

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
EMMA ST. CLAIR



a **HOLLY** *Jilly*
CHRISTMAS

A SWEET ROMANTIC COMEDY

A HOLLY
Jilly
CHRISTMAS

EMMA ST. CLAIR

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To Jillian, who made me write this book.

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CHAPTER 1

IF MY LIFE were anything like the romantic holiday movies made by the studio I work for, this mini road trip would look a whole heck of a lot different.

Take the scowling man in the passenger seat, for example. He wouldn't be glued to his phone, completely ignoring me. No, we would be exchanging playful, flirty banter while Christmas music played softly in the background and snow swirled outside my car.

He'd also have a secret crush on me. One to match the secret crush I've harbored on him since my first day at Brightmark Studios when I bumped into him on the elevator.

That moment had all the makings of a meet cute. When I say I bumped into him—I mean literally. I walked on the elevator while looking at my phone, glancing up just in time to see a vision in a dark gray suit and expertly trimmed beard as I stepped into him. His coffee spilled all over the front of his shirt, and I could totally imagine the rest of the scene: I would try to pat him dry with napkins, noting the firm muscles hiding under his shirt. The elevator would mysteriously get stuck, and when the firemen finally pried the doors open, they'd find us making out inside. Him shirtless, of course, because of the wet coffee.

That is NOT what happened.

Instead, Case Winchester glared hard enough to burn a hole straight through me, muttered something about my carelessness, and darted off the elevator before the doors shut.

Which meant when the elevator actually *did* get stuck, I was alone. Hot firemen didn't even rescue me—the old, stooped building manager pried open the doors, and I tore my favorite skirt climbing out.

Things between me and Case only went downhill from there. More like they went nowhere, because he's spent the past four years avoiding me not like I have the plague, but like I AM the plague.

Despite having zero reason to thrive, my crush grew like a stubborn weed poking up from a crack in the sidewalk. Thankfully, so did my cynicism about the kind of movies Brightmark Studio makes. My new motto is just say nope to tropes.

For the record, I LOVE my job. I love our cheesy holiday movies and their total C- or D-list actors' performances. And I love tropes—in movies or books, where they belong. Give me all the brother's best friend's cowboy rock star's nanny's secret baby stories. I eat that stuff up, and I'm not afraid to say how happy it makes my heart.

But I have intimate, personal knowledge of how they do NOT work in the real world. Or at least in my relationships. So, while I enjoy my job, and the contents of my kindle are embarrassingly tropey, I am aware it's all fiction. My teeny tiny itty bitty crush on the man glued to his phone will remain just that—a crush. Unrequited. Nothing more.

What I need in my life is just a guy—no boss, no brother's best friend, no rock star—with no meet cute necessary. So far, the likelihood of this happening seems to be as far-fetched as “Dancer Prances Home,” Brightmark's big streaming hit from last year involving a talking reindeer playing matchmaker.

“Could you drive any faster?” my scrooge sidekick asks without looking up from his phone.

“I *could*.”

I let my foot off the gas. Just a SMIDGE but enough to make him set down his phone and heave a sigh. I bite my lip to keep from smiling.

But then my silly power play backfires when Case leans all the way over the console to look at the speedometer. Or odometer? I'm not into cars other than the part where they get me where I'm going.

Case is all up in my space, which was not the plan. I just wanted to annoy him—mature, I know—or at least garner a tiny smidge of attention. I know nothing romantic is going to happen here, but was it too much to hope for basic, civilized conversation while I'm driving? The man didn't even want the radio on.

My heart goes rogue, beating like a kid in the marching band at halftime in the big game. Case's cologne hits my nose, and I do my best to NOT take an audible sniff. Just a subtle one he hopefully won't notice.

It's incredibly unfair how good he smells. Maybe there's some kind of ratio where the jerkier the guy, the better they smell, like a Murphy's Law of cologne.

"Now you're going *under* the speed limit," Case says, shifting back to his side and going right back to his phone.

"It's snowing. I don't know how to drive in snow."

It almost never snows in Houston, where we both live, and when I scout for Christmas movies, it's usually not in December but during a sunny spring or summer. This trip is a last-minute plan I suggested to my boss when my entire family got the flu. I figured if I'm going to be alone, I might as well distract myself with work. And if this trip goes well, my hope is to earn myself a raise.

"It's barely more than a flurry. And it's not sticking to the roads," Case says.

"But the roads are still wet."

"Wet isn't icy, Jillian."

"It's Jilly," I tell him for what must be the hundredth time. The man is averse to using nicknames. Or, at least, mine. "The only person who calls me Jillian is my great grandmother, and she hates me."

He frowns. “Why does your great-grandmother hate you?”

“She hates everyone, really, but seems to save a special piece of that pie for me.” Though I probably shouldn’t, I take it as a kind of compliment that my great-grandmother gives me so much attention, even if it comes in the form of criticism.

“Did you just slow down *again*?” he asks.

“No.” I inch my foot off the gas again. NOW I slowed down again. “The roads are still dangerous. Especially in the dark. And it’s below freezing. Black ice is a real thing.”

I don’t know what black ice is, exactly, but I’ve absolutely heard about its dangers.

“Pull over. I’ll drive,” Case says. “Otherwise we’ll never get there.”

I should protest, even if just to keep the conversation going. This argument is the most words we’ve said since Case hopped in the car and got lost in his phone screen.

But to be honest, I hate driving at night in *normal* weather. Especially on unfamiliar roads. What I said is true—any minute, the roads could get icy.

“Fine. You can drive.”

Case takes the liberty—or has the audacity—to push the hazard lights button. I resist the urge—barely—to slap his hand away from the dashboard. Instead, I focus on slowing down and checking the mirrors to make sure I won’t get rear-ended as I pull over. Thankfully, the highway is pretty deserted, and in a few moments, we’re on the shoulder and hopping out of the car.

Case walks around the front. I walk around the back. It’s freezing and our coats are in the back seat, so we both hustle, though I manage to catch a snowflake on my tongue. I want it to be magical but it disappears too quickly to be anything at all.

We get in and slam our doors at the exact same time like we’re a synchronized door slamming team. I glance over. Case’s knees are practically jammed into the steering wheel,

his fancy suit pants—because even now, he has to wear a suit—getting all wrinkled. Meanwhile I have a good two feet between my legging-encased knees and the dashboard.

I try to swallow my laughter, but a giggle escapes. Case stops fiddling with my mirrors to glare over at me.

“What’s funny?”

“You look like a giant driving a baby’s go-kart.”

“Babies don’t drive go-karts.”

“I should hope not. I can’t begin to imagine the insurance costs.”

Grumbling and completely ignoring my quick wit, Case feels around, obviously looking for a way to move the seat back. I watch, because I find it strangely entertaining to see him behind the wheel of my car.

“Where’s the button?” he demands.

“There is no button.”

He stares at me again. And look—I KNOW nothing is happening between us, but the way he looks at me makes my insides feel like they’re being melted from the heat of a thousand suns. It feels much better than it sounds, trust me.

His mouth takes on a sneery tilt. “What do you mean there is no button? Surely, you can adjust your seats.”

“I mean, I don’t get paid the big bucks like *some* people, and Tina only has the basics. There’s a lever under the seat.”

Case practically has to fold himself into a Bavarian pretzel to reach the lever. I hide my laughter behind a very enthusiastic coughing fit. He doesn’t buy it though, or else he’s just bitter about having to manually move the seat back, because the glare he gives me when he sits back upright is the glare to end all glares. Glarepocalypse.

“*Tina?*” he asks.

“Didn’t you name your Mercedes?”

“I don’t drive a Mercedes.”

“Your Beemer?”

He scoffs as he checks the mirrors again and accelerates, smoothly merging onto the highway. “No one calls them Beemers.”

“I do, Case. I do.”

A moment of silence stretches between us. Maybe the first comfortable one of the trip so far. That’s saying something. Especially since it’s only been twenty minutes since I picked Case up in Austin. Why he was in Austin at all, I’m unsure, but it was on my way from Houston to Sheet Cake.

Yes—that’s the actual name of the town. Sheet Cake, Texas.

Also yes—my mouth waters a little every time I say—or even think—the town’s name. I do love chocolate, and I don’t discriminate about the source: pie, cake, or ice cream will all do just fine.

“Why Tina?” Case asks.

“Did you ever see that movie, *Napoleon Dynamite*?” He opens his mouth, but I keep going, talking right over him. “Didn’t think so. Anyway, there was a llama named Tina. I liked her style.”

Case says nothing for a moment, and I settle in, leaning against the door to watch the snow. I almost jump out of my seat when he says, “She did have good style.”

And suddenly, I find myself grabbing his arm. Without consciously meaning to, I’ve lunged across the center console like some kind of apex predator and latched onto the man. I think it’s the first time I’ve touched Case ever, and I’m surprised by the bulk of muscle under my fingertips.

You never know what’s hiding under a man’s button-down shirt, I guess. They’re like office camouflage, nature’s defense against lusty coworkers.

When he clears his throat, loudly and deliberately, I let go of him and return to my side of the car like I didn’t just commit bicep assault.

“What has you so shocked that you’re groping me, Jillian?”

I ignore the groping part. Because it’s true. And I’m distracted by the way his tone sounds less harsh. Almost ... teasing.

“I’m shocked that you’ve seen *Napoleon Dynamite*. You?”

Because I imagine Case to be the kind of man who doesn’t binge series on Netflix like the rest of us mortals. No, he’s watching the stock market. Or, listening to podcasts about the stock market. He’s filing insurance claims or studying maritime law, probably still in a suit in the comfort of his own home.

Definitely NOT watching *Napoleon Dynamite*.

The man has smiled exactly once in the four years since I’ve worked at Brightmark Studios. And it was because someone got fired. Who smiles at people getting fired? Well, and okay, the guy did embezzle some money, so maybe a smile was appropriate.

But the point is, Case’s sense of humor was clearly an accessory sold separately.

He opens his mouth to answer, but there’s a sudden thump, the car jolts, and we’re careening straight for the trees.

CHAPTER 2

CASE MANAGES to wrangle Tina away from the trees and onto an exit ramp, slowing to a safe stop like he's some kind of professional driver. I'd be impressed, but I'm still screaming.

"We didn't crash," Case says, loudly so I can hear him over my shrieks. "Stop that *now*."

I do, my mouth snapping shut. My body is apparently very receptive to Case's commanding tone. A little *too* receptive. Which is a scary thought. Better not test that theory.

I breathe deeply for a few seconds, then turn to Case. "Thank you. I was stuck in some sort of scream spiral and couldn't get out." I glance through the windshield, where I see a very deserted stretch of very country road in front of us. "Um, also thanks for not crashing Tina. Did a tire blow?"

