s great seeing you. Forgive me for being vague and in a hurry.”

That was the last thing she whispered. She squeezed my hand and then moved a step away from me. She gave me a little wave and then waved at Belinda, who was at a distance behind me.

“So, just drop that off at my dad’s office when you go by there,” she said in an over-exaggerated tone that was obviously meant for Belinda. “That’s for my dad, the office Christmas party, so just drop it off there for me. Please,” she added.

“Yeah, okay,” I said, trying to go along with it.

There were others in the store, and Belinda glanced at them. There was a third woman, CeeCee, working with us as well. She was at the register. I looked around, noticing what everyone was doing, wondering how I would maneuver this large canvas through the store. It wasn’t heavy, but it was cumbersome and must have been at least three feet tall and maybe four feet wide.

I watched as Lila crossed the door, but mostly I was concerned with getting the mysterious package to the back.

“What’s that?” CeeCee asked thirty minutes later when we were leaving.

“It’s... I’m not sure. I think it’s a picture—a wall hanging or something. That’s why it’s so big. I’m supposed to take it to the hospital for Dr. Morgan.”

“Yeah, I saw Lila Morgan here. She’s from Houston, you know. My cousin used to go to college with her. She was pre-med.”

I just nodded.

“How are you so close with her that she comes to see you at work?” Belinda asked.

“She just needed to bring me this,” I said, vaguely.

I wanted to rip it open. It took all the strength inside of me to play it cool and casual like I was really going to deliver that somewhere and didn’t care about it. The truth was it was highly likely that I would rip it open at a stoplight on the way home.

I didn’t do that. I was certainly tempted, but I knew I would have to carry it inside past my roommates. I waited until I got home and into my bedroom. Josie was in the living room and she asked me what it was, and I gave her the same

story I gave my coworkers. I told her I had to deliver it to the hospital. She looked confused, but I just ignored her and headed into my bedroom.

I locked my bedroom door and sat on the edge of the bed with the edge of the painting resting on the floor in front of me. I had no idea what I would find when I opened it. I stared at the package remembering everything Lila had said. It was all so rushed and jumbled that it was difficult to make sense of it in my recollections.

I opened it by resting it on my bed and carefully tearing the tape. I easily peeled back the huge sheet of patchwork paper bags, and I gasped at how breathtakingly beautiful the painting was. I had seen some of Beck Morgan's paintings. There were a couple of them in his dad's office. My eyes were drawn to the lower part of the painting, to the lights. The gritty street scene was contrasted by gorgeous glowing lights—streetlights, Christmas lights, and lights from the storefront. His painting style was angular and full of shapes and lines.

And there I was, in the window. My eyes filled with tears as I looked at it. Hot tears ran silently down my cheeks as I sat there and took it in. I was overwhelmed by the striking beauty, stunned. It looked like music sounded—his painting style was like music to my eyes. And I was in the song he had played.

I had never, in my whole entire life, felt so special. The sight of this masterpiece, and the timing of the moment he captured caused me to cry. I blinked away tears so that I could clear away the blur and focus on the painting. But then my eyes blurred again. It was so beautiful and unbelievably timed that I cried actual sobbing tears. It was like something that should be hanging in an art museum, and there it was, on my bed. My image was a part of it. I felt honored and like a fraud all at the same time. It was the most beautiful thing I owned. It was the most beautiful thing I had ever been a part of, and I didn't even know I was a part of it until now.

I couldn't believe the timing.

In the painting, I was staring at the star that had just lit up. I remembered that exact moment. The sign for Luna with

the crescent moon was hanging on the other side of the window. The composition was stunning in itself, but the timing of it was what had me feeling actually stunned. It was a vision of the exact moment when I prayed and God made me feel like everything was going to be okay. And now a famous actress had come to me and brought me a priceless snapshot of it.

It was all so special and overwhelming that I could do nothing but stare at it and cry. My heart said God had delivered this to my doorstep, and I felt touched by it.

I had on the black body suit, which I never wore other than that one night, and I was smiling as I looked out of the window at the star. I remember the joy I felt at that moment, and it was surreal to have the image of it, depicted by a master's brushstroke.

My tears were of gratitude and happiness but also wonder and awe at the fact that something so unbelievable had happened to me.

It needed a frame. It needed to be hanging in a museum with a gorgeous, ornate frame and a description of the moment I experienced. But instead, I shoved it into my closet. Okay, I didn't shove it. I carefully put it in there. I rested it on the floor and made sure nothing was touching it and then I let clothes gently hang over it before I closed my closet door.

While I was in the shower, I did my best to remember the things Lila had told me. She was scared that I would be offended about being in the picture, I thought. She said something about Beck destroying it because of that. I tried to remember the things she had said to me.

My hair was still wet and it was tied up in a towel when I looked up Beck Morgan on social media. I gasped and rolled backward onto my bed at the sight of his profile. He had over a hundred thousand followers. I held my phone in the air while I stared upward at his account. His branding was professional. His paintings were gorgeous. He was actually gorgeous. I remembered how handsome he was.

I stopped scrolling on a picture of him. His face was all straight lines and pouty lips and his jaw was a thing of perfection. He only had a few photos of himself on the feed, though. Most of his pictures were of his art. He painted shapes and lines depicting cities or other busy landscapes—bright colors in contrast with heavy black-and-grey. They were all so beautiful, and my heart ached at the thought of this artist making that image of me in a window. The painting was basically burned into my mind, but I still went to my closet and stared at it five or six more times that night.

Chapter 4

Beck Morgan

The following morning

Beck's heart was pounding like a jackhammer in his chest as he pressed the buttons to call his sister. He had been at the gallery most of the day yesterday, setting up, and he went straight home afterward without coming by the studio. It was now ten in the morning, and he had arrived at his studio five minutes ago.

The painting was gone.

The one he had made of the woman in the window.

He had just moved over thirty paintings into an art gallery yesterday, so his studio had been cleared of a lot of clutter. He could clearly and easily see that THE PAINTING WAS NOT THERE!

His face was hot. He felt agitated, and he stalked around the place like an angry beast. He looked and looked for the first few minutes he was there, and it was nowhere to be found in his studio. Beck's chest felt tight, and he took some deep calming breaths. He wondered if he had made the mistake of taking it to the gallery, but he knew he hadn't. He had gone through all of those paintings.

He was so overheated that he went outside to let the cold air hit his body.

"Dang it, Lila, pick up," he whispered out loud as he walked down the sidewalk. He was so hot and bothered that he enjoyed being in the fifty-degree weather without a coat. He felt relieved by the cold gust of wind hitting his face and arms. It had been four rings, and—

"Hello?" his sister said innocently on the other end.

"Lila."

"Hey, Beck."

"Do you have it?"

“Have what?”

“Don’t mess around, Lila. Tell me right now if you have that painting. I just opened my studio, and it’s not in there. Where’s the painting?”

“What?”

“I’m driving to the gallery right now. I’m going to go over there. There’s a very slim chance that it made its way over with my collection, but I’m almost sure it’s not there. I swear, I saw it in my studio on the way out yesterday. I’m going over there now, Lila. If I get in my car and drive all the way over there, and then I found out you have this painting, I’ll be really upset. Do you have it? Tell me now.”

“No,” she said.

Beck kept walking at a brisk pace, headed to his car without a jacket. He breathed a long sigh, thinking of where he could have misplaced it.

“I did see it, though,” she said.

Beck stopped in his tracks at the sound of her timid tone. He knew she was guilty of something, and his heart felt like it stopped.

“Lila?” He stared at the pavement in front of him. He tried to speak calmly even though he wanted to yell. “If you took that painting from my studio, you need to get in your car and bring it back to me right now.”

Lila was quiet for a few seconds, and during this time, Beck turned and began heading slowly, stiffly back toward his studio. He knew his sister had it, so there was no point going to the gallery to look for it.

“Beck, I would love to, but I—”

“Oh, geez. Oh, no,” Beck said.

His voice was strained, and he made a grunting sound.

“What’s happening?” Lila asked when she heard shifting, like there was a struggle.

“Hang on... ” He trailed off and made a frustrated breathing sound. “That girl is at my studio, Lila. She’s walking in front of that door that leads to my studio. What is she doing here?”

Beck had ducked behind a corner when he saw her. He didn’t think she had seen him, and even if she had, she probably wouldn’t recognize him. He decided to chance it and look out there again.

“She’s at my door,” he said. “She stopped. She’s standing at that exterior door, looking in. What’s she doing here?”

Lila breathed a heavy sigh at the fact that she was being found out.

“What’s that about?” he asked, hearing her.

“I’m not sure what she’s doing there,” Lila said. “I’m shocked because that’s so weird. Are you sure it’s that same girl?”

“Yes, I’m sure. She’s still there. She’s looking in. She’s going in. You need to get it back to me, Lila.”

“Just go talk to her, I guess.”

“I’m not talking to her. I’m staying here until she leaves. My studio door is locked.”

“You have to go talk to her if she came over there to see you, Beck.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about. Bring me the painting back. I’m serious. I’m letting you go so I can wait this out and get back into my studio, but I expect it back today, Lila. I’m serious.”

Beck did not put the pieces together about the painting being missing and the fact that it was related to the girl being there. Up until this point, he thought it was a coincidence. He was usually a quick thinker, but this whole incident had been so shocking that he didn’t put the pieces together.

Beck had been standing there for a minute or so when he wondered if the two could be related. He was curious enough that he began walking back to the studio. He went inside the

exterior door and saw her there, standing still in the hallway near his studio. Her back was to him, and she turned to him once she heard him coming.

“Oh, hello, hi, Beck? Yes, you’re Beck. I shouldn’t have come here like this, I, I was just standing here, writing you a note because I thought this was your studio door, but I wasn’t sure, and I didn’t see anyone in there, and I was... I came by to thank you so much.” She paused for a second but continued right away. “My goodness, thank you so much. You really have no idea how much I will treasure the... I just stare at that thing, and I’m absolutely mesmerized by it. Your sister said you might not want me to have it, but I thought you should know. It was a moment when I was thinking about—”

Beck cut her off. “Could we maybe step inside?” he asked, since she was saying a lot and they were in a public hallway.