I'm not even sure if that's the correct terminology. People in movies are always talking about tires blowing.

"Felt that way. When's the last time you had your tires replaced?"

I think about this, trying to remember buying tires, but I don't. Wincing, I tell him. "I don't think I have."

Case turns his whole body to me. "How long have you owned this car, Jillian?"

"Um. A while."

"Define a while. In quantitative terms, please."

It shouldn't be possible, but somehow hearing the words *quantitative terms* coming from his mouth is sexy.

Die, crush, die! This is NOT the time.

"I got her my freshman year of college."

"And how old are you?"

"Shouldn't you know that, Mr. Bossman?"

"I am *not* your boss."

He stares at me long enough to make the tiny hairs on my arms stand up.

"I'm twenty-six."

"Which means your car has been running on the same set of tires for *eight years*?"

"Is that ... bad?"

His look says that even ASKING if it's bad is bad. "Should I assume you don't have a spare?"

"Why would you assume that? There's one in the trunk." *Probably.*

His brown eyes look even darker out here in the deserted countryside. The only lights come from the dashboard instruments, which are fairly dim. There are a few seconds of staring, causing that same melty feeling in my chest again.

When he doesn't stop staring, I add, "I think I have a spare in the trunk."

He nods like he was waiting for me to confess, then says, "I'll check." With lightning speed, he pops Tina's trunk and climbs out.

I hope I have a spare. Not only because I don't want to be stranded here, but also because I'd love to watch Case changing a tire in his expensive dress shoes. Not to mention having a spare would make me look less like an irresponsible car owner. Even if that's exactly what I am.

I rub my hands together, glad at least the engine is still running so we have heat.

As though my thought was somehow projected into the universe and was found unworthy, the engine makes a wheeze, a clank, and sputters to a stop.

“No,” I whisper. “Tina, you can’t do me like this.”

Case’s door swings open and he sticks his head in, snow swirling around him and falling in his dark hair and beard. “No spare,” he says.

No surprise, his tone seems to say.

“Sorry.” I really, really am. “And something happened to the engine. There was a, um, noise.”

“So I heard.” He slides his hand around until he locates the lever for the hood. “Be right back.”

I grab his coat from the back seat. “Want your—”

His door slams on my question, and he disappears under the hood. I should put his coat back, but the temperature is already dropping inside the car. After a moment of hesitation, I drape his coat over me. The fabric feels expensive. Which is to say—it feels nothing like anything I own, the bulk of which comes from Target or Ross.

Since Case can’t see me, I lean down and sniff the collar. It’s the same heady, male scent I smelled when he leaned toward me.

Don’t get used to it, I tell myself, inhaling deeply.

When the hood slams, I freeze, my nose still buried in his collar. Case stares at me through the windshield, and there’s no way he misses me smelling his coat. I can’t read the expression on his face, but all of his expressions are variations on the same theme: irritation or something like smug triumph. I can practically hear him mentally chastising me for such poor car maintenance.

Why do I feel drawn to the idea of Case chastising me in the same commanding tone he used when he told me to stop screaming?

A moment later he joins me in the car again, his hair dusted with snow. I try to hand him his coat, but he shakes his

head.

“Keep it. Quick question—when’s the last time you got your oil changed?”

“Let’s see ... I last got a coupon in the mail, um ... I don’t know. Sometime this year. Probably?”

“It’s December.”

“I’m aware,” I say weakly. “I’m sorry.”

He makes a growly sound of frustration. “I’m sure you are.”

“You didn’t have to come with me, you know? I do these trips alone all the time. I’ve never needed a babysitter before.”

I thought it was odd when I got a text from an unknown number as I was packing. Even odder—the texter identified himself as Case, ordering me to pick him up in Austin on my way to Sheet Cake from Houston.

Not asking. Not explaining. *Ordering.*

He didn’t seem amused by my response, which was *New phone. Who dis?*

His curt responses in our short text thread kept me from asking any of the questions I had. Like, why was Case in Austin to begin with? Why does he need to come on this trip? Is he going to be scouting alongside me—a job I have always done alone—or is there some other reason he insisted on coming?

Case pulls out his phone and starts tapping. We can’t be *that* far from Sheet Cake, so hopefully a garage or towing place is open. Even small towns have those. In our movies, they also tend to come with hunky small-town men who look sexy in coveralls and never, ever get grease on the heroine.

Unless, of course, it’s part of a cute scene that starts with a fight that’s ninety-nine percent sexual tension and ends with a kiss.

Within a few minutes, Case has made contact with a local towing service and given our approximate location. When he

ends the call, a very awkward silence hangs between us right along with the cold air that seems to be growing more frigid by the second.

I burrow down further into his coat. “Do you want your coat back?”

He shakes his head and crosses his arms over his chest. “I’m fine. They should be here in about twenty minutes.”

“We can always share body heat.” I don’t know where the thought comes from, much less why it comes out of my mouth in actual, audible words.

Someone kill me now. Frostbite, hurry up! Hypothermia, have mercy on me!

I don’t need Case’s coat to keep me warm anymore. The fiery heat of embarrassment burns through me like some kind of volcanic event. I should look away, but I find myself transfixed by his dark eyes.

Case stares, his expression intense in the dim light. His mouth tightens. His eyes narrow. Even his trim beard looks angry.

And my mouth just keeps going, digging a hole I’ll never climb out of.

“The most effective way to share body heat is skin to skin, but considering we barely know each other, we should probably keep our clothes on.”

I just stuck my whole foot in my mouth and then decided to gnaw my way up to my knee as well.

“We should keep our clothes on,” Case repeats, his intonation as flat as Tina’s tire.

“Yes.”

“Because we barely know each other.”

“Right.”

“Have you put a lot of thought into this scenario?” he asks.

I swallow. “Definitely not. I mean, not with you specifically. I’m a worst case scenario person. I like to be prepared.”

I don’t need to explain that it helps curb my anxiety. Mine is pretty mild and self-diagnosed by Dr. Google. For me, I can usually talk myself down or use breathing techniques. But imagining terrible scenarios and then making a plan for how I’d deal with them has been a great preventative. My brother gave me *The Worst-Case Scenario Handbook* a few years ago, and I keep it on my bedside table.

“Like, in the case of a bear attack, be still. But with a mountain lion, you want to appear larger. So you should spread your arms or coat wide—if you’re wearing a coat. In quicksand, you want to lie back and get as flat as possible.”

I need to stop talking. But it’s like my scream spiral from earlier—I can’t seem to regain control of myself.

“Is quicksand a real point of concern in your life?”

“You never know. Like I said, I like to be prepared.”

“For quicksand.”

“And bears. And being trapped in a car with no heat when it’s snowing.”

I finally manage to halt the free flow of words from my mouth, which means we descend into that same awkward silence. MORE awkward now that I’ve brought up the idea of us sharing body heat. With or without clothes.

“So, you’re prepared for quicksand and bear attacks and preventing hypothermia, but haven’t managed basic car maintenance?”

Ouch. Right on the nose with that one.

I laugh weakly. “Guess so.”

Case shakes his head and then goes back to his phone. Again. The man never stops working, apparently. Meanwhile, I snuggle deeper into his coat, wishing for a magic button to undo the past few minutes of conversation. Maybe it’s Case’s

scent, acting like a truth serum and disarming my ability to restrain my words. That **MUST** be it.

If tropes worked in real life, Case would have been totally into the body heat idea, which would have turned into a makeout session hot enough to fog up the car windows.

I'll be honest—the idea has been appealing ever since I saw *Titanic*. But, like I said, tropes don't work in real life.

Which is probably a good thing. Because horror movies have their own set of conventions, and our current situation could result in someone creeping out of the woods to murder us.

That is definitely a worst-case scenario I shouldn't have been entertaining. I start to feel the itch of anxiety, like tiny ants creepy-crawling their way over my skin. I draw in a slow breath, then let it out just as slowly.

We're not in a horror movie. No one is coming out of the woods to kill us. It's **CHRISTMAS**, for crying out loud! No one gets ax murdered the week of Christmas!

Though research does show how holidays come with increased stress and stress means people get pushed past their limit and might—

“Hey.” Case's hand finds my shoulder and gives me a quick squeeze. He doesn't let go right away, and his gentle voice and warm touch short-circuit my anxious thoughts. “We're okay, Jillian. Nothing is going to happen. Okay?”

I nod, because he's right. Still ...

“Would you mind getting the metal bar thingy out of the trunk?”

A faint smile lifts one corner of his mouth. “The tire iron?”

“Yes, that. Just in case.”

“Just in case of ...?”

I'm not going to say ax murderers. I won't say it.

“Bears,” I blurt. Which is a few degrees less ridiculous than ax murderers.

“I thought you said if there are bears, we should be still,” Case says, still smiling faintly. “But yes, Jillian, for *you*—not the bears, but you—I’ll get the tire iron.”

Jillian, for you.

As he climbs out of the car, I pull his coat further up over my face.

Not the bears, but you.

It’s not a compliment. Not a pick-up line. But for now, Case’s words—and the sight of him climbing back in with the tire iron—warm my heart.

CHAPTER 3

THE TOW TRUCK takes much longer than twenty minutes.

And because it's freezing and Case doesn't believe in body heat sharing for survival (at least, not with me), things have gotten desperate. I forced him to take his coat after I heard his teeth chattering. And I got creative with layers.

I'm now doing my best impression of Ralphie in *A Christmas Story* wearing several pants and every shirt I packed. A pair of tights is pulled down my head since I apparently forgot a hat.

This isn't a good look, nor is it so good for mobility, but it's okay for survival. And shockingly, Case's solid presence (and the tire iron) have kept my anxious thoughts about being murdered or dying of hypothermia at bay. Mostly.

Still, I have never been so grateful for anything when I finally see headlights coming toward us.

"Look! That has to be them, right?" I point through the dashboard, watching my breath come out in tiny puffs of air.

Case turns off his phone—finally—and leans forward. "I sure hope so."

When a wrecker pulls up beside us, we both audibly sigh in relief. A big, bearded man rolls down his window, waving for us to stay where we are as he does a three-point turn, goes past us, and backs up in front of Tina.

He hops out and walks to Case's side of the car. If it weren't for the man's warm smile, I'd be taking my chances

running through the woods, because the man is massive. He's got a whole lumberjack thing going on. Which, in this situation and without the friendly smile, could be lumberjack ax murder.

Lumberjax murder—I file this idea away for when our studio expands from making romance movies.

“I'm Big Mo. Y'all called about some car trouble?” He eyes the tire iron on the dashboard, and Case clears his throat.

I lean across the center console. “Tina isn't having a very good night,” I say, and even though he has no reason to, Big Mo nods like he understands.