“Oh, sure, sorry,” she said, looking relieved that he had cut her off.

Beck was thrown-off, but he was smart enough to put the pieces together by now. He was burning hot with anger at his sister because he knew this woman had seen that painting.

He tried to control his frustration, taking a deep breath as they headed into his studio space. She followed behind him, being completely silent. This gave Beck a few seconds to think. By the time he went into his studio, he had already come up with something to say.

“These are the paintings I normally make,” he said, gesturing around himself. “I just took a whole collection to a gallery, and they were similar in style to this. This is my normal style. I never paint portraits. That painting was a fluke, so I told my sister that I was going to get rid of it.”

He paused, realizing that he should make sure she knew what was going on.

“Have you seen a painting I did with you in it?”

“Yes. I have seen it. Your sister gave it to me, and I’m sorry if she did that against your will, but...” She trailed off

and her face crumpled a little as if she was fighting back tears. She blinked, and Beck could see how affected she was. He saw tears spring to her eyes. “I needed to talk to you in person and let you know something,” she said, her voice wavering.

Beck could not believe this woman was standing in his studio. If only she would stay in there forever. She could make faces and he could draw and paint every expression, every combination of shapes her face could make. He could not help but stare at her. He got lost looking at her eyes and then into them. He thought of a few things he would change about that painting now that he was seeing her up close. She was completely distracting, and Beck just stared at her while she continued to speak. She wore the most sincere expression he had ever seen. His heart went out to her simply by the way she stared at him. She blinked away tears.

“You couldn’t have known this, but the moment you captured in that painting was a significant moment for me. I was having a rough time that night, and those lights came on out of nowhere, and I just...it was God. I can’t believe that you made the painting from that moment. I’m just so thankful to have it that I had to come over here and let you know that. I hope you don’t mind. I tracked down this address to see if I could thank you and pay you—”

“You have that painting in your possession? I did not want my sister to give it to you. She stole it from my studio and took it against my will. I did not know she gave it to you.”

She stared at him blinking, looking regretful.

Beck was embarrassed. “I saw you in the window that night, and I felt like painting what I saw, but I hadn’t consulted you. I didn’t want anyone to see it. The painting needs to be destroyed. It’s not my usual style, and I don’t want it circulating.”

“Are you trying to say you’re taking it back?” she asked, still tearing up and now looking afraid.

“Yes, I am.”

“You can’t. It’s the nicest thing I own. It’s the only nice thing I own. I came here to thank and pay you.”

His jaw clenched because he hated denying her. He could see she wanted it. “I’ll give you any other piece you want.”

“I want the one I have,” she said.

“Wh-why are you... don’t cry. Stop crying.”

“I’m sorry. I’m trying to stop. I didn’t think you were going to get mad, and I—”

“I’m not mad at you. I’m mad at my sister. I just found out like five minutes ago that the painting was missing, and now here we are. It’s humiliating. I don’t paint people without permission. I mean, I did paint you without permission, but it wasn’t meant for anybody to see, not even my sister. I regret all of this. I need that painting back.”

Her face crumpled again.

“No, no, no, don’t do that,” he said, begging her to stop.

“I’m sorry,” she said sniffing. “I didn’t expect this conversation to go like this. I’m just... it’s the most wonderful, beautiful thing I’ve ever been given in my whole life.” She covered her face with her hand, hiding the fact she was crying.

“I’ll give you a bigger piece. I have one that’s going for eight thousand at the gallery right now. You can have it, no questions asked.”

She sniffled again and blinked. “Beck, in five months, I’m going away. I won’t live in Texas anymore, and I won’t be nearly as happy there as I was while I was h-here.” She tried to stifle her emotion, but tears continued to form.

Beck stared at her, wishing he could do something to make her stop. She was even beautiful when she was crying.

“My future feels a little bit like I’m serving a life sentence, and this painting is a gift that makes that fate more bearable. I was so thankful to you, Beck. I came here to tell you that. I don’t know if you remember this, but I used to work for your dad. We’ve met and even talked a few times.”

“I know,” he said. “I knew who you were in the window, I recognized you. That’s why I painted you.”

“You did?” she asked, putting a hand to her chest and sounding amazed and honored that he knew who she was. “I just know I’m going to look at that painting and remember a time when my life was fun, beautiful, and full of possibility. I really thought it was a gift from God. I look at it, and it feels like a hope and a future to me. I thought God had used your hands to paint it for me because it was exactly what my soul needed. I was coming here to tell you that, to thank you, and see if I could offer to pay for it. I’m pretty sure I can’t pay your normal fee, but I would love to cover your supplies.” She sniffled and wiped at her tear-stained cheeks as she took an unsteady breath.

Beck’s heart went out to her. He wasn’t usually an emotional person but it was almost impossible to stand there and watch her without taking her into his arms and offering some sort of comfort.

Chapter 5

Adeline Baker

“Why does your fate feel like a life sentence?” Beck asked, staring at me from close range.

We were standing in the middle of his studio space with paintings and canvases stacked against every wall. And he was a sight to behold—tall and menacing with faded black jeans and a white t-shirt. It was so snug and thin that it looked more like an undershirt. I took him in, vaguely wondering what he was doing outside wearing that in the cold weather. My thoughts were scrambled. My mind was scrambled. I had gone there to thank him, and now he was trying to take the precious gift away from me. I was floored, stunned, and all I could do was stand there and stare at Beck because he was so handsome. He was like a dark angel—an actor in an action movie—a rockstar. I felt scared of him. He was no longer the man who had done something so nice for me. He was now the man who was about to take that nice thing away.

“Hello?” he said, snapping in front of my face as if he was uncertain if I was awake.

“What?”

“I was asking why your future felt like a life sentence. I asked twice.”

“Oh, because I’m starting a job back home in Louisiana. I graduate in May, and I’m moving back there. I’m going to work and live with my mother, and not so much because I need her, but more the other way around.” I held back tears and continued, “I’ve loved living here. I’m dreading leaving, and this painting was just so special to me. A memento. It’s something I would keep and treasure for the rest of my life. It’s, without a doubt, the best thing I own.”

Beck was silent for a moment. “So, you’re not from here?”

“No, I’m not. I’m just here for school, and I’m almost finished. My mom and brother live in a small town in

Louisiana, and I'm going back there when I graduate. I have a few more months." I discreetly wiped my face with the back of my hand, composing myself as best as I could.

"Where's your dad?"

"He left when I was eight."

"I'm sorry."

I shrugged. "It's fine. Mom is difficult. Sometimes I understand why he left." I gave him a small, shy grin. "I'm not perfect either, I lied to my mom so I wouldn't have to go home for Christmas."

"What'd you tell her?" he asked, his voice slightly softer, slightly less annoyed than before.

"I told her I had to volunteer at a soup kitchen."

"Did she buy it?"

"Yeah, especially once I actually volunteered. I made the arrangements and then gave her all the specific details. She really bought it then." I was intimidated by Beck, but I wanted the painting so badly that I started talking again, trying to convince him. "I knew you didn't want me to have that painting. I heard enough from your sister that I knew I shouldn't come here today. I'm sorry. I just thought it was amazing that you knew the exact moment when I thought I heard from God." I let out a little, humorless laugh. "And I thought maybe since you were there at that moment, maybe you'd have some other kind of message for me—some plan for me to be able to stay here." Tears came to my eyes, and I clamped my mouth shut. I did not plan to be so candid.

He was quiet for a few seconds, taking it all in and calculating. "Just tell your mother you're staying," he said, finally. His voice was slow and sticky, like he was thoughtful and didn't know what to say.

My gaze snapped up to meet his when he said that. I smiled regretfully and shook my head. "I can't," I said simply. "She's been waiting on pins and needles these last four years for me to get back home. Look, all I'm saying is that the painting is really special to me, and no one's going to see it.

I'll hang it in my bedroom when I get back to the boondocks, and I can pretty much guarantee you that no one will ever see it besides me."

"You can't go off to live in the boondocks."

I smiled at how matter-of-fact he was when he said it. He seemed serious, so I asked, "Why not?"

"You have to see patients, or stand in windows, or whatever it is you do for a job. Your face is a gift to the city. You can't take it to the woods."

He seemed so serious that I just stared at him with an amused grin. "That's a funny thing to say, but unfortunately I don't think it would work as an excuse for my mother."

"Just tell her that I need you. Make something up."

I felt flush when he said that first part. I was suddenly lightheaded, like I might pass out.

"Tell her a local artist needs you for a collection. Tell her it'll take a year."

"Do you need me for a collection?"

"No. But you've already told your mother the soup kitchen thing so just tell her something else when May comes."

"Well, thanks for the idea, but unless I have a job and a house all lined up, I don't think that's going to fly. My lease is up in May, and I have a job starting back home. I felt bad enough about lying about Christmas. There's no way I would do it for something big like never going home. I would need a legit reason to stay, and that's not going to happen. I'm going home in May. The only question is whether or not you're going to let that painting go home with me. Please. I'll pay you. Even if I have to get on a payment plan. I'll pretty much give you anything."

I met Beck's eyes and found that he was staring at me. He studied me, his gaze roaming slowly from my eyes down to my mouth. I bit my bottom lip, and I saw his chest rise as he took a deep breath. He swallowed hard, and I saw his Adam's

apple shift. He was studying me intensely. Beck Morgan was affected by me, and I felt a sudden, warm whooshing sensation when I realized it.

“Are you...” my voice came out shaky, and I cleared my throat and started over. “Are you married?” I asked uncertainly.

“No, I’m not,” he said, staring at me. “I am single.”

There was no explaining what happened next. It was completely out of character for me, and honestly, I had no idea where I got the confidence. I wish I could blame it on desperation over the painting, but it wasn’t that... I simply wanted to kiss Beck Morgan, and so I did it. I took a step toward him, and I went in for a light kiss.

I did it so quickly that he would have had to pull back to avoid it. I relied on him stepping back if he didn’t want it to happen, and he didn’t do that—not in time. He stayed right where he was, and I planted a soft kiss directly on his mouth. I broke it and then looked downward, feeling shy and nervous and unable to believe what I had just done.