“We blew a tire and the engine died,” Case says. I wait for him to explain it's my fault for being a terrible car owner, but he doesn't.

“I'll get Tina hooked up,” Mo says. “Why don't y'all wait in my cab? It's nice and toasty. Leave the bags for now.”

“Do you, ah, need help?” It's adorable how Case asks, even as it's clear from the way he's eyeing the tow truck he wouldn't have the first clue how.

“Nope. Just leave the keys in and go get warm. You look like a couple of popsicles.”

I thought I was cold in the car, but outside is so much worse. I'm shivering as I waddle in my layers over to the wrecker, where Case waits by the passenger door. He opens it for me.

“You first.”

But climbing up into the big truck proves a challenge. I can't bend my arms or legs with all my layers. I try hopping, but I get maybe an inch off the ground and only manage to ram my shins into the car. Which would hurt if I could *feel* my shins.

With a heavy sigh of annoyance, Case says, “Here,” and then manages to locate my waist and hoist me most of the way in.

“Oof!” I end up on my face, sprawled halfway across the cracked vinyl bench seat.

“Can’t you wiggle the rest of the way in?” Case asks from somewhere behind me.

I try to do just that and make exactly zero progress.
“Apparently not.”

“I’m sorry,” he says, and I’m about to ask for what, when he says, “touching,” in the same tone of voice my OBGYN uses. Then his hands land on my butt—at least, I think it’s his hands and I think it’s my butt; it’s hard to tell through the layers—and gives me a hearty shove.

Okay, then. Now I’m fully inside the car, and have to do the hard work of maneuvering into a seated position. All while dealing with the realization that Case touched my butt. (Through fifteen layers of pants. But still!)

Before I make much progress, the driver’s side door opens and Big Mo appears.

“Need a hand?” he asks, chuckling.

“Or a forklift,” I mutter.

His big hands grasp my coat at the shoulders and tug me upright as Case swings my legs down to the floor. Now I just feel like a toddler being loaded into a car seat. Especially as Case leans close to buckle my seatbelt.

I should thank him. Instead, I try not to noticeably sniff him again.

“Thank you,” I say, adjusting myself and my pride.

Case doesn’t respond as he climbs in, but Big Mo gives me a quick nod before disappearing again. Case and I are sitting VERY close. I’d relish the moment more if I could feel our thighs cemented together. But I can hardly feel anything, so I simply appreciate the view of his dress pants touching my pajama pants over jeans over yoga pants over the leggings I started out with.

“Cozy,” I say.

Case only grunts, pulling out his phone again. Rude! Look, I know we're not on a date or anything, but I happen to be of the opinion that staying glued to an electronic device of any kind when a living, breathing human is next to you displays a total lack of manners.

It doesn't help that my ex (a best friend's brother situation) and I broke up when I gave him an ultimatum—the TV or me—and he chose the TV. In hindsight, I should have explained I didn't mean he had to get rid of the TV. Just maybe ... not watch sports 24-7.

Jeff was kind of a jerk anyway, something very clear looking in the rear view. My only regret is that losing Jeff also meant losing my friend Jaycee.

See? Tropes are bad. They're really just clichés with a cuter name.

“Work stuff?” I ask, nodding toward Case's phone.

He tilts the screen away. “It's personal.”

“Ah. Sorry to intrude.”

The polite thing would be for him to say I'm not intruding and explain he's checking his stock portfolio or maybe texting a girlfriend (hopefully not), but he offers up nothing.

Big Mo finally reappears, climbing into the crowded cab. His big body takes up a lot of room. I'm forced even closer to Case, who makes an annoyed sound and does his best to plaster himself against the door.

Sheesh. The man just touched my butt. If I have cooties, he's definitely already caught them.

“Sorry for the tight squeeze,” Mo says, starting down the road. “But I've got Tina all set. I'll drop her off after I get you situated. Which hotel are you staying at?”

“We're actually staying in a loft downtown?” It's more of a question than a statement because the details are on my phone. And I don't have enough flexibility to reach it right now.

“We are?” Case asks, sounding mildly horrified. “Whose loft?”

“Gotta be Tank’s,” Mo says. “He mentioned some movie company was coming out.”

“That’s us.”

“Real nice place,” Mo says. “And if you’re hungry, there’s a diner right around the corner open late.”

Case sniffs. “A greasy spoon kind of place? Everything deep fried?”

Big Mo smiles. “Not everything.”

“Pass,” Case mutters.

“Well, hope you packed some snacks, because nothing else is open at this hour. There’s Wolf’s bar, but he doesn’t serve food. And it’s a bit of a drive and you have no car, so ...”

“I’m sure it’s fine,” I say, trying to elbow Case.

Mo chuckles. “I should hope so. I’m the chef.”

Twenty minutes later, I’m about to sweat to death underneath all these layers. Thankfully, Big Mo announces “We’re here,” as he drives into the kind of picture-perfect downtown made for made-for-TV movies.

So perfect I audibly gasp and strain forward against my seatbelt to get a better view.

Both sides of the street are lined with old brick buildings, the kind with tall windows and unique wooden doors. Most have second story balconies with wrought iron railings. Christmas lights crisscross over the street and there’s even a little town square, dusted with snow, featuring a white gazebo and a massive Christmas tree glowing like a beacon, just for me.

Or for Brightmark Studios.

“I’ll take it,” I murmur.

“Tank’s done a good job with this town,” Mo says, pulling up in front of one of the buildings. He nods to the door. “This is his place. Did he say where to meet him?”

“The address is on my phone. I’ll have to check.”

But first, I need to get out of this stifling car, get some distance between me and Mr. Glued to His Phone, and get out of these layers before I expire from heat stroke.

“All the lofts are above the storefronts, so it will be a quick walk to whichever one it is. I’ll help with the bags.”

A minute later, Big Mo drives off after pointing out the diner, which is hard to miss considering it’s the only business lit up. Most of the storefront windows are covered with brown paper and signs that read, *Coming Soon!* My stomach rumbles just looking at the cheery diner window strewn with greenery and lights.

I manage to pull my phone out of my purse. “Let me call Tank.”

Case grumbles, staring back at his phone again. I swear, by the end of this little trip, I’m going to “accidentally” run his phone over with my car. Assuming Tina makes it out of the garage. She’s old, and according to all of Case’s complaining, I’m not taking very good care of my girl. I don’t have the money to buy a new vehicle anytime soon, and I definitely don’t want to be stuck in Sheet Cake any longer than necessary with Scrooge McCell Phone, so she better be okay.

“You must be Jilly!” A door opens and a man I recognize from the Internet as Tank Graham steps out with a welcoming smile. “Mo just messaged me about your car. I’m so sorry. But I sure am glad to meet you.”

The former football player is bigger than he looks in online photos. When he envelops me in a hug, my feet come off the ground. He sets me down, and I find myself grinning like a fool at the handsome man, who looks younger than however old he is. Late forties? Fifties? I can’t remember exactly other than knowing his kids are all in their mid- to late- twenties. A

daughter and three *very* hot sons whom I'm secretly hoping to meet.

Other than Tank's laugh lines and some light gray hair at his temples, he could be just a little older than Case.

Who I forgot existed until this instant.

"Tank, this is Case Winchester." I'm not sure why I don't explain *who* Case is. Maybe because I'm slightly starstruck.

Tank reaches out his hand and the two shake. "Good to meet you. Are you a boyfriend or ..."

"Colleague," Case says decisively, and there is NO reason for me to feel disappointed with the reality. But strangely, I am. "I'm with Brightmark Studios as well."

"Let's get y'all out of the cold." Tank starts off down the sidewalk, taking my bag with him, but I stop, a thought suddenly spearing me with panic.

"Wait," I say. "There are two rooms, right? And two beds?"

Case shoots me a look, but I refuse to meet his gaze. Because if there's one trope I'm all too familiar with in my line of work it's the one where there are two people stuck in a tiny town with only one bed.

"Two rooms, two beds, two bathrooms, and even a pull-out couch," Tank assures me.

"Good."

Case falls into step beside me, which is a challenge considering I'm basically doing a lurch-waddle in all my clothes.

"So, you're willing to get close to me but *only* to share body heat for survival?"

Is he seriously asking? He can't be. But the only alternative I can think of is that he's teasing or even—GASP—*flirting* with me.

The idea is so ... shocking that I get distracted, stumble over my own feet, and pitch forward. Case drops his bag and

catches me with an arm around my waist.

At least, I THINK that's my waist. These layers are really hindering my ability to enjoy all these touches from Case.

He rights me, then immediately steps back to retrieve his bag.

"Thanks," I say, a little too breathlessly.

"I'm here to catch you anytime," Case says, a phrase which seems so alien coming from him, I can't manage a reply. For a moment, his brown eyes hold mine, and then he speeds off—aka, walks at a normal, not lurching pace like me—to catch up with Tank.

Of course I think of the perfect response once he's out of earshot. "I'd only let you catch me in case of emergency," I mutter to myself, knowing even as I say the words that they're wholly untrue.

CHAPTER 4

“WELL, would you look at that—the diner has more than just deep fried items,” I say, slapping the laminated menu down on the table. “The Tex-Mex Cobb salad sounds delicious. And it’s a *salad*.”

“I don’t *just* eat salads,” Case says, not looking up from his menu. At least he’s not staring at his phone screen, though it is on the table next to his rolled-up silverware. The phone is almost like another appendage for how attached to it he is—a phone phalange.

“So, you don’t eat fried foods, and you don’t just eat salads. Let’s see ...” I peruse the menu again even though I knew what I wanted the moment I walked in and smelled waffles.

“There are lots of foods on the continuum between salads and a fried Twinkie, Jillian.”

“Oooh, do they have fried Twinkies?”

“No,” a voice says, and a beaming woman with gray hair approaches our table. She has a sprig of fake holly behind one ear. “But we do have churros.”

“Mm,” I say, as I hear Case groan softly. Not the good kind of groan like when something sounds delicious. Clearly, something is wrong with the man’s palate.

“Y’all are the two movie people who broke down?” she asks. “I’m Mari. Big Mo said he towed your car in.”

“That’s us,” I say, trying to shove away any worries about Tina. Particularly, any expenses fixing her might incur. “I’m Jilly and this is Case. Is Mo back yet? I’d like to thank him again.”

Especially now that I look like a normal human. As soon as Tank got us settled in the gorgeous modern loft a few buildings down from his own, I stripped out of my layers, only then realizing I’d still been wearing tights on my head while meeting Mo and Tank.

Humiliating.

And Mr. Sunshine across the table didn’t think to mention how dumb I looked. WHO ALLOWS SOMEONE TO WALK AROUND WITH TIGHTS ON THEIR HEAD? It’s like not telling a person they have spinach in their teeth, multiplied by a billion.

So, if I’m giving him a hard time about his food choices, that’s why. He totally deserves it.

“Mo just got back. I’ll send him out to say hi in a few. Do we know what we’re having tonight?” Mari asks.

“The waffle plate with bacon,” I answer. “How are your grits?”

Mari winks. “A must.”

“Then grits too. And a coffee.”

“You drink caffeine this late?” Case asks, looking judgy. Which I guess is just his resting face.

“I pretty much keep a steady drip going into my system. I can drink a pot of coffee and go right to sleep.” I snap my fingers for dramatic effect.

“That’s disturbing,” Case says.

“I like to think it’s impressive.” I hand my menu back to Mari.

She smiles. “I’ll make a fresh pot. Then you’ll have enough to take when you go.”

“That would be great.”

Even though caffeine doesn't keep me awake, having something to eat or drink does help my focus, and I want to do some work when I get back to the hotel. I hope to present Sheet Cake not as an option for a single movie, but as more of a central shooting location. I need to do a bit more research tonight on locations, properties, and some of the local laws.

I was lucky to land this job right out of college with an English degree and no experience in film or related fields. So I made sure I was REALLY good at my job. After a few years of this under my belt, I know what to look for and what to look out for—not just visually, but down to the legal issues.

It's shocking how many of these tiny towns still have weird, leftover laws that can inhibit filming. I've got a document where I collect my favorite ones. Things like: no serenading from a balcony after dusk (which actually made one location impossible due to singing from a balcony in the script); roadkill may not be cooked on an open grill (ew times a million, especially because it says nothing about *closed* grills); and no more than three unrelated persons may reside in a single dwelling for more than ten days (which put the kibosh on a whole town because it left only the gross hotel rather than home rentals and Airbnbs as an option for our crew).

If Sheet Cake does pan out (ha! punny) as a more permanent location and I'm the one who brings it to the studio, I can use this to lobby for a raise. It would also effectively put me out of a scouting job if we make this our sole location. I love scouting, but the pay isn't so hot. I've been hoping to move into working with the writers on adaptations or even with the directors and am hoping this could be my big break.

Unless Case is trying to step in and take credit or step on my toes somehow. I honestly can't think of another reason our boss would have sent him. That would be SO like David. I can't be the only one who's noticed the massive turnover, especially of women in many of our entry- or lower-level positions. I love our company, icky boss aside, and I don't want to go anywhere. But to stay ... I need to see a chance for advancement.

The thought that David or Case might get in the way of that sends a chill through me and unleashes fresh, new worries.

I study Case as he asks Mari a lot of questions before settling on toast and a grilled chicken breast. I don't know him well, but he has a well-deserved reputation around the office for being prickly and inflexible. Which could just be a personality trait—not everyone is sunshine and rainbows.

But is he a true jerk, like the kind of garbage human who would step in on someone else's project to take credit? Is he as bad as David, who likes to run the office like a good ol' boys club? THIS is what I need to know.

I brought this location to David just this week, and as far as I know, it wasn't anywhere near his radar. It only got on mine in a roundabout way. One of my very favorite beers is a coffee stout from Dark Horse Brewery, owned and operated by Tank's son, James—in my opinion, not just a great brewer but also the hottest of the brothers. I followed the news about Dark Horse's move to Sheet Cake, which is how I found out about the Graham family essentially taking on the feat of revitalizing the small town.

I found it. I'm scouting it. And when I present the idea of using Sheet Cake as Brightmark's main hub for filming, I want it to come from me and ONLY me.

When Mari has taken the menus and disappeared into the kitchen, I fold my arms on the table and eye Case. “So, David asked you to come along and babysit me?”

Is it just me or does he look distinctly uncomfortable? His squirming is very un-Case-like.

“I asked to come.”

Well. That kills the possibility of David being the one trying to hold me back. If someone else is trying to infringe here, it's Case.

I *really* hope I'm wrong.

I would be incredibly disappointed to find out my impossible crush slash current roommate is the same brand of

jerk as our boss.

Case glances around the diner, which is almost empty save for a table of white-haired men talking loudly about football. Case's espresso eyes are assessing.

Is it wrong to wish he'd look at me with the same intensity?

Maybe not wrong so much as delusional.

Remember: he might be trying to mess things up for you at work.

That thought alone helps get me in the right mindset. My crush isn't dead, but it's on life support. Which is a good thing.

"What do you think so far?" he asks.

"It's okay," I say, intentionally downplaying. No need to show my hand. "I mean, there are still lots of factors to consider, and we've only viewed it at night."

He frowns, like my answer was unexpected. The town is obviously perfect even at a quick glance. It's almost a twin for the last location we used, which is so popular and overused there are Reddit threads dedicated to listing all the movies and shows filmed there.

"Tank seems very eager to do what he can to make this work. That kind of motivation helps," Case says.

It does help. As Tank helped get us settled in the condo, he was warm and friendly, making it very clear how willing he'd be to work with the studio. Tank owns the whole downtown area, which I didn't think was a real thing outside of the show *Schitt's Creek*. Even though we'll still need approval from city council and will need various other permits Tank has no control over, it really helps having him on board.

"Sometimes people who are too emotionally invested can actually pose a problem," I say, which is true in certain situations. I've seen it more with authors who are too precious about their sweet baby scripts or the adaptations of their books.

In this situation though, Tank's willingness to work with us could only help. Still, I don't need to tell Case everything. Not until I know for sure why he's here.

"Hm," he says, brows knitting. He stares at me like the human equivalent of a lie detector test, and I realize I'm clutching my silverware like a weapon.

I'm grateful when Case's phone screen lights up, and he loses interest in me again.

I'm spreading my napkin neatly over my lap when Case jumps right back into the conversation like he hadn't just abandoned it for his phone.

"This seems like an ideal setup. Especially with the town being in the midst of a revival. It's also close enough to Austin that it won't be so complicated for travel."

I hold back an eye roll. I don't need Case mansplaining the pros and cons of Sheet Cake to me like it's not my only job.

"You didn't explain why you wanted to come," I say.
"You've never shown interest in scouting locations."

Or in me.

Case doesn't answer but just keeps glancing around the room like he's going to be tested later on the details.

"So—why did you?"

Case's eyes slide back to me, and I refuse to look away, even as he studies my face.

"I'm curious about this aspect of the business," he says.

I'm no facial expression expert, but I've watched enough crime shows to see that Case is a dirty old liar. Or a hot, not-so-old liar. As he spoke, one side of his mouth turned down in a frownier frown than his normal one, and he couldn't hold eye contact.

Interesting.

And ... maybe terrifying. Because this only solidifies my suspicion that he might interfere with my plans.

“Really? What aspects, exactly?” I try to keep my voice even, but I’m about as bad an actor as he is a liar.

Case’s gaze snaps back to me, and his eyes narrow. “What you do. Your role in the company. How valuable this position is to Brightmark.”

Oh, holy snowmen. Is this ... an evaluation? Is the company trying to decide which positions—and which *people*—are essential and nonessential?

I might not be fighting for a raise here but to keep my job.

I lean forward, lowering my voice to a whisper I’m embarrassed to say is very shaky due to my trembling lip. “Am I going to lose my job?”

“What?” He frowns. “No. Are you crying?”

I sniff. “No.”

“Because you look like you’re crying.”

I use my paper napkin to dab at my eyes. “You know, Case, it’s politely understood that you shouldn’t draw attention to someone crying.”

For some reason, talking about it makes me lose the little grip I had on my emotions. I’m on the verge of full-on bawling. Which I will NOT do in front of this man.

“You want me to pretend not to see your tears? I can’t do that, Jillian.”

Well, that’s *sweet*. Except this is Case—the spy and potential thief of my idea and my raise.

“It’s etiquette,” I say.

“I don’t think I’ve heard this rule, and I know my Emily Post.”

This comment immediately yanks my attention away from my delicate emotional state. “You? Mr. Barely Civil subscribes to the school of Emily Post?”

“Rules and manners were very important in my house. You think I’m barely civil?”

Mari returns with our drinks and food then, so I’m saved from having to answer that very direct question. Instead, once she’s gone, I point a fork at his plate. Even the butter for his toast is on the side.

“That is about as boring a meal as you could possibly order from a diner. But you did want grease-free, so mission accomplished.”

Am I insulting his food choices because I’m embarrassed he saw me cry? Yep. And I’m only slightly ashamed to admit it.

Case slowly unwraps his silverware and smooths his napkin over his lap, avoiding my eyes. “My IBS tends to act up more when I travel.”

I almost drop my fork. “IBS as in—”

“Irritable bowel syndrome. Yes.”

I want to crawl under the table and die. No, under the table isn’t low enough. I need someone to bring in a backhoe, dig a giant hole, and toss my body into it because I am DEAD.

“Case, I’m so sorry. I didn’t know.”

“Nor did I expect you to. I don’t tend to find myself eager to discuss my bowels with anyone.” Carefully and methodically, he begins cutting up his chicken. “Especially not an attractive woman.”

My entire body shuts down like a power grid in a storm. Thoughts aren’t forming coherently in my head. I can’t make myself start eating, despite the delicious smell of my waffle. And I think my jaw is somewhere on the table.

Case thinks I’m attractive?

Case takes a bite of chicken, like this is just normal table talk. His bowels. Me being attractive. Both in the same paragraph, which—ew. But the important point remains: Case thinks I’m an attractive woman.

“What?” he asks, finally meeting my eyes again. I swear, his cheeks are the slightest bit flushed. He sighs and sets down his silverware. “Was it the attractive comment?”

I nod.

“Please tell me you’re not one of those women who doesn’t see themselves clearly. Or that you pretend to deny compliments as a way of fishing for more. I’d be very disappointed if that’s the case. You honestly don’t know you’re attractive?”

How does anyone answer that question? It’s like Regina George telling Cady she’s pretty in *Mean Girls* and then turning it into an attack: “So you agree? You think you’re really pretty?”

But I don’t want to *disappoint* Case. Why this matters so much, I can’t say. Probably my stupid crush, which has been given new life now that Case said I’m attractive.

“I’m just shocked that *you* think I’m attractive,” I say slowly.

“I’ve got 20/20 vision.” He picks up his fork and takes another bite of chicken.

Like it’s just a routine fact.

I’m attractive.

The table has coffee rings on it.

I’m attractive.

It’s snowing.

I’m attractive.

I really am *not* one of those women who fishes for compliments, and it’s not like I think I’m some kind of hideous beast. But I don’t have the kind of face that draws attention across a room. My eyes are large and maybe a little too close together. My nose has a bump in the middle and my blond hair and I are rarely on speaking terms.