Beck moved away from me, his black, lace-up boots taking a step or two toward the door. He raised his arms stretching upward with his hands behind his head and his elbows splayed out in a helpless motion, grabbing his own head. His shirt came up and I saw the waistband of his boxers peeking out of his jeans. But I couldn’t pay attention to his gorgeously exposed lower torso because he had just rejected me. I kissed him, and now he was stretching and walking away—looking away.

“I’m so sorry,” I said.

He turned the instant I said that, wearing an expression like an apology was the last thing he expected. He came back to me, taking steps swiftly before ducking to kiss me again. He didn’t touch me otherwise. He didn’t take me into his arms, but he kissed me again, and this time, we didn’t break apart so fast. He held his lips there long enough for me to take in the fact that his mouth was soft and warm and that he was definitely holding his kiss for longer than I held mine. He let

his lips remain on mine for what must have been two full heart-pounding seconds before slowly pulling back.

“I just didn’t want you to be sorry,” he explained quietly.

I smiled at him. “You did that just now because you didn’t want me to be sorry?”

“Yes.”

We held gazes, staring at each other. He took a step back. Looking me over from a few feet away. It was the most unawkward awkward silence I had ever experienced.

“What are you looking at?” he asked.

“You. What are you looking at?”

“You,” he said. He nodded reluctantly, looking downward as if lost in thought. “Just keep it,” he added.

I gasped. “Really? Keep it?” His eyes met mine. and I smiled and clutched my hands in front of my chest, doing my best to keep from wiggling or otherwise showing my excitement. “Thank you,” I said, holding back emotion.

Beck took a few steps, slowly circling in front of me. “I do apologize if it’s odd for me to put it plainly, but you’re just wonderfully put together. Your face is remarkable in proportion and scale. That’s why I painted you. I admire how you look.”

“Well, thank you,” I said with a half-bow. “I don’t know what to say to that. Thank you. I thought it was something much deeper because of the timing.”

He stared at me with a serious but unreadable expression. “I did not expect you to do that a second ago.”

“Oh, gosh, I’m so sorry. I knew I shouldn’t have done it. I just thought it was this time of year, and in the spirit of mistletoe.”

“In the spirit of mistletoe?”

“No, I’m sorry. I just wanted to.”

“I’m not saying I didn’t like it. I’m saying that I didn’t see it coming. I should have known I would really like it because of how beautiful you are. But I didn’t realize how much I would... ” He trailed off and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “I did not mind that happening at all. I the opposite of minded it.”

“You the opposite of minded it?” I asked.

“Yes.”

“Thank you. I think.”

“Yes,” he said, a little stunned. “Thank you.”

“Okay, so, now that you already said that about the painting, can I give you something for it that’s less than five hundred dollars, if possible? A limit of five would be amazing for me. I know it’s not even close to what you normally charge and technically it’s stolen and you can just take it back from me, but can I please give you five hundred for it?”

“No.”

“No?”

“No. Keep it. I was just going to paint over it, anyway.”

“Well, then take a little money from me and use it to buy a new canvas.” I had five hundred dollars in cash in my wallet, and I reached for my purse.

“What are you doing?”

“Paying you.”

“Don’t.”

“Maybe I can get you a gift certificate to your favorite art store.”

He shook his head.

“What about your favorite restaurant?”

“Are you trying to take me to dinner?”

“Do you want me to take you to dinner?” I asked.

“You were the one who brought up dinner.”

I smiled. “I offered to buy you a gift card to your favorite restaurant, but I would buy you dinner instead. I would take you somewhere. That would work for me.”

“Are you talking about us going to eat somewhere together?” he asked. “I hope you don’t have a boyfriend.”

“I hope not, after what just happened. I don’t. I should have found time for that because then I might not be in this predicament with my mom. I might be staying here and getting married right now instead of thinking about working for the rest of my life at Dr. Bosco’s office.” I let out a self-deprecating laugh. “No, I do not have a boyfriend. And I would happy to buy you dinner, multiple dinners if necessary to pay you back for the painting. No strings attached.”

“Two dinners,” he said.

“Two dinners?”

“Yes.”

“Deal,” I said.

“It doesn’t need to be fancy. I don’t care if we go to Frank’s,” he said, referring to a greasy diner near Luna Boutique “Actually I do care about going to Franks, there or Taco Bell would probably be the two places I don’t want to go. But I don’t even care if you buy dinner. I’ll buy dinner. I’m just interested in going to dinner with you.”

I wanted to say that it wasn’t a good deal on his part. I wanted to tell him that it was not sufficient enough of a payment since the painting was worth so much. Eight minutes ago, I was crying and feeling desperate, and now Beck Morgan was staring at me and telling me he wanted to take me out on two dinners. My heart felt like it was about to burst.

“I’m leaving tomorrow,” he said.

“Okay.”

“My uncle has a lake house in Arkansas, and we have plans to spend Christmas over there. I’ll be back on the twenty-seventh, though, because my show opens that next Friday. I figured the week between Christmas and New Year’s

would be good at the gallery because people would be looking for something to do.”

“Okay. That’s fine. It’s fine if you’re busy until all that is done. I’ll leave you with my phone number, and you can just call or text me when you think you have a free evening sometime and maybe want to get a bite to eat. I’m in Houston all the way up until the middle of May.”

Chapter 6

I might as well have been given a big check for a million dollars with the way I felt for the last two days. Beck let me keep the painting and then, as if that wasn't good enough, we also made a deal where we would go to dinner. Twice. He was a city boy, a worldly man with experiences and a cool family. He had grown up doing things like going to a lake house for a whole summer or skiing in the mountains. I knew these things from working at his dad's office.

Beck and I were different, but he had kissed me in that studio, and I really thought he had felt something for me. I was sure he had enjoyed the kiss. I had definitely enjoyed it.

I could hardly stop thinking about Beck. I would focus on other things and then catch my thoughts drifting toward him again. I wasn't only thankful that he gave me the painting. It was more than that. Those moments we spent alone, and especially that kiss, had stuck with me in a deeper way. I felt something for Beck. I couldn't wait until he got back from his uncle's house and called me.

Today was the twenty-third, Christmas-Eve-Eve, and I had to work a ten-to-five shift at Luna before going to Saint Alphonsus for Christmas volunteer training.

It was just after noon when I took a half-hour lunch break. I went to the back and fished my phone out of my purse.

Beck's name was the first thing I saw when I opened the screen. I didn't have his number saved, but my phone suggested that it might be him because he introduced himself in the text. It had come in twenty-two minutes ago.

I opened it as quickly as I could and read the words he had written.

Beck:

Hey, it's Beck Morgan. My Christmas plans changed, and I was wondering if you might be available to hang out sometime before the first of the year.

I started typing instantly. I had been about to put hot water into my ramen noodles, and that didn't happen. I set the cup of dry noodles on the counter and focused on my phone.

Me:

Hey, Beck. Yes, I have an orientation meeting after work, and I am volunteering at the soup kitchen on Christmas and Christmas Eve. I'm there for the dinner shift both nights, but I'm finished by eight. I'm off for three days on the

I stopped typing. I knew I was saying too much, and I deleted the text and started over.

Yes! I would love to get together whenever you can. What day were you thinking?

I pressed send and took a deep breath, forgetting my ramen and staring at the screen, waiting for his response. I saw the thought bubble working, and I knew he was texting me back. My heart raced as I waited.

Beck:

How about dinner tonight?

Me:

I am volunteering at Saint Alphonsus for the next three evenings. I'm at work right now, but I have lunch free after today.

I pressed send reluctantly.

I wished I could just take him up on the offer to hang out tonight.

Beck:

What are you doing for Christmas?

Me:

I thought about driving to College Station to eat with a friend and her family, but I have to be back at five for dinner service at Saint Alphonsus, so I'm not sure.

Beck:

Can I call you?

Me:

Yes.

I pressed send and looked around the kitchen at Luna feeling like I wanted to squeal. I ran over to the breakroom door and closed it partially since I figured he would be calling any second.

“Hello?” I said when the phone rang.

“Hey, it’s Beck.”

“Yeah.”

“My whole family was planning on going to Arkansas for Christmas. My dad had to stay back for work last minute, and my mom decided to stay with him. Lila and her husband are still going to Arkansas. They’re already gone. So, it’s just me and my parents here.”

“I was wondering. I didn’t know you decided to stay.”

“Yeah, I did.”

“Well, I don’t have to be at the soup kitchen until five both days, so I can definitely take you to lunch either of those days if that’s what you were thinking.”

“Yeah, I thought we could hang out with my parents for lunch on Christmas. My dad rarely has to be on call on Christmas anymore, but he had to this year, so my mom is staying with him. I’m fine with a quiet Christmas here in Houston. My mom’s side of the family is getting together on Christmas Eve, but Christmas day is going to be quiet. Why don’t you plan on coming over?”

“Yes, sure, thank you. But I still owe you lunch.”

“You don’t owe me anything,” he said.

“Well, I would actually look forward to eating a meal with you.”

He cleared his throat. “Okay,” he said. “We’ll plan on having lunch on Christmas and then two other times at restaurants. At least.”

“Great,” I said, a smile in my voice.

“Good. Thank you. I don’t know why I said thank you just now. I’m glad we’re doing this. It’s going to be great. Fun. Good. Christmas-y. It’ll be Christmas Day, so, yeah...”

I laughed because Beck was talking just like I was thinking. We could both tell that the other one was smiling by the sound of our voices, and neither of us could think straight. I held my phone to my ear and squeezed my eyes shut tight.

“Hey, I’m really happy you decided to stay,” I said quietly into the phone. “You know, for Christmas. I’m glad you didn’t go to Arkansas.”

“You are?”

“Yes,” I said.

“Wh... me too. I’m glad too. I, uh, I guess I’ll call you tomorrow to maybe work something out for Christmas—pick a time and everything.”

“Sounds great,” I said, speaking in a soft, delicate tone even though my fists were still clenched and my eyes were still squeezed tightly shut. “See you then.”

“Okay, bye,” he said. His voice was like a dream come true, and I felt like I wanted to run to the top of a mountain and let out a victorious cry.

The epic scene was flashing through my mind as I opened my eyes to hang up the phone. I expected that it would take a second for my eyes to adjust, but I did not expect Belinda to be standing two feet in front of me wearing an expression like she thought I was crazy.