Guys I’ve dated have called me cute and pretty. Beautiful even, but usually only while trying to convince me to invite

them back to my place or come to theirs. (For the record, that never works for them.)

So it's not like I'm one of those girls with low self-esteem. And I'm definitely not asking for more compliments, though I'd take more if he offered them. Then again, it might be detrimental to my health. Heck—Case paid me one compliment, and now I'm over here malfunctioning. If he paid me two, Big Mo would need to tow me out to the garage with Tina to have someone look under my hood.

I'm still sputtering, trying to come up with a response or even locate my tongue, when Case sets down his fork and knife again, then wipes his mouth with his napkin. He meets my gaze and then the most amazing thing happens: he smiles.

The time he smiled about that one bad employee getting the ax was NOTHING like this.

It would be like trying to compare watching a solar eclipse to flying a spaceship directly into the sun. I know in reality, the craft would burn up well before reaching the sun's atmosphere, and that's exactly how I feel.

I'm across the table from Case and his gorgeous smile and surprise dimples—DIMPLES, people!—barely peeking out above his beard. My total kryptonite!—and all my instrument panels controlling bodily functions have melted.

“Now you know two facts about me, Jillian. I have a janky GI tract, and I have perfect vision, which means I am aware you are an attractive woman.”

I want to demand follow-up information. Like, does he *objectively* think I'm attractive or is he ATTRACTED to me? But I am nowhere near a brave enough soul for that line of questioning.

I also don't want to be disappointed when he explains again that he simply has perfect vision.

What I ask instead is, “Did you just use the word *janky*?”

His smile turns into a smirk, and it's even more off-putting. “I did, indeed. Now, quid pro quo, Jillian. If we're

going to be together for the next two days, it seems we should be getting to know each other. Don't you think?"

"Yes?"

I swear his face falls a little when it comes out of my mouth as a question.

"I mean, as colleagues." He goes back to cutting his chicken and not looking at me.

Oh. Right. We are *colleagues*. I'd do well to remember that. Colleagues who each happen to think the other is attractive. Not that I've admitted my feelings, which are not based on my vision. And anyway, Case HAS to know, objectively, that he's quite a hunk of a man. Despite his best efforts at being unapproachable, the women in the office are always throwing themselves at him.

I'm still not over the attractive comment, so of course I continue along my path of saying stupid things. "Colleagues who have knowledge of things like each other's bowels."

He grimaces. "I would have preferred *not* to start there, but it's kind of a relief to be open about it, honestly. I don't talk about it with anyone, and I assume we'll be sharing meals. Maybe now you'll stop teasing me about my food."

"I'm sorry," I say, feeling miserable about the remarks I made.

"Don't be. I don't mind you teasing me. Just not about that."

Case *wants* me to tease him?

"I have two older sisters," he continues, clearly seeing the disbelief on my face. "Being teased feels like home. Now you know three things about me."

I've learned way more than three things in the last few minutes. The biggest thing I've learned is that I have really NO idea who Case is, but he's certainly not the man I thought.

"Your turn. What fun facts do I need to know about you, Jillian?"

I cut my waffle into squares while riffling through my mental archive for “fun facts” I can share with the stranger across the table—the one with the gorgeous smile and dimples. Let’s see—we could start with my stupid crush on him, or maybe I could share my fear he’s going to somehow ruin my chances of getting a promotion.

“I’ll help you out—you don’t put syrup on your waffles.”

My waffle is now cut complete into squares right along the lines.

“That’s fun fact number one: I like my waffles plain. Or with just butter. In every square.”

“Of course. Why else do waffles have squares, if not to hold things?”

“Exactly.”

Case nods thoughtfully, then pushes both his butter containers my way. “Have mine.”

Be still my heart. The man just gave up his butter for me.

“Thank you.”

“You don’t want to know what havoc butter wreaks on my system.”

Never mind. The man gave up his butter for his bowels.

As far as this little trip goes, it seems about par for the course.

CHAPTER 5

I DON'T SLEEP WELL in general. Nighttime is when my anxious thoughts come out to play. But I especially don't sleep well while traveling. Kind of makes my current role at Brightmark inconvenient. Despite this, I do love to travel. I figure if I'm not sleeping well anyway, why not sleep a little worse in a strange bed?

A strange and very comfortable bed.

I stretch, then spread out and swish my arms around the silky sheets, like I'm making a snow angel. Whatever thread count these are, it's heavenly. I could just stay in here all day.

Especially considering my already bad sleep was much worse knowing Case was in a bedroom just a few walls away. I stayed up half the night putting together a presentation on Sheet Cake for David, hoping I'd exhaust myself into sleeping. It did not work.

A loud knock on the door makes me do an embarrassing little scream.

"Jillian? Are you up?"

"No!"

"Can I come in?"

Can Case come IN? As in, come into my current bedroom? Where I'm in bed?

That sounds like a terrible idea, says most of me. The kind of thing that leads to nothing but trouble.

Another part of me, the one powered by my stubborn crush says, *I love trouble.*

“I have breakfast,” Case says, his voice sing-song-y. He sounds utterly ridiculous, and I find myself smiling big. “And coffee.”

“Fine. Come in. You had me at coffee.”

I barely have time to sit up, pulling the covers to my chin in order to hide my bralessness, when the door opens. Case sweeps inside with a wooden breakfast tray. It’s the kind I’ve only ever seen in movies, with little legs on either side so it can rest over your lap in bed.

Was the tray here in the minimally furnished loft? Other than the most basic furnishings, the loft is pretty empty. Case wouldn’t have *brought* a breakfast tray in his suitcase, would he?

Without making eye contact, Case walks it over and sets it in place on my lap, then steps back, crossing his arms. I stare down at the mug of coffee and a full breakfast plate with bacon, eggs, toast, and grits. There’s also a tiny mountain of creamers by the silverware.

“I noticed how much cream you put in your coffee last night,” Case says.

He did?

“And you seemed to enjoy Big Mo’s grits.”

That one was a little more obvious. When I took my first bite of grits last night, I moaned so loudly, Case spilled his water.

“Wow. Thanks? I, uh, didn’t get you anything.”

For the first time, I glance over at Case. In the morning light filtering through the windows, he looks different. It’s not just the button-down shirt with NO TIE, paired with dark jeans and no shoes—though this is the most casual I’ve *ever* seen him. It’s more that his body language and his expression are totally unfamiliar.

He seems ... nervous? It's kind of adorable. Not a word I ever thought I'd use for the man voted most likely to intimidate others to death in our office. (Okay, so there was no official vote. But if there were, Case would win.)

"I picked it up while having breakfast with Tank."

Forget that—I read him TOTALLY wrong. It's not nerves I see on his face. It's guilt at having breakfast with Tank *without* me. Which is not adorable at all.

I'm the one who set up this trip. *I'm* the one who was supposed to meet with Tank today. Not Case.

I'd love to enjoy this dressed down version of him, the one who brings me a perfect breakfast in bed. The man who talked all through dinner, asking me questions about my degree, my family, my hobbies. We even got so intimate as to share our favorite movies.

His: *Braveheart*.

Which started an argument about stereotypical guy movies.

Mine: *The Dark Knight Rises*.

Which started an argument about DC versus Marvel. I'll never admit to Case that I don't actually like either one. I just happen to like Christian Bale and Christopher Nolan. I had too much fun watching Case get riled up defending his beloved Marvel.

Because Case has a thing for comic books, apparently. And has even been to Comic-Con. *Twice*.

Color me shocked.

Anyway. Forget that version of Case who was open and friendly. Questionably flirty at times. Obviously, he's just trying to lull me into a false sense of security while he steals the credit for my awesome idea.

"He stopped by while you were still sleeping," Case continues.

"And you didn't think to wake me up?"

I want to stomp out of bed, but my sleep shorts feel like a completely indecent length to walk around in front of Case. He doesn't deserve to see my legs. Especially when they're arguably my best feature.

"I thought after our late night you might want to sleep in," he says with a little frown, obviously picking up on the fact that I'm about to explode. "Your light was on late."

Was he checking on me? Or maybe ... thinking about knocking late at night?

Doesn't matter! Focus!

"You thought I wouldn't mind missing the meeting *I* set up on this trip that *I* arranged?"

Case takes a step back and shoves his hands in his pockets. "It wasn't a meeting per se. Tank and I talked about football. My dad is a huge fan. I followed his sons' careers. I've got a signed Collin Graham jersey hanging on my wall at home."

I file that little bit of trivia away with the other things I've learned.

"Oh."

"I told Tank we'd text him when you got up. He'll come back to give us an official tour and answer questions whenever you're ready. He said there's no rush."

So, Case *isn't* trying to sabotage me? I'm so unsure what to think.

"You like football?" I ask, because it's another surprising fact.

"We live in Texas. Liking football is required for residency."

"Yeah, but ..." I trail off because I don't know what I want to say.

"Do I have some kind of anti-football look?"

"You're just so ... refined. You know, with the fancy suits and the whole vibe."

“Vibe?” He raises his brows slowly.

“I really shouldn’t hold conversations before coffee.”

“Or maybe before coffee is when you speak your truth. Tell me, Jillian, what is my *vibe*?”

I can’t exactly tell the man his vibe is like the Wizard of Oz, only instead of being great and terrible, he’s hot and terrible. Or, at least, hot and confusing. I have NO idea what’s behind his curtain.

When I add four creamers to my coffee and take a sip without answering, Case backs toward the door. “Fine. Don’t tell me. I’ll assume you think I’ve got a totally amazing vibe. Epic.”

I snort, almost inhaling coffee. “You know what they say about assuming.”

He grins, those dimples flashing like flares used at airports to guide planes down a runway. Except in this analogy, I’m the plane. And I’m crashing.

“I’ll be out here whenever you’re ready. Take your time.”

Another *thank you* is on my lips when the door closes, leaving me alone with my confusion and a totally perfect breakfast.

I wait until we’ve seen all of downtown Sheet Cake, and Tank has walked away to take a phone call before I say what I’ve been wanting to say all morning.

“Back to this, huh?” I ask as Case and I walk up the gazebo steps together. Or, should I say, Case and I and Case’s phone.

He glances up. “Back to what?”

“You being glued to your phone.”

I lean closer to Case, pretending I’m trying to look at the screen. I’m not actually looking—that would be a huge

violation of privacy I'd usually never consider. Usually. Mostly. Probably.

He clicks the phone off, sliding it into his coat pocket.

"Sorry," he says.

The tips of Case's ears slowly warm up to a bright and festive pink, and he can't meet my eyes. Jealousy is a hot wave, hitting me with sudden force and leaving my hands trembling. I shove them deeper into my coat pockets.