I let out a little yelp, and she pulled back and glanced downward, looking at my phone. I turned it over to keep her from seeing the screen. I knew that Beck had already hung up, so I set it down on the counter, face down.

“You scared me to death,” I said, acting casual even though I was mortified that I had been caught. I had no idea how long she had been standing there, and I don’t know what she heard or what sort of expressions I was making.

“Who were you talking to?”

It was none of her business, but I didn't want to come out and say that. My nerves were on edge from being caught, and I couldn't think of anything good to say, so I just said, “Nobody.”

“It didn't look or sound like nobody,” she said, smiling and looking suspicious.

“It was a guy,” I said. I was unable to stop a smile from spreading across my face when I said those words.

“Nu-uh,” she said, like she was fifteen and not fifty.

I smiled. “Yes.”

“Are you dating someone?”

“No. But it's a date. I think. We might go on a date.” I regretted saying anything to Belinda. “It's just a guy I knew from working at the hospital.”

“What's his name?”

“I'm not telling you until after I go out with him. I have to check it out.”

“I understand that. You don't wanna jinx it.”

“Yeah,” I agreed, feeling happy to have a way out of the conversation. “I was just about to space out to some music and eat my lunch,” I added. “Did you need something?”

“Yeah, I came back to see if you could wrap something for me really quick, but I didn't know you were already off the clock. That's fine, I guess, I'll do it. I'm just not as good as you.” She wanted me to volunteer to do it in spite of being clocked out, and normally, I would have, but I needed to process this phone call, and I was ready for her to be in the other room and no longer standing right in front of me.

I turned and began putting water into my Ramen. “I'll be out in twenty-five minutes,” I said.

She left, and I turned away from the door before closing my eyes again, just long enough to sigh.

Beck Morgan had invited me to his parent's house for Christmas. I was almost certain that had just happened, and I recalled the conversation, making sure I understood it correctly.

I made noodles and ate them dazedly, and then I worked the rest of the shift in a state of anticipation that had me feeling like my wheels were turning both mentally and physically.

We were busy in the store, and I left there feeling tired, but not rundown. I was so happy about Beck and our plans for eating Christmas lunch that I stayed in a perpetual state of joy where my resting face was a smile.

I was still smiling when I went into the soup kitchen at Saint Alphonsus.

“Okay, this must be Miss Adeline. She's the last of our volunteers to arrive. We can go ahead and get started.”

I heard the man make this announcement as soon as I walked into the cramped storage pantry. I was three minutes late. “I apologize,” I said. “I got held up at work.”

“No problem, we're just glad you could make it. Thanks for texting. We will have several other regulars joining us tomorrow and on Christmas, but you guys are the new ones. We've already made introductions so I'll just tell Adeline everyone's names. I'm Leo, and this is Stan, Julia, Candice, Oscar, Beck, and Angel.”

Beck?

And, yep, there he was. He leaned around the woman who must've been Angel and gave me a little wave.

I felt like my chest might explode. He was a gorgeous specimen, and he was here in the room with me. It was a cramped storage pantry, and I made my way inside, standing as close to Beck as I could without making it obvious.

We listened to Leo's speech about the number of people they serve and the history of the place. He had obviously rehearsed and delivered the information before because it was

all fast-paced. He gave a ten-minute introduction in the pantry before asking us to follow him to the dining hall.

“Is this okay?” was the first thing Beck asked when he fell into stride beside me in the hallway. “I didn’t have anything to do since my travel plans got canceled, so I called to see if they needed help here. Are you okay with it?”

“With you volunteering? Am I okay with it?” I asked.

He looked at me and I smiled.

“Yes, I’m okay with it. I’m happy you’re here. I hope this doesn’t count as dinner, though. I mean, it can, but I kind of hope it doesn’t.”

He looked over at me as we walked. He was all dark hair and nice clothing with a perfect face and a tall, masculine form. He was standing right next to me, and the sight of him had me feeling weak in the knees.

“This is where the line starts!” Leo yelled as we walked into the dining room. “It’s supposed to be chilly tomorrow, so we’re going to get everyone inside and have the line wrap around in here. There will be a long line—both days—so get ready for that.”

We followed Leo, and he stopped at the place where we were all facing the serving line.

“You guys stay over here, and I’m going behind the counter. You’ll come back here and get acquainted with the food service area in a minute, but I want you to see what everyone else sees when they come in. Come up to the line, like you’re ordering.”

Leo walked around the counter, and we all got situated close to the service line, leaning against the rail as if we were pushing a tray through. Beck touched me as we got situated. It was barely a brush to my arm, but he touched me.

“We expect to serve over three hundred people tomorrow, and some of them will be coming here for the first time. Some will be shy, some will mumble, and some will hardly speak English. You are going to feel kind of in a rush with how many people are here waiting, but please try to remember that no

matter who is standing in front of you, they all deserve a smile on Christmas. Some parts of it may not be not as glamorous as you would imagine. A few people will bring with them certain odors that you might not be accustomed to. You might have to stop yourself from flinching at something you see or even smell. If you're working the food service line, and you feel too overwhelmed to smile, trade with someone. Now, I'm not saying you have to walk around with a fake smile plastered across your face all evening, but try to be pleasant. If your resting face or your concentrating face is a frown, then just make the effort to switch it up with a smile as they come through. I think all of these people would ultimately rather be somewhere else for Christmas, so we try to always welcome them and show Christ's love. And don't be afraid to make a little small talk even though we have a line. Don't stand there and talk all day, but don't rush them through, either." He paused and smiled, looking across the counter. His eyes landed on me. "Which would you like? Chocolate brownie or pumpkin pie?" he asked.

By instinct, I answered, "Chocolate brownie."

"A brownie for the lady," he said. He pretended to place a brownie on a plate and put the plate on top of the service window. "That's a lovely scarf you're wearing," he added.

I looked down at my scarf. "Thank you," I said, even though I wasn't sure if he was expecting me to respond.

"You're welcome. Thanks for coming to spend Christmas Eve with us." He stepped back and turned to regard us all. "Do you see how I said with *us* today? That shows ownership. I want you all to feel like you can talk like that. If you're here with me right now, that means it's your first time here. I know you will feel like the newest one. You'll probably feel like the people eating here know more than you do. Fake it. Act like you own this place. Treat them all like this is your living room and you are happy to have them here. If they ask you a question and you don't know the answer, just come get one of us. I'll need all of you to wear comfortable, closed-toe shoes. Okay, come around, and I'll explain the different serving stations to you."

Chapter 7

It was a little over an hour later when Leo brought us back into that storage pantry where we first started our tour. He had been talking nonstop the whole time, telling us one thing after another about what to expect when serving.

All of the other volunteers were serving either Christmas Eve *or* Christmas Day. Leo announced that only one of us had signed up to work both days, and I knew that was me. I wondered when Beck had said he was working, but I didn't ask him because Leo had gone right on talking. Finally, he clapped his hands together like it was the end of the orientation.

"Tomorrow is showtime," he said. "Food is already rolling in." Different ones in the group commented about how they could smell it.

Leo thanked us and handed us a piece of paper and then said he would see at least three of us back tomorrow.

It was so packed in there that we all flooded outside as soon as he dismissed us. The rush of cool air hit me, and I zipped my jacket.

"Hi," I said, turning to Beck when we finally made our way out.

"Hi," he returned even though we had just been together for more than an hour.

"What day are you working?" I asked.

I reached up and put my hood on, and Beck turned and watched me. He looked at me a certain way—with sweet curiosity and amusement.

"I didn't tell him a day," he said. "I just said I wanted to come check it out and maybe volunteer. I wanted to make sure." He didn't finish his sentence, and I turned to him.

"Sure of what?" I asked.

"Sure you thought it was cool that I was here. It was a surprise, after all."

“I think it’s *so* cool that you’re here. So cool, it’s almost, it’s almost c-cold. I’m pretty much f-freezing.” I felt as though I was shaking with happiness and excitement, and I was thankful the weather was cold and I had an excuse for it. “I’m actually cold out here,” I added. “I need to get to my car.”

“Why don’t you come to my car?” he asked. I smiled and nodded crossing my arms and huddling to try to stay warm. “Are we going somewhere if I go to your car?” I asked easily.

Beck put his arm around me. I wasn’t fake-shaking to try to get him to do that, but I was glad it had that effect. “Are you hungry?” he asked.

“Yeah, I do owe you dinner,” I said.

“Do you want to go get something to eat now?”

I nodded. “I’d like that.”

“Can you give an IV?” he asked, thirty minutes later as we sat across from each other at an Italian restaurant.

We had been talking about my nursing school, so the question was one I expected. I nodded.

“That’s a cool skill to have,” he said.

I smiled thoughtfully.

“What?”

“Nothing,” I said. “I was thinking about how I don’t really care about nursing. I’m not one of those people who does it because I have to help people. I love people and everything, but I don’t have a personal interest in helping them, medically. I’m doing it for the money, really. I hate to say that because I know your dad is such a good doctor and honestly, I’m going to be a good nurse just because I have morals and standards. But I’m just being, for some reason, even though I just met you and should be trying to impress you right now, I’m being honest. I chose nursing because I knew I would have a good steady job doing it—one that would give me insurance and benefits. My mom set this job up. When I moved to Houston, I was onboard with the plan to go

back home and become a nurse, but the longer I've been here, the more I just want to start over with school, study something else, and stay longer."

"So, do that," he said. "Take more classes. Become a doctor. Become a painter, become a chef."

I laughed. "If only it were that easy."

"It is that easy," Beck said. "You just decide to do something and you do it."

"Maybe I'll let you break that news to my mom," I said, smiling and taking a big bite of breadstick.

"Sure, I'll do it," he said. "I'll break any news to anyone if it's going to make you stay."

I looked at him, staring into his dark eyes. I had been messing around when I mentioned him talking to my mom, and his response seemed serious and caused me to forget to breathe.

"I would talk to your mom," he said, as if that was what I was stuck on.

"You would?"