"Oh ... you're talking to a girlfriend?"

He glares. "No."

"Fiancée?"

"No."

"Wife? I mean, you don't wear a ring but—"

"I am unattached."

I snort. "Unattached, huh? That sounds very fancy and official."

We stop inside the gazebo and sit down on a little wooden bench along the side. I expect Case to stick to the opposite side of the bench, but he sits right next to me, so close our thighs almost touch. The light dusting of snow from the night before has melted under the sun's scrutiny, but it's still cold. I tuck my head down into my scarf and coat like a turtle.

"Unattached is like the lesser of two evils. Single sounds so ..."

"Beneath you?" I offer.

Case chuckles and shoots me a sideways glance. "No. It just sounds like teenager-speak."

"So, I was right—it *is* beneath you."

"Fine. Yes. Being single is beneath me. You've got me pegged, Jillian." He bumps my shoulder with his, and the playful gesture is so surprising, I almost fall off the bench.

"Thank you. I am also *unattached*. Though I just call it single by choice."

I'm not sure why I offer this up. But just like when I started talking to him about body heat, my mouth seems determined to steer the ship—right into deeply embarrassing waters.

“Why by choice?”

I shrug, staring out at the massive Christmas tree, imagining a scene just like this one in our movies. Except in the movie, the couple would be heading toward some kind of mistletoe kiss. And that is NOT happening here.

“I've had my fair share of bad experiences.” Aka: a laundry list of tropes gone terribly wrong.

“Or maybe you just haven't found the right man,” he suggests.

“I'm not sure I believe in some kind of mythical ‘one.’”

Case looks at me with a tiny smile, like he knows I made quote fingers in my pocket.

“So, you're giving up altogether?”

I shrug. “For now. It's better than the disastrous dates I've had.”

“How disastrous?”

“You don't want to know.”

Case turns so he's angled toward me, and our thighs are definitely touching now. “Oh, I do, Jillian. I want nothing more right now than to hear about all your bad dates.”

I study him for a moment. The serious expression, the beard that looks like it was freshly trimmed this morning.

“Fine. But don't say I didn't warn you. And no laughing.”

“Fair enough.”

I sigh, tucking my hands into my coat sleeves. “My last date was a guy I met on Tinder—”

“You went on a date with some stranger from Tinder?”

He sounds so incredibly horrified, I can't help but laugh. “Yes, Case. Did you know that over 300 million people a year

are dating through apps?”

“You’ve done your research, huh?”

“I had to defend my choice to my mom.”

Now he’s laughing but stops and holds up both hands when I glare. “How did that go over?”

“She sent me headlines of horror stories for weeks. *Weeks.*”

“And the date? How did it go?”

“It didn’t.” I sigh, burrowing my chin even deeper into my coat so my voice is muffled. “We met at a restaurant, but instead of getting a table, he asked if we were going to his place or mine.”

Case stiffens next to me, and I wonder if I’ve finally stepped over the line of whatever friendship or colleague-ship we’re building here. I’m still totally confused about all the lines or lack thereof.

When he speaks, his voice sounds strained. “And?”

I chuckle and shake my head. “It’s embarrassing.”

Case’s hand appears in front of me, and then he pulls down my scarf and the collar of my coat. The movement is weirdly sexy. Maybe because the side of his fingers graze my bottom lip and then the sensitive skin on my neck. Apparently, it’s EXTRA sensitive today. Probably because of the cold. Not because of Case.

“Hey,” I protest lightly, my voice sounding way too breathy.

“I can’t hear you,” he says. “You’re mumbling into your coat.”

Whatever part of me wanted to unload personal info onto Case has gone into hibernation. Now, I just want to backtrack and ask about work stuff or Christmas plans or something totally normal and surface level. Because that’s where we belong—professionally surface level. I’d even take bowel talk right now. I should totally ask for a list of acceptable foods.

“Tell me,” he demands in a voice so low, so growly and forceful, that I have no choice but to do what he says.

“I pelted him with mints.”

Case doesn't speak right away. Then, *exorcist* slowly, his head swivels in my direction. “You *what?*”

“You know how they always have those big bowls of mints at the hostess stand or by the door? Well, I grabbed a handful and started throwing them at the guy.”

We're sitting so close it's kind of awkward to turn and meet Case's gaze, but just like his demanding words, his eyes leave me no choice—I have to look.

“What?” I ask, unable to read a single thing in his espresso eyes.

Then his face breaks out in the same brilliant smile that almost undid me the night before.

My, what big dimples you have!

The better to disarm you with, my dear.

“Shut up,” I tell him, though he hasn't said a word.

“I'm trying to picture it. How many mints would you say you threw? Just one handful?”

I clear my throat, then look down at my boots. “More.”

“Come on. I need details. I'm a numbers guy. Would you say a third of the bowl?”

I shake my head. “Not a third.”

“Half?”

“I mean ... at *least* half.”

Case's shoulder bumps mine again. “You dumped the whole bowl over his head, didn't you?”

I giggle. “I wish. He was standing too far away. And he was kind of tall. I would have needed a stepladder to get up there.”

“You like tall guys, then?”

This question feels ... *different*. Case has been teasing me, but this feels more like interest than simple curiosity.

But that can't be right.

"I don't really have a height requirement for men I date. I mean, taller than me, but I don't need some NBA star or anything."

"Noted. So, you didn't dump the bowl on his head, but I feel like you're holding back."

Sighing, I duck my chin back into my coat. Case *tsks* and immediately reaches over. This time, instead of pulling down my scarf and coat, his fingers rest lightly on my chin.

I almost stop breathing. He applies the lightest touch, urging me to lift my face and meet his gaze.

I swear, I feel that touch all the way in my toes.

Slowly, I let him direct me until I'm turned toward him, facing those intense eyes again. When he drops his fingers from my chin, I have to hold back a sound of protest.

"Tell me," he says again, this time lightly. "This is quickly becoming one of my very favorite stories."

Why this statement makes my stomach flip and my heart pound, I don't know. *He just likes your funny story, Jilly. It's not like he likes YOU.*

"I, uh, threw the bowl at him."

His lips twitch, a tiny smirk emerging from the hard line of his mouth. "Was it glass?"

"Thankfully, no. Also thankfully, it didn't hit him. Because he was already yelling about me assaulting him."

One eyebrow raises slowly. "This giant of a man said *you* were assaulting *him*—with mints?"

"He did."

"What happened next?"

"Next, the manager threatened to call the police. I dropped a twenty on the hostess stand and bolted. Then I deleted my

Tinder app and ordered a pizza. I think ... I think part of the problem was I got hangry.”

“I don’t think you were the problem in this situation,” Case says.

“No?”

“No.” His voice is firm. “But you realize that Tinder is an app mostly used for hookups, not for serious dating, right?”

“I know that *now*. I mean, no one I knew had used it, but it’s the one you hear about with all the swiping, so I just thought ... yeah. No more app dating.”

“Good,” Case says.

Good? I swallow. Is it good because those dating apps are trash and Case cares about my safety and well-being? Or good because of ... another reason? One maybe more personal?

I can’t even let myself THINK the possibility in specific terms. But I’d be lying if I said my little crush isn’t alive and well, overthinking and reading into this whole conversation.

Then Case leans away, pulling out his phone. Again.

He frowns. “I need to make a call.”

He stands abruptly and leaves me alone on the bench, hope wilting like a flower in a weeks’ old bouquet.

Case already has the phone up to his ear as he takes long strides away from the gazebo. Maybe the man is unattached—aka *single* to all the regular people out there—but he isn’t *available*. His mind is clearly somewhere else.

And he certainly isn’t going to fall for the kind of woman who throws dinner mints in a fit of hangry indignation.

Tank appears a moment later, jogging up the gazebo steps and blowing on his hands. His broad smile cheers me up the smallest bit. He just has that way about him, like some kind of giant, warm teddy bear.

“Sorry about that. A little fire needed to be put out.” He glances around. “Do we need to wait for Case, or should we tell him to meet us for lunch? I know it’s already a little late.”

I stand, doing my best to smile normally and not like a woman who can't kill her stupid crush. "No need to wait. Let's go."

CHAPTER 6

BY THE TIME Case blows into the diner, Tank and I have already ordered. I've also rushed through a lot of my questions at a speed that made the former football player chuckle. "Where's the fire?" he even asked. I just forced a laugh and told him I was really excited.

Which I am. I also wanted to ask him questions without Case getting a sense of what I'm thinking about Sheet Cake.

I see Case through the glass window before he walks in, mostly because I've been watching for him. I've heard of stormy expressions, but his looks more hurricaine-y, and I'm totally on the dirty side of the storm.

Ruh-roh. Looks like somebody doesn't like being left out.

My stomach swirls with a mix of guilt and triumph that I managed to have a discussion without including Case. I'm doing my level best to hold on tightly to my goals and forget the few nice moments we've had.

Actually ... it's been more than a few nice moments, I realize as he strides over. The effort to get to know me last night, letting me keep his coat in the car, bringing me breakfast in bed. And though it's true he's been glued to his phone, he hasn't been *awful*. He's actually been surprisingly ... nice. Maybe I'm being too hard on him.

Then again, he met with Tank this morning. And I have a hard time believing they just talked football.

Case's eyes find mine and lock. He doesn't so much as blink as he storms across the packed diner to our booth.

This must be what a gazelle feels like, being chased down by a lion.

Except I bet the gazelle didn't take a weird sort of pleasure in it the way I am. I definitely love the way he slides right into the booth next to me, not leaving any room between us. We are connected from shoulder down to our hips and thighs.

I shouldn't like this. That's the thing. But giving myself a mental reprimand doesn't do diddly squat. Telling my heart to slow down doesn't make it change its erratic rhythm. Reminding my lungs to take slow, deep breaths doesn't stop me from being light-headed. All because Case Winchester is giving me a heated look while plastered to me in a diner booth.

Anger, I tell myself. It's anger not desire or anything else. Because he hurt my feelings by ignoring me and might be trying to get in the way of me making my big work move.

But I don't *know* that he's trying to do anything nefarious at work. I still don't know why else he'd be here, so I cling to this thin suspicion like a shield.

"Sorry about the delay," Case says, scootching even further into me, my space completely invaded by his big body and his ridiculously male scent.

Do they bottle and sell testosterone? Or some kind of Pure Man Spray? Because that's got to be what he's wearing. It's undeniably delicious, even when competing with the scent of bacon and coffee.

"No worries," Tank says, his smile cutting right through the tension. The man practically seeps kindness from his pores. If it weren't for his intimidating frame, I'd struggle to believe Tank ever played a sport as rough and relentless as football. "We just ordered, but we can add yours. Let me go grab Mari."

"You don't need to do that," Case says. "I'll wait."

"It's fine," Tank says, his eyes darting between Case and me. "Looks like you two might need a moment."

I expect Case to protest, to tell Tank we're just two colleagues who barely know each other, but he says nothing.

Instead, the moment Tank is gone, Case angles his body toward me, putting an arm behind my shoulders. I lean slightly away to combat the deep urge to press back into his arm.

“You couldn’t wait, huh?” Case asks.

“You didn’t wait for me earlier,” I say, but it sounds way too petulant and whiny, so I add, “Also, I was starving.”

Case’s eyes narrow, and he leans forward the slightest bit, making me feel like prey again. Willing prey, based on the delicious shiver I try to hide.

“It’s only been a few hours,” he says. “I fed you breakfast. A good breakfast.”

“You underestimate the close relationship I have with food.”

“I’ll make a note in your file.”

“You have a file on me?”

Case only rolls his eyes. And now I’m wondering if Case does have a file and is jotting down notes to share with David when we get back from the holidays.

“Anyway, you had a meal without me. Why can’t I have one without you? Not a big deal.”

Case studies me. “I told you, Tank and I talked football.”

Right. He did say that ... but can I trust him? I study his face, looking for traces of deception or malice or—fine! Maybe also for traces of something else. Something like interest or any indication we might be moving from colleagues who barely know each other into something more.

“What did *you* talk about?” he asks pointedly.

NOT football.

But I’m saved from having to explain or trying to lie when Tank reappears at the table with Mari. This afternoon, she has a red flower behind her ear where the holly was last night.

“Good to see you again,” she says, smiling. “What can I get for you today?”

And this time, when Case orders a baked potato with all the fixings on the side, I say nothing. Even though I cannot fathom the idea of eating a baked potato without everything on it. My bowels would just have to get OVER it because I need my sour cream and cheese and bacon and butter.

At that very moment, Case passes his dish of butter to me without a word.

It's just because of his IBS, I tell myself. No other reason.

But the secret smile he gives me as he slides over his butter seems to suggest something else entirely.

“Let me know if you have any other questions or need anything,” Tank says as we exit the diner, where he insisted on paying for our meal.

Usually we'd pick up the bill, just part of our expenses. But Tank was insistent.

He smiles. “I mean that. Anything at all.”

I believe him. The big man has practically bent himself in half like some kind of contortionist to make us feel welcome. Not just the studio. He's made Case and me feel *personally* welcomed.

Case had a few questions at lunch, ones I'd already asked but Tank answered again, and then we were regaled with stories of Tank's kids and of the town of Sheet Cake, where the residents apparently call themselves *Sheeters*. I can't remember the last time I laughed so much. Even Case cracked a few smiles.

“I think we're good,” I tell Tank, removing my hand from the warmth of my coat pocket to shake his hand. “Thank you for your hospitality.”

“Any word on your car?”

I shake my head. “Still undergoing surgery.”

A very expensive surgery. One that's going to make my already minuscule Christmas budget even smaller. Apparently, all that car maintenance stuff is pretty integral to having a functioning vehicle. Who knew!

"Actually, on that note," Case says, glancing at me before turning back to Tank. "We could really use a vehicle if you happen to know where we could rent one or—"

"Have mine." Tank fishes the keys out of his pocket and tosses them to Case, who catches them easily.

"Oh, we couldn't possibly," I say, just as Case says, "Thank you."

"My truck is parked just down the street," Tank says, pointing toward a big blue pickup. "You've got my number. I'm happy to drive you back to pick your car up when it's ready."

"Thanks," Case says again, as though it's *his* car that broke down, and Tank is doing *him* the favor. "When do you need it back?"

Tank waves dismissively. "I've got my niece coming over to spend the night, so I'll be good until tomorrow. Let me know if you want to see the brewery. I can message James."

I hope my cheeks are already red from the cold so the flush I feel doesn't show. Before Case showed up at lunch, I might have asked Tank about getting a behind-the-scenes tour of the brewery. It's not open yet, but it's a few blocks away with construction vehicles parked out front and workers moving in and out.

I asked because I like Dark Horse beer.

Not because I fangirl over James Graham.

Case waits until Tank has lumbered out of sight before he says, "You want to see the brewery, huh? As a potential filming location?"

"Yep."

I can't meet his eyes and instead stamp my feet and burrow further down into my scarf.

“And this has nothing to do with the signed posters of James Graham on your wall?”

“He doesn’t have any—” I realize my mistake the moment the words leave my mouth. Of course James has no posters. Unlike Pat and Collin, Tank’s two other sons who played pro, James stopped in college after an injury.

NOT that I’ve spent much time on his Wikipedia page or anything.

Case is laughing, head thrown back, actually *cackling*, and it’s too distracting for me to make any kind of valid counter argument.

“Shut up. I like his beer.”

“The *beer*. Not the man *behind* the beer.”

“Exactly. Purely professional interest.”

“Is he tall?”

Yes. A fact I know thanks to Wikipedia. “How should I know?”

“Oh, you know. Taller than me?”

I squint. “Are you tall? Hadn’t noticed.” He is. I noticed.

“Mm-hm.” He clearly doesn’t believe me because I’m clearly lying. “Shall we? Come on,” Case says when I don’t move. “You owe me.”

“I owe you?”

“For all the butter.”

“You’re just giving me your butter because you can’t eat it.”

“Why not both? I like giving you butter because I like seeing you happy. I also like giving you butter because it makes my intestines happy. Come on. How else will you get a thorough look at the town?”

I hesitate, but it’s hard. It feels like overstepping to take Tank’s nice truck, but I’m afraid of another kind of overstepping—a big old leap over the boundaries I’m trying to

keep firmly in place with Case. Because when he says things like he likes giving me butter because he likes seeing me happy ... well, let's just say that it's not helping with the whole crush situation.

Neither will going for a ride with him, spending more time with him. Because every hour seems to bring us closer.

Which could be a good thing ... a really good thing.

But out of all the tropes I've lived out in my life, the one I've absolutely and intentionally avoided is an office romance. When you crash and burn there, you don't just lose a relationship, you could short-circuit your career. Case isn't my direct boss, though he is above me. I can't see how this would help my career or what it might do to how people in the office see me.

You're overthinking. You're doing a worst-case scenario of a scenario that hasn't even happened to worst-case yet!

Okay, that might be the MOST reasonable voice in my head.

"Come on, Butter," Case says.

"That *cannot* be my nickname. It's offensive."

"What's offensive about butter?"

"Nothing as a *food*. As a name? No."

"Hm." He rocks back on his heels, playfully rubbing a hand over his trimmed beard. "Let's see ... I need another idea."

"How about just call me what all my friends call me—Jilly?"

"So we're friends now?"

"No." I pause because my answer seems harsh. "Maybe. Getting there?"

"There's no *maybe*. The whole getting stranded and sharing a loft leveled up our working relationship to friendship."

“You said last night we were colleagues.”

“That was last night. Today is a whole new day, Jillian.”

“Why are you being like this?”

“Like what?”

“All ...” I search for the right word while he smirks at me.
“Playful. Fun. You aren’t those things.”

“How would you know? You just said we aren’t friends.”

He has a point. The more time I spend with Case, the more of a mystery he is.

And it’s probably best he stay that way.

“Fine. On one condition.”

“Name it.”

“Go back to being the stuffy and serious work version of yourself that I’m used to.”

He raises one dark brow, a muscle ticking in his jaw as he shoves his hand in his pocket. “Stuffy and serious—is that how you see me? Is that my *vibe*?”

“That’s how everyone in the office sees you. It’s a factual observation.”

For a moment, I think I’ve hurt his feelings. When he steps close, I get that feeling again—the one I shouldn’t love so much—like I’m his all-too-willing prey.

He leans close, the breath leaving his mouth in visible puffs that curl toward me and disappear. “Well, I’m sorry to disappoint. I am *not* stuffy, and I’m only serious about a few things.”

It’s on the tip of my tongue to ask what things, but then Case leans even closer, his cheek brushing mine as his lips come close to my ear.

“And when I’m serious about something, I am wholly focused and completely consumed.”

There have been several occasions when I’ve wondered if Case was flirting. But it was easy to dismiss them as friendly

banter. Teasing. Because I wasn't lying about how everyone sees him. How I've seen him. NOT as the kind of man to flirt with someone like me.

Again, not that I have some weird insecurities. Just that I see the facts—I'm younger and barely above minimum wage in the company. I verbally vomit things like sharing body heat while Case is a master of control.

But there is zero question in my mind about his intentions now. He is flirting.

Unless ... he's hinting at his plans to murder me. Considering he's had ample opportunity to do so—particularly when Tina died on that empty road—I'm going to have to go with flirting.

As quickly as he stepped close and gave me a dizzying case of vertigo, Case backs up, his face resuming the normal expression of impossible to read.

“Are we going for a drive or not?”

I can't speak, so I start walking toward the truck by way of an answer. Case hurries ahead of me to open the passenger side door.

Instead of thanking him, I cross my arms.

“You assume you'll drive because you're a man?”

I really need to return to some semblance of normalcy, something lighter and more playful than SERIOUS Case. I don't know if I can handle that right now.

He rolls his eyes, then holds out the keys, dangling them right in my face. “You want to drive? Have at it.”

“Nope. But I do get to choose the radio station.” I snatch the keys and hop into the passenger seat, leaning over to start the engine.

I catch another rare, devastating smile before Case closes the door. The truck is massive, just right for a massive man like Tank, but as Case climbs behind the wheel, I realize it's not nearly big enough for the two of us.

CHAPTER 7

MY CHEEKS HURT. Like, they are legitimately aching from how hard I've been laughing.

At Case.

I am laughing at the man whose skeleton I assumed was missing a funny bone. Now, I think he's got at least two. They're just well hidden.

He regaled me with stories as we drove around the idyllic country surrounding Sheet Cake's downtown, checked out the acres where the annual Sheet Cake Festival is held, and then quickly passed by the newer part of town which could be Anywhere, America with its strip malls and fast food. Case has an endless amount of funny stories, mostly from growing up and being his two big sisters' favorite Guinea pig or scapegoat, depending on the story.

"Your sisters actually gave you a perm?"

"They did."

I wipe a tear and wiggle my jaw to ease the cramping in my face muscles.

"I'm going to need photos."

"All photos have been burned. But picture a miniature Bob Ross without the mustache or any happy trees."

This mental image starts my giggles anew. The weird thing is, I can absolutely picture it. "And your parents didn't stop them? I bet your sisters got grounded later."

His whole body quiets at my question, his hands tightening on the wheel and his mouth snapping closed. Did I overstep? Was that too personal? Oh no—did his parents die in some tragic accident and leave him orphaned?