"I'm not scared of your mom, Adeline. I had to be fearless and determined to get where I am. No one in my family, especially my father, wanted me to become an artist. And now he's the first one lining up at my shows. I have a good, supportive family, but sometimes they mess up. When people around us start messing up and giving us bad advice, we have to be strong enough to think for ourselves and listen to our own hearts. If your mom is saying you have to go back to Louisiana, and you don't want to go there, I feel like she's messing up right now." He shrugged. "Maybe I'm just being selfish."

"Well, I... I'm just not as independent as you, I guess. I just never thought of it that way."

"Are you thinking about it that way now?" he asked.

"I don't know," I laughed.

I was about to say something else to respond, but our server came, delivering the food we had ordered when we first arrived.

“Tell me about your gallery opening,” I said, after we thanked the server and she went on her way.

“I moved the paintings over there already. It’s opening next Friday. I have thirty-five pieces in the series.”

“And they’re all for sale?”

“Yes, but twelve of them are already sold. Last time, I sold out the first night, but that collection was only twenty paintings, and they were smaller, so I don’t know what to expect with this one.”

It was a relief that my mouth was full because I didn’t know what to say. He looked and talked like a famous person. He was famous. He had overcome doubts and obstacles, and he created a cool life for himself—one with gallery openings and pre-sold, thousands-of-dollars paintings. I felt inferior, like it was only a dream that Beck was sitting in the booth across from me.

“So, what do you think you’ll do?” he asked between bites of pasta, since he was down-to-earth and eating, like a normal person.

“About what?” I asked.

“Moving home.”

“Oh, I’ll do it. Unfortunately, I’ll do it. It’s coming up so fast that it’s inevitable. Dr. Bosco’s office already sent my W-2s. My roommate’s moving back to College Station, so I won’t have a room in Houston.”

Beck didn’t say anything. He chewed a bite of food and listened to me speaking, and then he considered what I had said. I watched him eating and wondered how an act so mundane as eating could stir up so many feelings in me. I watched his jaw work as he chewed. He was so handsome that I was nervous. I found myself wanting to impress him.

“You have a lot of reasons why you can’t stay,” he said.

“Yeah,” I said, thoughtfully.

I wanted to tell him that he would be a reason for me to stay. I wanted him to beg me to stay. Maybe he already had. Maybe I was being too difficult.

I changed the subject before I could get too distracted over analyzing everything. I asked him about his artwork again.

One thing led to another in our conversation, and just like that, two hours had passed and the server brought our check.

“I’ll leave this here, but I’m not in a hurry,” she said. “Did you want any more coffee?”

“I’m fine,” I said. “Thank you.”

“It’s after nine,” Beck said.

“That’s crazy, that went by fast. I guess we should go.”

“I don’t know how you can drink coffee this late.”

“It keeps you up?” I asked, taking the last sip out of the small mug.

“Definitely. If I had a cup like that right now, I’d at least be up until three.”

“You’re kidding.”

“No. But I’m normally up till twelve or one, anyway.”

“This may keep me up, now that I think about it,” I said with a shrug. “I just thought it sounded good since it’s cold outside.”

“I’m paying for dinner,” he said, protesting and jumping forward when he saw me reach for the check. His hand landed on mine, stopping me from opening the little folder. I made eye contact with him, and I didn’t move. I stayed still, letting his hand rest on mine. I felt electrified at the contact. My lungs were functioning at about half capacity as I held his dark gaze. His face was captivating, and his eyes were as black as midnight in the dimly lit restaurant. “I’ve got it,” he said. His deep, raspy voice was velvety to my ears. “Please.”

He took the folder, and I let him pull it from my grasp. “Thank you,” I said.

“My pleasure. I guess I’ll take you back to the soup kitchen to pick up your car.”

“Yeah, if you don’t mind. Are you going home after that?”

“Yeah, why?”

“I was going to see if you wanted to come over and hang out sometime—on Christmas, or tonight, or whatever.” I shrugged. “One of my roommates is already in College Station with her parents. I have another roommate, though, and she’ll probably be home. There could be a few people over at my house, I’m not sure. She has a lot of friends. I would normally hang out with them for a while before I go to bed. We were watching Elf earlier.”

“If you’re inviting me to your house to watch Elf right now, then, yes, I’d love to come.”

“Tonight? Right now?”

“Isn’t that what you were saying?”

“Yes,” I said.

“Sure, then” he answered. “I’ve never seen it.”

“You’ve never seen Elf?” I asked, looking astonished. “How do you avoid it?”

He shook his head. “I’ve seen parts, but never all of it.”

I looked at my watch even though I wasn’t really checking the time. “Well, I drank coffee, so I’m up for watching the whole thing.”

“Let’s do it.”

Beck took me to Saint Alphonsus to get my car and then he followed me to my house. It was a fifteen-minute drive, and while I was on the road, I called my roommate and asked her to move my bras and anything else embarrassing to the closet where they weren’t in plain sight when we came in. She asked who was coming over, and I gave her enough details to satisfy

her. I knew she'd be looking Beck up as soon as we hung up. Those types of thoughts started to make me nervous, but then I realized I didn't care. I hung up the phone and turned the radio up. Christmas music had been playing, but I changed the dial until I found something that fit my mood. It was a pop song with a dance beat, and I turned it up, feeling pumped and happy.

I was as excited as a kid on Christmas that Beck Morgan was coming over. I had so much stinking fun with him that these hours had seemed like minutes. I did not want the night to end, and I was unable to wipe the smile off my face since the moment he said he was coming to my house.

I watched as his headlights pulled into my driveway, and my blood ran warm with excitement. I got out of the driver's seat and met up with him near my car. He had on a leather coat. I loved his fashion sense. His face was gorgeous, and his clothing choices only added to his appeal. Physically, I was crazy about him. And with every conversation we had, I realized how much I loved his personality. I was utterly smitten, done for, and I smiled at him as we met up near the side entrance of my house.

“Am I okay parked right there?”

“Yes. I'll pop some popcorn,” I said. “And I think we have some candy.”

“We just left a restaurant.”

“Yeah but we haven't eaten in two hours,” I said, causing him to smile. “My roommate's in here,” I warned when I looked into the door and saw her in the kitchen. “Hey Bailey!” I called, coming into the living room with Beck following behind me.

Chapter 8

Beck and I sat on the couch and watched the whole movie from start to finish. I adjusted, and my leg touched his once during that time, but otherwise, we didn't touch.

The first time the movie played, we watched the whole thing with no interruptions.

The second time it played, we turned the volume down and talked over it the entire time. We sat next to each other on the couch without touching through the first two movies.

Then we let it begin a third time, and we moved. I sat right next to Beck, and he put his arm around me. I grabbed a pillow and snuggled next to him. His arm rested around my shoulders. My body buzzed with excitement and newness, and somehow, at the same time, I felt more comfortable sitting there next to Beck than I ever had in my entire life.

We spoke on and off for about half of the movie, but the supreme comfort I felt was what caused me to eventually fall asleep.

It was well after midnight when he woke me up. Beck turned and was sitting at the edge of the couch, poised to leave, and I took him in as my eyes opened. I glanced around, squinting.

"It's two-thirty," he whispered. "I'm going home. I'll see you tomorrow at the Saint Alphonsus, okay?"

I nodded.

"Can we go out again tomorrow night, after dinner?"

I nodded without hesitation. I didn't even care when he mentioned. If he was asking to spend time with me the answer was 'yes'. The answer to that would always be 'yes'.

"It's Christmas Eve," he whispered.

I smiled. "Merry Christmas Eve."

"Merry Christmas Eve to you, too," he said. "I'll text you later today, after we wake up, okay?"

“Okay,” I said.

He leaned in and kissed my cheek, and I loved the feel of his warm mouth on my skin. I felt his breath against my cheek, and my chest ached with longing and desire.

“Night,” I said.

“Night,” he returned.

I watched him walk out of the door. He was lean and muscular, and I loved his body. I loved every single thing about him. He turned, smiled, and waved at me on his way out.

“See you tomorrow,” I called quietly.

“See you tomorrow.”

I got up and went to my bedroom after Beck walked out. I went straight to bed, but was awake for another hour, thinking about everything, replaying the whole night.

I stirred and woke up some that night, and every time, my thoughts went to Beck.

I was lying in bed in the middle of the night when I imagined the moment in that store when I felt like God was in control and I could relax.

I got out of bed and went to my closet to look at the painting again. It was still locked away in there. It was so beautiful that I didn't even want my roommates to see it yet. I was sure I would show it to them eventually, but right now, my life was such a whirlwind that I just kept the painting and all of my feelings locked up in a closet.

Beck and I texted during the day. He was with his parents, and he told me that he would see me at the soup kitchen for the Christmas Eve dinner service.

He messaged me again when he was on his way, and I told him I'd wait for him in the parking lot.

We were a few minutes early, and there were not a whole lot of people there, so he pulled up in the spot next to me. I

waved at him and rolled my window down. He did the same, and then he waved me over. The sight of him doing that caused a sigh of contentment to escape my lips.

Within a minute, I was sitting in the passenger's seat of Beck's large SUV. He needed a vehicle this size to transport his art safely, and I glanced in the back to find that it was empty and clean.

"I was missing you," I said as soon as I got settled in the passenger's seat.

I glanced at him, and he leaned toward me, reaching for me. I went to him. I could tell he wanted a kiss, and I leaned his way. Our mouths touched—once and then twice, and my heart ached to be closer to him.

"Mm," I said, smiling as I pulled back. "Thank you."

Beck stared at me as he leaned back. "Thank me?"

"Yes."

"You're welcome. Thank you."

"I got up at six in the morning," I said. "But then I went back to sleep. I was thinking about that painting, and I must've been out of it because I got out of bed and went over to it, and then I fell asleep on the floor in front of my closet."

"It's in your closet?"

"Yes. I have it there until I figure out what to do with it. I'm keeping it safe. It needs a frame."

"And you fell asleep on the floor?"

"Yeah. And I slept like a rock for four hours—until ten o'clock this morning. I had no blanket and I used a stuffed animal as a pillow. I just crashed."

He laughed. "Come here, please. I was missing you."

I smiled as I leaned across the console again. We kissed without hesitation. We both knew where our mouths were going when we leaned in. I felt passion for him. Over and over, we kissed. Beck Morgan's mouth was the most glorious thing I had ever touched or tasted. He kissed me gently more

than a dozen times, and I moaned a little in protest when we pulled back.

“Did you hurt your back?” he asked.

“Doing what?” I asked since I forgot what we were talking about.

“Sleeping on the floor.”

“Oh, no. I’m surprised, but no. My back’s fine. I was busy dreaming, I guess.”

“What were you doing looking at the painting in the middle of the night?”

“I woke up, and I was thinking about that moment when the star lit up. It’s insane that you were there to capture it. It had to be God. There’s no other explanation.”

“Speaking of that, Adeline, I was thinking about everything last night, too, and I think you should stay.”

“What?”

“Here in Houston. I think you should stay here. You know, when May rolls around, and you graduate. It would be great if you could just go ahead and make up your mind to stay here at that point.”

I let out a sigh, and I felt short of breath because I could tell he was completely serious.

He continued. “I didn’t plan on saying this right now, but it’s Christmas Eve, and I’m with you. I’ll be with you again tomorrow. Then we will’ve already spent an important holiday together. I think, I’m pretty sure I’ll be used to spending holidays with you after that. What about fourth of July and Halloween and Thanksgiving and Christmas again? You’ve got to be here for all those. I’m used to you already. Please say you’ll stay.”

“I—”

“I already talked to my parents about it. We could help you find a place you can afford. Dad said he could definitely get you a job if you want to work for the hospital where he—”

Beck stopped talking because I kissed him again. I leaned toward him, reaching out and touching the side of his face, kissing him tenderly—letting my mouth rest against his in slow, sticky contact. I pulled back and stared at him for a second before I said, “Yes.” I wore a serious face that let him know that no other answers had ever crossed my mind.

He touched my cheek. I felt his thumb move against my skin. “I want to be near you all the time. Something’s happened to me, and now I miss you when I’m not next to you.”

I was so relieved to hear those words that tears came to my eyes, blurring my vision. “I know,” I whispered, blinking them away. “Something happened to me too.”

“So, stay. Say you’ll stay with me. Please.”

“I will stay,” I said.

Beck pulled back, staring at me. “Seriously? In May? You won’t leave? You’ll stay?”

I nodded. “I have no idea how I’m going to work it out, but yes, Beck. I miss you when I’m not with you too. I’m happy I’m with you on this Christmas, and I don’t want to miss any other holiday, even though you didn’t mention Valentine’s day, which might be the most important one.” I said, looking playfully disconcerted.

He scanned my face, stopping on my lips when I said that. His dark eyes stared right at my mouth. He was the most handsome man I had ever seen. Apparently, he took the hint about Valentine’s Day because he smiled playfully at me. “I didn’t mention Valentine’s Day because it’s before May,” he said. “You’d still be here on Valentine’s Day, either way.”

“What about the next one?” I asked.

He started to smile, and then he kissed me. We leaned toward each other, over the console, each of us pressing forward. I felt urgency, and relief flooded my body when Beck kissed me deeply. We had obviously both been desperate to see each other again, because we connected like we were each anxious for it to happen—aching for it to happen. My mouth

opened, and his tongue slid against mine, causing me to lean in, to pull him in. I forgot to breathe. Air was an afterthought. We connected in a way we hadn't before. Beck's mouth was open and his kiss was different this time. His kiss was possessive and yet still gentle and protective. He was answering my question about next Valentine's Day, and maybe even every Valentine's Day after that.

He kissed me for what must have been a full minute. Maybe it was five minutes or even ten. It was so glorious that it felt like a matter of seconds, but my whole body felt weak and wasted when he finally broke away and pulled back. I felt like crying. I wished this console wasn't separating us because I wanted him to hold me.

I gripped his arms tightly, and I didn't even realize it until he moved.

"I'm sorry. I didn't even notice I was squeezing you."

"I like you squeezing me. I'm only moving because we need to get in there."

"Oh, yeah, we need to go inside." I looked over my shoulder and saw that there were people headed inside. The parking lot had filled up around us. "I forgot where we were," I said. "It's a good thing you have tinted windows."

Chapter 9

Christmas Day

We stayed up late again last night.

It was Christmas Eve, and we were together at midnight when we wished each other Merry Christmas. Beck had come over to my house after we served dinner at the soup kitchen. We put on another movie, and again, we let it play two or three times, but this time we didn't watch it at all. We talked and kissed and fell in love, and by the time Christmas came at midnight, I already knew that I was going to spend the rest of my life with this man.

He seemed to know it, too. We didn't say it to each other, but we were in love. It was love we felt. There could be no other word to describe it. We were both happy and excited that the other one existed on the earth. We already shared a mutual hope that we would stay together forever. I could tell that was Beck's intention simply by the way he handled me and treated me, and by the things he said to me.

We had said goodnight at 2am, and I had plans to be at his parents' house as close to 10am as possible the following morning. I set my alarm for 8:30, but I was pumped up and already awake by the time it went off.

I put on Christmas music while I got dressed. It was the radio, and they played all the classics. The only thing that could have made it better was for me to have a gift to take over there. That was what was on my mind as I got dressed. Things had all been such a blur since I connected with Beck that I had no time to think about the fact that I would not want to show up at his parents' house empty-handed on Christmas.

I was almost all the way dressed and had been about to put on some lip gloss and hit the road when I remembered a package that came in the mail. I ran to Josie's bedroom. I had stashed the box in there for her because she was already at her parent's house when it came. It was still sitting right by the door where I had left it.

“Josie,” I said, a minute later when she answered her phone.

“Hey, Addie, Merry Christmas!”

“You too! Thank you! Hey, how attached are you to that box of oranges sitting in your room? I assume those are oranges. It’s marked from Florida and says things like ‘contains citrus’. The box is the same one your parents send here every year.”

“Yes. The oranges,” she said in a tone like she was rolling her eyes. “They think it’s my only form of fruit over the year. They’ll get me through till May without getting scurvy,” she said, laughing.

“Can I buy it from you? I don’t want you to get scurvy or anything, but could I perhaps buy it from you? I could pay you a hundred dollars for it.”

“I would tell you to just take it for free, but I think it’s actually worth a hundred,” she said.

“Oh no, I don’t, I’m not asking to just take it for free. I met a guy, and I’m going over to his parent’s today, and I didn’t want to show up empty-handed.”

“Oh, yeah that would be a good gift,” she said. “My dad has them sent from Florida every year. They’re organic and everything.”

“Can I buy them from you, or do I need to replace the box with a new one?”

“I think the company he buys from sells out every year. I’m not even sure if you would be able to buy it now. But go ahead and take it. They’ll like it. And my dad has two boxes of oranges over here. I’ll just take a few back with me. Don’t forget to pay me, though. There’s a new bag I want. But it’s a good deal for you. I think my dad spends a hundred on those boxes.”

“Okay, well, thank you. I’m taking it and leaving your money on your bed.”

“Thanks, Adeline, and Merry Christmas. Who is this guy that you’re buying oranges for?”

“It’s for his family, but honestly, I would spend more. I really don’t care how much things cost in the world.”

“What? Are you so in love that you’re not even making sense? What did you say just now?”

“I think I might be in love,” I said, laughing and realizing that I wasn’t making sense.

She squealed, and it hurt my ear because I had the phone trapped between the ear and my shoulder while I carried the box.

I laughed at her reaction. “Hey, I’m going to let you go. But Merry Christmas, and thank you. Thank you so much!”

“Thank you. I’d rather have the money. Merry Christmas, Addie. I hope you have fun at your new boyfriend’s house.”

“Thank you,” I said.

We got off the phone, and her words made me suddenly feel nervous. He was my new boyfriend. She was correct in saying that, and I knew it. He was my boyfriend. He would probably be my boyfriend forever. And I was meeting his parents today. It was a big deal.

I carried the heavy box out of her room, knowing that I would return with the money in a moment. I didn’t even care if a hundred dollars was too much for what was inside. I had nothing else to offer them and no time to find something. I took the box of fruit out of the shipping box, and was pleased that it was in nice gift packaging—a lightweight wooden crate.

It took me twenty minutes to get to his parent’s house, which was unexpectedly gorgeous. I should have assumed it would be since Dr. Morgan was so high up at the hospital, but I hadn’t seen pictures and didn’t know what to expect. It took me by surprise when I arrived and felt like I was in one of those shows about dream homes.

It was a multi-million dollar home. It had to be. It had its own gate—not a gate for the neighborhood, but an iron gate for the personal driveway. I stared at the beautiful home on the other side of that gate. It was modern and sleek looking.

I was used to spending Christmas in Many. Josie's parents had a nice house in College Station, and I had been there before, but this was on a different level. This was a mansion. The architecture and landscaping were both so beautiful that I stared at it for a moment before I pushed the button.

"Hello, Adeline." I heard a voice from the speaker.

"Can you see me?" I asked.

"Yes, I can. I'm opening the gate. You can park behind my truck."

"There's a few cars here," I said, seeing them as the gate opened.

"My sister's here. They came back."

"I'll see you in a second," I said, driving toward the house now that the gate was completely open.

Beck came to the door, and by the time I parked, he had made his way outside to me.

"Hey there," I said as I opened the door and got to my feet.

Beck came up to me and pulled me into a hug. We had just said goodbye to each other hours before, and we were anxious to hold each other again. I squeezed him tightly to let him know how I was feeling, and he held me back. "Merry Christmas," I said.

"Merry Christmas, my girl." He held onto me firmly. "My sister's here. And Wes."

"How?" I asked pulling back to look up at him. "I thought they already went to Arkansas."

His dark eyes met mine. "They did. They were there for a day, and they came back. My sister asked him to come back."

She said she couldn't stand it. She wanted to come home and have Christmas here with us. It's about you, honestly."

"What do you mean?" I asked, staring at him.

"She couldn't stand that you were having Christmas with us and she was missing it. I don't bring many girls home. She's amazed that you're here with me, and she said she's got to see it with her own eyes." He made an expression that was slightly regretful. "I hope you're okay with that."

"I want it," I said. "I want your family to like me, and I'm glad she wants to be here when we're here," I said. "I'm nervous, but I'm happy. Does she like me? Does she want you to have a girlfriend?"

"She likes you enough to drive back from Arkansas."

"And she's back already?"

"Yes. She's here. They got back last night and came over this morning."

"Oh, my gosh. Your famous sister is here, and I brought oranges."

"You brought what?"

"Oranges. It might be grapefruit, too, I'm not sure. I think it's Florida citrus. It is that. Josie's dad gets them from Florida. I've had them the last few years. They're really good. I bought the box from my roommate just now. Josie. Her dad sent them to her, and I asked if I could buy them."

"My family would actually love this, but I don't want you to have to pay your roommate. I can pay you back for that."

"Then it wouldn't be a gift," I said smiling at him. "And you already bought me dinner when I'm supposed to buy yours."

"I love your face," he said.

"I know," I said smiling since that was a new inside joke between us.

"I love lots of things about you," he said. He leaned down and kissed me on the cheek, and right when he did it, I heard

someone else's voice yelling from the door.

“Hello! Merry Christmas!”

“Hello!” I said, smiling and waving as I broke away from Beck. He went toward my backseat to get the oranges.

“I cannot believe you're here!” Lila hollered as she came outside to meet us.

Beck took a hold of the case of citrus and started to pick it up, but he saw how quickly Lila was approaching, and he knew she was headed for us, so he left it where it was and moved to stand next to me. Lila didn't acknowledge him. She took me into her arms as soon as she came up to the car. She hugged me and then stepped back.

“Merry Christmas,” she said, smiling. “I'm so happy you're here. I'm not in as big of a hurry as I was the last time I saw you. I was in the middle of running for my life that night.”

“You really were,” I said, smiling at her. “Thank you so much for risking your life. I owe you big time for that.”

Lila Morgan. She was a famous actress, and in that moment, I felt like she would inevitably be my sister-in-law. I reminded myself to play it cool. I was about to bring up the oranges when she spoke again.

“Yeah, I had to act all disinterested in that painting while my brother got distracted and went on, doing other things. And then I came back the next day, like a criminal, and stole it from him—stole it right out of his studio. He was about to paint over it. Can you imagine if that would have happened? Aren't you so glad I rescued it?” She stepped back and looked back and forth between the two of us. “I couldn't believe it when Mom called and told me Adeline Baker was coming over for Christmas.” She was being lighthearted, smiling and trying to embarrass her brother a little since he never brought women home.

“I owe you a great debt for going against my wishes on that one, Lila.” He spoke seriously, and Lila glanced at him with a suspicious expression.

Then she covered her mouth and stepped back again, looking at us with a new, wide-eyed expression. She stiffly backed up, staring at us as if something had changed in her own mind.

“What are you doing?” Beck asked.

I had grabbed onto his mid-section as they spoke, and he put his arm around me. I saw her notice our proximity as her mind continued to work.

“I expected you to shush me and tell me not to talk about the painting and all that. I thought you were in the new, awkward, getting-to-know-you phase with her. I was coming out here to break the ice.”

“Oh, no, Adeline and I already have ice broken.” He looked at me, and I looked at him, unable to stop a smile.

“Yeah, I think it’s broken,” I said, staring straight at him.

“Oh, my gosh, are y’all in love?” she was completely serious and not joking at all when she asked the question, and she just stood there and waited for one of us to answer.

“We’re definitely not not in love,” Beck said. He smiled and kissed me before pulling back and turning. “I’m grabbing these out of the back seat. Adeline brought some fruit.”

“What kind of fruit?” Lila asked, still sounding a little stunned.

“Citrus,” I said. “It’s for sure some oranges, but there might be grapefruit, too. I’m not sure. It’s from Florida, though. They’re delicious. Your house is beautiful, by the way.”

“Thank you,” she said. “Our parents bought it three years ago, so neither of us grew up in it, but thank you. They like it here.”

“I guess so,” I said, looking around. “I didn’t even know this neighborhood was back here.”

Lila nodded. “Everybody says that. It’s hidden for being right here in the city. Have you met our mom?”

“I have. I’ve met her and your dad. Never your husband, though.”

“Yes, Wes is inside talking to my dad. It’s just the six of us here. It’ll be so much fun. I’m glad we didn’t stay in Arkansas. I miss being with the cousins and seeing everybody, but this is wonderful. Plus, I was just there. I got to wish them all Merry Christmas. Oranges... great idea. I’m seriously going to eat one of these in a minute,” she added, stepping to the side so she could get a good look at the box.

Chapter 10

We walked inside with Lila and made introductions. Their dad was kind and remembered me even though I didn't work that closely with him while I had the assistantship in his office. I also met Lila's husband, Wes, who was charming and sweet.

We all caught up with each other for a few minutes. We talked about the fact that Beck and I were scheduled to volunteer later that day for the dinner service, and his family all said we should come back to their house once we were done. Beck looked at me as if it were my choice, and I instantly agreed.

Beck's mom, Sarah, was an ex-pageant queen and his father, Don, was one of the most powerful doctors in Houston (which was saying something since Houston was a medical mecca). Lila wasn't acting when I first met them, but now she was making it in Hollywood. Even Beck himself was famous. He didn't get recognized at the store like his sister, but he was definitely a little famous—at least on the internet.

I always thought of their family as so elite that I would never spend personal, family time with them. I couldn't imagine being invited into their home, much less for Christmas with the core group. It was dreamlike to find myself in a position where I was falling in love with Beck Morgan. The whole situation was surreal.

A few short days ago, my life was headed in a completely different direction. Or at least I thought it was. Maybe God had changed my trajectory years ago, and I didn't even know it. Maybe I was headed in this direction way back when I first met the Morgans, and I had no idea until a few days ago.

"Would you mind coming with me to open that box of oranges?" Lila asked drawing me from my thoughts when there was a break in conversation.

"What box of oranges?" Sarah asked, looking around.

“Beck left them in the kitchen when we came in,” Lila explained.

“Addie brought oranges,” Beck added. “It’s a nice gift box of fruit—they’re from Florida. I left them in the kitchen since I figured they’d end up there, anyway.”

“Oh, how nice,” Sarah said.

“What happened?” Don asked, when he heard us talking.

“Adeline brought oranges,” Sarah explained to him.

“Yeah, I’m going to get one. I wanted Adeline to come with me to open the box. We’re going in here for a second by ourselves.”

Lila smiled and winked, and then reached out for me and I went with her into the kitchen where we had left the box of oranges. Everyone else stayed in the living room. They wouldn’t be far behind us. Sarah had already mentioned coming to check on the food. But Lila’s words and mannerisms made it obvious that she wanted a second alone with me.

Beck looked at me on our way out of the room to make sure that I was okay, and I gave him a reassuring smile, letting him know I didn’t mind going into the next room with Lila. It seemed like she might want to tell me something about Beck’s Christmas present, and I was fine with that.

“I hope they have grapefruit,” she said.

“Me too,” I replied.

“I don’t care about the fruit,” she whispered, holding my hand and pulling me along as we walked out. “I just want to tell you something.”

We rounded the corner and came into the kitchen, and she stopped abruptly, turning to let me run straight into her. She was only inches from me, so she whispered when she spoke. Her expression was intense, and my heart raced, wondering what was going on.

“Did my brother tell you he’s painted you before?”

“What?”

“Beck. My brother. Did he tell you that wasn’t the first painting he made of you?”

“What? No.” I pulled back, blinking at her.

She shook her head regretfully. “It doesn’t exist anymore, and I hate that. He painted over it.”

I swallowed, trying to take in what she was saying and form words to respond. “I—”

“He would be so mad if he knew I was telling you this right now, but if I were you, I would want to know this fact. I knew my brother wasn’t going to tell you. But you’re the only woman he’s ever painted. You’re the only person he’s ever painted, ever. He does streets and buildings and cars and wires. You know what his work looks like. If there’s a person in his art, it’s just a teeny tiny blur. I know I explained to you that he liked your face and everything, but I just think it’s so amazing that he’s been liking it for years. Of all the girls in the world, he’s been stuck on you.”

I blinked and shook my head, and she could see that there were tears forming in my eyes.

“I’m not even sure I should be telling you right now. I just think I would want to know if I were you. Can you believe there was another painting? Imagine if he would’ve painted over yours like he did with the other one? Anyway, I would have wanted to know that if I were you. I thought it was sweet. And knowing Beck, and being around him and seeing the things he draws all these years, I just know how significant it is. I hope that doesn’t make you feel differently about my brother. I would’ve normally kept this to myself, but for some reason, I just felt like I needed to—”

“I love your brother,” I said. “I haven’t told him that, so please don’t say it to him, but I feel it in my heart. I was just having those thoughts right before you asked me to come in here. I was thinking about how I might have been on this path to Beck before I even knew it.”

She hugged me. We stood there, embracing. I felt dazed by it all, but even through the fog, I was able to appreciate the significance of this information. Lila seemed relieved to hear that I was in love, which was so backward when I was the one who felt relieved to have the love of this family.

“I think they’re coming. Don’t tell my brother I told you.” She gave me a squeeze and then let me go, heading to the box of fruit.

“I am telling him,” I said to her.

She smiled at me. “I knew you would. I love you,” she added, surprising me and causing me to grin.

Beck came into the room, so didn’t answer back. But I loved her, too, and she knew it. I hoped she knew.

“I thought you came in here to get an orange,” Beck said, seeing his sister walk toward the untouched box of citrus.

“I am. I’m about to. I was talking to Adeline. Hey, I wanted you to show her that drawing you did in high school—the one with all the circles and shapes. It’s in that room upstairs.”

“That’s just a basic shading exercise.”

“Yeah, but I wanted you to show her the whole room,” Lila said. She looked at her dad and Wes. “Can one of you guys help me get into this box? Beck’s going to show Addie some of his old drawings in his art room. I still need help getting into these.”

“I’ll break into it,” Wes said. “Adeline, do you mind?”

“Oh, no, it’s theirs, yours. It’s for you guys,” I said.

“Yeah, go ahead and open it, Wes, thank you, baby,” Sarah added.

Beck and I walked out of the kitchen. “My parents have a room with a bunch of my art stuff upstairs,” he said on our way out.

He reached out for me and I gave him my hand. He gently held onto a few of my fingers and I followed him

through the next room and up the stairs.

“What’s going on with my sister,” he said finally, once we were upstairs and there was no chance we were being overheard. “Why is she being so secretive?”

“She told me there was another.”

“Another what?” he asked, looking offended.

“Another painting. A painting of me.”

Beck stopped walking, closing his eyes for a second and taking a deep breath. “She did not,” he said, looking at me. He had hesitated in the upstairs hallway, so we were alone, but we still spoke quietly.

“Yes, she did, and I’m glad because I wanted to know that. I’m glad she told me.”

He continued walking, and I followed him down the hall. “What is wrong with her?” he asked, looking angry and shaking his head.

“She likes me,” I said. I continued speaking as we made our way into the upstairs room. “She thought I might want to know that you painted me before, and she was right. I’m glad I know. She said you painted over it.”

“I did.”

“Well, that was why she had to break down and steal the last one, so you didn’t do it again.”

I saw a few of his paintings on the walls of this beautiful home, but we rounded the corner into an office-sized room that was full of his art—sketches, doodles, old stuff that was preserved in frames, in photographs, and out on surfaces. I gasped when I came inside. The artworks were professionally preserved. I felt like I was in a tiny museum.

“Some of this stuff is old projects I did in art classes, during high school and college,” he said when he saw me looking around.

I was flooded with emotion as I came to stand in the middle of the room. Beck met me there. We stood near a table,

and I stared at him from two feet away, feeling overwhelmed and not knowing where to even begin.

“I’m sorry she told you that,” he said, staring at me. “It’s really no big deal.” His face was insanely beautiful and his voice was deep. I wanted to melt in his presence.

“It is a big deal to me,” I said. “And I’m not sorry she told me. I’m really glad I know.”

His gaze met mine and then he reached out and touched me. He grabbed the side of my shirt, taking a hold of it.

“Why didn’t you tell me you liked me way back then?” I asked, staring up at him as he tugged me closer.

“Because I didn’t know I did,” he said. “I looked at you like Legos.”

“Legos?”

“Yes. I painted you like I would put together Legos just trying to make all the shapes go in the right place.”

I went to him, leaning in. I touched the side of his flawless face, letting the backsides of my fingers brush the hollow of his cheek. “Do you think you could see yourself ever falling in love with some Legos?” I asked tentatively, like I was serious.

“Yes, Adeline. I don’t even see you as art anymore. I have no desire to paint you now that I have you, now that you’re mine.”

“Was I wearing scrubs the first time you wanted to paint me?” I asked.

“Yes, but I didn’t care about your outfit. I was looking at your face.”

“I’m just saying. I feel so invisible at the hospital. I’m just kind of there, going through the motions. I’m wearing scrubs, and I don’t know, honestly, I just think it’s unbelievable that I could’ve inspired anyone to paint anything. I’m amazed, Beck. I’m thankful.”

“I’m amazed and thankful that you’re amazed and thankful. You’re the most beautiful creation ever made, Adeline. I want to look at you every morning when I wake up. I never want you to leave my side for the rest of my life. Why don’t you just take an office job working for me?”

“I seriously might, if you’re ever hiring.”

“You’re joking, but I’m serious.”

“No, I’m serious. I’d love to work for you if you’re ever able to hire me. You can train me at whatever you need me to do.”

He stared at my face, looking me over. “Just be with me, work with me, and never leave my side for the rest of my life, okay? We can figure it all out. You can help me manage my business. Finish school if you want, but please don’t feel like you need to go into nursing. Right now, I feel like I could paint a hundred-thousand paintings and never get tired of painting. I want to provide a life for you. I want to turn paintings into money and buy you anything you want. I want to buy you a house and have you live in it and make babies.”

“Am I dreaming?” I said.

He grinned. “Would it be a good dream?”

“The best. A Christmas miracle dream. Christmas Miracle on Dream Street—that would be the name of this movie—if this was a movie. I want to live in this theoretical house you’re talking about, though. I want to cook dinner for us and wear your shirts on Saturday mornings.”

“If I see you wearing my shirt, I might die.”

I made a surprised face. “You might die? Of what?”

“Of desire. I would have to have you, or else.”

“If I’m wearing your shirts in the morning, I’m pretty sure you already have me by then.”

“Can we both agree that we’re headed in that direction?”

“I see no other direction but that one,” I said, not taking my eyes off his.

Epilogue

The following December

“Hey, baby, I’m in here!” Beck hollered at me when I came into our house.

It was a gorgeous, little three-bedroom craftsman bungalow that he bought for me last May as a graduation present. The one condition to the gift was that I marry him before we move into it, which I considered part of the gift and not a condition. It was all a gift. My whole life was a big gift. I had wrapped a hundred small boxes today, so I was an expert with gifts, and my life certainly was one—better than anything I could wrap.

It was almost Christmas again, and I was working at Luna, but only because the owner needed seasonal help and she called and asked me to come back part-time. I agreed since I enjoyed it and liked the discount. I had plenty of work helping my husband with his art—selling it, displaying it, promoting it. All of this had to happen in addition to making it. And boy, had he been making some art. Beck had been working like crazy since we met. He had painted prolifically and had continued success with his work. He needed me around. I was constantly helping him. We truly were a team.

“How was work?” he asked when he heard me come closer.

“Good,” I said, making my way into the kitchen with him.

Beck put the lid on the pot and turned with a smile, gesturing like he wanted to take me into his arms. He was barefoot and shirtless with grey sweatpants hanging loosely on his hips. His midsection was lined with muscles, and I went to him and snuggled up next to him, feeling like I was in Heaven. I leaned up and kissed his neck as he rested casually against the counter.

“We were busy,” I said. I kissed him again before leaning over toward the stove. “What’s cooking?”

“It’s from my mom. She brought it by. I just put it in the pot a second ago.”

“What is it?”

“Some kind of stew. She said we could make some rice if we wanted, or cornbread. I was hungry now, so I was just going to heat it up and eat it like that.”

I took off my coat and tossed it onto a nearby stool. While I was at it, I reached over and grabbed a hair tie off of the counter, and wrapped my hair into a quick, low, messy bun. I came close to Beck as I did that, and he took me into his arms while my hands were busy above my head. I was hoping he would do that, and I easily went to him.

“It’s warm in here,” I said.

“I know, and I just got out of the shower, so I’m extra toasty.” I put my nose to his chest and breathed in, smelling the expensive shower gel that I bought him. I knew I smelled good, too. I always used the best perfumes and lotions when I worked a shift at Luna. I smelled his chest, and it prompted him to lean in to sniff me back. He lowered his face to my neck, and he ran his hand up my arm, giving me chills.

“Rebecca was there,” I said, speaking of the owner of Luna. “She is obsessed with you painting her grandson. She saw that painting of me when she came over to bring me my check, and she’s been relentless with asking me about it. She said she’ll pay ten thousand. She asked me about it again today.”

“I don’t paint people,” Beck said calmly.

“I know. I told her that was the last portrait you ever did. I said that thing you tell people where it’s like asking Stephen King to write a Bible study book—it’s just not something you do.” I shrugged. “But she saw the one of me, and she can’t stop talking about it.”

“I can’t imagine what came over me to do that,” he said, gently kissing below my jaw. He moved slowly, letting his mouth hover over the sensitive skin on my neck. He was warm and damp from the shower, and I felt like melting.

“You can’t imagine what came over you to paint me?” I asked, my chest rising and falling as I took a deep breath.

“No, I can’t. It was almost involuntary when I painted you. I’m not interested in painting anyone else. I’ll paint Luna for her, with her grandson in the distance with his back turned, but no. No people. No portraits. Luna would be fun to paint, though—from a different perspective and minus the woman in the window.”

“Oh, I can’t believe I forgot to tell you this! Speaking of Luna’s window... oh, man, baby, guess what? There’re no lights this year. No lights! Isn’t that crazy? I noticed the other day. I knew they should be up by now, but nothing. Nothing this year.”

“What are you saying right now?”

“No city lights. The stars. Rebecca put up some lights at the shop, but there’s no lights on the street like last year.” I leaned back staring at him—at his gorgeous chiseled jaw. “Isn’t that amazing? It only happened once. I asked Rebecca about it today, and she said she called and asked the city, and the lady told her it was a mistake last year. A mistake. Can you believe it? Our block wasn’t even supposed to be included with all the city decorations last year.”

Beck touched the side of my face. He stared at me, looking over my face so slowly that I squirmed a little and bit at my lip.

“The star wasn’t supposed to be there, and I wasn’t supposed to paint you,” he said. “Everything unlikely had to happen.”

“Why do you think it did?” I asked, flirting with him.

“So that you can end up right here,” he said. He kissed me. “We can.” Kiss. “Be us.” Kiss. “Us two. This had to happen.” He kissed me between every other word, and I pressed my body against his, drawing myself closer to him. My body felt a surge of longing. The aching feeling was familiar, but it felt new and wonderfully forbidden every time.

“I love you,” I said.

“I love you, too.”

I reached out and turned the fire on the stove down to ‘warm’, which was the lowest setting possible.

“It’ll take an hour to heat up that way,” he said.

“Exactly,” I said.

Beck hesitated, giving me a slow, easy, sideways grin. He was irresistible.

“You said you were hungry,” I said. “I’m sorry for slowing down your dinner. You can turn it back up, if you like.”

He stared at me. “No, I don’t think I will,” he said.

He spoke so slowly that I didn’t even remember what question he was answering or what he was saying.

“I’m not sure what we said just now, but I think we’re not eating right now, is that right?”

“Yes. that’s right. We’re not eating.”

“I put up Christmas decorations this morning before work,” I said. “Maybe we need to stop by the mistletoe.”

He moved, taking my hand, pulling me along—headed away from the aforementioned decoration. He glanced back at me over his gloriously shirtless shoulder.

“We’re way past mistletoe,” he said.

The End

(till book 5)

About The Author

Brooke St. James



Brooke St. James is a USA Today bestselling author and Amazon Kindle All-Star. She writes contemporary romance novels with Christian and inspirational themes and happy endings. She was born and raised in south Louisiana but has had the opportunity to travel and live throughout the U.S. An avid reader, writer, audio book addict, and fan of all things artistic, Brooke constantly has her hands in some creative activity. She's currently back home in Louisiana enjoying life with her husband, children, and two lazy dogs.

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