“They didn’t really care what we did, as long as we made good grades and didn’t cause trouble. I’m not sure they even noticed my hair.”

I process this. It takes a minute.

My parents are embarrassingly dorky with their affection toward each other, always kissing loudly and holding hands. They are also far prouder of me and my younger brother than we ever deserve.

Anything we *did* do as kids, they showed up in a major way. Like fully decked out in team colors (for my brother’s high school soccer games) or in a matching costume (the one time I was in a Peter Pan musical and Mom wore fairy wings). They’d have loud horns in the stands and handmade signs with our names and would get into fights with anyone on the sidelines who dared have the audacity to say anything about their child. I had one line in the play but my bouquet was bigger than the girl who played Wendy.

The one time I attempted to cut layers in my hair (total fail) and then tried to hide the evidence with a ponytail, my mom noticed the second she saw me. They would absolutely have noticed a perm. And my brother would have been grounded forever if he’d done that. They might have permed his hair as a lesson in “do unto others.”

So, what Case has said is hard to imagine. It makes my limbs feel weighted down with sadness.

“Were they ...” I struggle for the right word. “Neglectful?”

“Not technically. Not according to any laws. We were fed. Clothed. We had things we needed but weren’t spoiled. My parents just liked their jobs better than they liked their kids.”

Ouch. That hurts to even hear, and I don’t realize I’m rubbing at my sternum until Case shoots me a look.

“It’s fine. I’m not traumatized by my childhood. My sisters and I are still super close. They live in Austin.”

“Is that why I picked you up there—you’re spending the holidays with them?”

I’d picked him up at a cute little house near the UT campus. The kind that would be called a bungalow but would sell for half a million or more because it’s Austin. Case was waiting by the curb for me when I got there, and I saw no sign of a sister or anyone else.

A brief pause. Then: “Yes.”

Clearly not the only reason, but I feel like I’ve probably gotten more out of him than he usually gives. The funny stories—any stories at all, honestly—and the admission about his family are the equivalent of peeling back most of his onion layers. I’m still unsure what’s in the center but I sense Case needs a break from the inquisition.

“Hey, what was the place Big Mo mentioned when he drove us into town—some wolf bar?”

Case grins over at me. “Wolf is a man who happens to own a bar.”

“That makes a lot more sense than what I was thinking.” Which was some kind of Twilight-themed Team Jacob saloon.

“I think we should go,” I say.

“To a bar?” Case looks skeptical.

I’m not sure if it’s because he’s not the bar type or if this Wolf’s bar sounds sketchy. Maybe he’s hungry. The horizon is edged with gold and red as the early winter night closes in.

“Not just any bar. Wolf’s bar.” Before Case can protest, I add, “I’ll text Tank for the address.”

There is no address for Wolf’s bar (which has me asking so many questions like—how does that work as far as tax

purposes?) but Tank texted me small-town directions. As in: drive till we get to the four way stop, go left, then find the gravel driveway just past the crooked oak but before the old barn.

We missed the crooked oak—all oaks are pretty much crooked to some degree—but after Case u-turned at the old barn, we manage to find the gravel drive. I'd think the weird metal shed was more a meeting place for some kind of apocalypse cult except for all the trucks out front and the sound of country music faintly drifting over the air.

“Still up for this?” Case asks, peering through the windshield. He still hasn't turned the truck off, so I'm guessing he's having second thoughts.

Which only makes me more eager to go inside. “Let's do this.”

The bar definitely doesn't have a shred of Twilight vibes. Though Wolf Waters has definitely got the Charlie Swan thing going on with his dark hair and mustache. His face looks a little paler around his jaw, like he just shaved off the rest of his beard and hasn't had time to even out his tan.

“Welcome to Backwoods Bar,” Wolf says, leaning on the bar, which is really just a wide wood plank balancing on two barrels.

Apparently, Wolf's bar has an actual name, even if no address. Good to know. It's nice that he doesn't point out that we're strangers. Probably no need, since the people scattered around at various unmatching tables make it clear with their stares.

There are stools by the “bar,” so I plunk down on one, unzipping my jacket and laying it across my lap. I expected it to be chilly inside, but there are several of those tall metal space heaters around the room, and it's actually quite toasty. Case sits beside me but keeps his jacket on.

“Do you have any Dark Horse?” I ask, ignoring Case's snort.

Wolf's grin widens. "Sure do. You're in luck—James dropped some off earlier today. Not a full stock, but just some of his seasonal stout."

"We'll take two," Case says, shrugging when my brows shoot up. "What? You've raved about it, so I at least need to try it."

Wolf pulls two unlabeled bottles out of a cooler behind him. After popping the tops, he slides them over. "I don't do glasses. Not unless you're ordering something a little harder." He winks, and Case scowls.

"Enjoy. First round's on the house." Wolf walks off as someone calls to him from across the room. Shed. Bar? Whatever. I tilt my head a little, listening in as Wolf commiserates with a grizzled man complaining about his ram escaping the pasture again.

Case clinks the neck of his bottle against mine, drawing my attention back to him. "What are we drinking to tonight?"

I pause, the beer almost to my lips. Turning slightly, I meet Case's gaze. "To new friends?"

I'm still not sure if he's got some ulterior work motive for being here. I mean, he *has* to, even if I don't know what yet. But with how open he's been, friendship seems like a safe start.

"Friends," he agrees, then just before the bottle meets his lips, he adds, "For now."

Before this weekend, I'd have taken that as a veiled threat. Maybe that I'm about to lose my job. Frankly, I still haven't one hundred percent ruled that out.

But after the last day of being with Case practically every minute, this feels more like a flirty promise of things to come.

I don't hate it at all. In fact, I like it so much, I get super nervous and drink half my beer without taking the time to appreciate all the lovely fall notes and the depth of flavor.

"Okay, you're right about the beer." Case holds out the bottle, examining it. "This is fantastic. But I still think you

have a crush on James Graham.”

“It’s totally about the beer,” I lie.

“Why no labels though?”

Wolf appears, counting out cash and putting it inside a metal cash box. “This is from James’s personal stash,” he says. “No labels. It doesn’t really exist. Legally speaking. Just like this place.”

With a grin aimed my way, he’s gone again, floating from table to table, laughing and talking.

“This feels so . . . quintessential small town,” Case says, spinning the bottle on the bar.

“It really is. Do you think it has, um, a bathroom?”

I’d love to not explain that I’ve been holding it for a while now, but I guess since Case has talked about his irritable bowels, I can talk about my tiny bladder. Earlier it was just a vague sense of needing to go, but it’s becoming an urgent need by the moment. Beer isn’t helping.

Case stands. “You know what? I’ll look around.”

“Thanks.” It’s not that Wolf’s bar looks unsavory—the mood here seems relaxed and jovial like Wolf himself—but I don’t feel super comfortable walking around any new place searching for the bathroom.

I think he’s already walked away, but Case leans forward, brushing my shoulder as he slides his credit card across the bar. His mouth is right next to my ear, setting off all kinds of internal proximity alarms, when he says, “Order me another, will you? Next round is on me.”

My next round is going to be water, but I can hardly find thoughts, much less form coherent sentences, so I simply nod. Case hesitates a moment longer, so close I feel a tiny scrape of his beard on my jaw. I wonder if he’s thinking about kissing me. Because I am unequivocally thinking about it.

If I just turned my head, our lips would brush. It would be so easy—and noncommittal. An OOPS! kiss. Then later, we could figure out the details. Like, if we wanted to do it again

or maybe even if we wanted to *right now* turn the accidental kiss into something intentional. Something longer and more—

Case backs away in one swift move, and I really hope he doesn't have the ability to read my thoughts by osmosis.

Wolf appears and laughs when I try to give him Case's credit card. "Cash only," he says, grinning. I'm beginning to wonder if the man can frown. "But for you, I'll happily cover it."

"It's for my friend."

"Friend, huh?" His eyebrows jump, and a light comes on in his eyes.

"We work together. Colleagues. The friend thing is new."

"You like him." Wolf is not asking.

"Maybe? I don't know him well. He's hard to read."

I am the cliché of a person coming to a bar to spill their guts to the bartender. Then again, my mouth seems to spill things whenever I open it, so maybe this is just me being me.

"He's not that hard to read. More of an open book. And the way he's looking at you isn't so *friendly*," Wolf says. My eyes go wide, and as I start to turn, Wolf grabs my hand and says, "Don't look. He's walking over."

"O-kay."

"Just look into my eyes."

I do. Wondering if this is a Twilight kind of bar after all, and I'm about to have my mind wiped. Wolf's eyes are a rich, dark brown, sparkling with amusement. Case's eyes, I realize, are, by comparison, flecked with gold, a little more of a milk than dark chocolate. Mm... chocolate.

"You've seen my bar now," Wolf says, as the tiny hairs on the back of my neck rise in a way that tells me Case is near. "How would you like to see my bunker?"

I have SO many questions about this. Wolf has a bunker? Like ... the doomsday kind? Maybe I wasn't so far off

thinking of this place like a hotbed for cult activity. But maybe

“Is that some kind of euphemism?” Case asks, firing off his words like bullets. “Your *bunker*?”

Wolf lets go of my hand and steps back, crossing his arms over his chest and looking pleased with himself. “Nope.”

“You really have a bunker?” I ask. “Does it have bathrooms?”

In a smooth motion, Case grabs his credit card and then my hand, pulling me to my feet. His hand is warm and solid in mind, firmly urging me to move in a way that’s a little bossy without being controlling. I barely manage to grab my jacket as Case all but drags me—willingly, of course—toward the back corner and a slim door that looks like it’s made of particle board.

“There’s no lock,” he says, taking my coat and dropping my hand. “I’ll stand outside.”

I hesitate, because if the door is any indication, this isn’t going to be a clean bathroom.

“It’s fine,” Case says. “I checked.”

As far as chivalry goes, checking a bathroom for a girl isn’t on any top ten list. But maybe it should be.

Safely shut inside a room so small it’s hard to even stand, I stare into the mirror that’s attached to the wall with extensive layers of duct tape. My cheeks are flushed pink, my hair is a staticky mess, and my eyes have the look of someone who’s just been thoroughly kissed.

I wish!

My pupils are wide, my lids hanging low, like they can’t possibly find the energy to open wider. It’s not really fair to look this way WITHOUT being kissed. Not even a little bit fair.

I notice a few things suddenly. It looks like there was a word or phrase written in lipstick on the mirror that someone tried to wipe off. There’s a little bit of pink smudge still, but

the mirror is clean. So is the sink. Cleaner than I'd expect for a place like this. Even the toilet seat is down and pee-free.

Did Case clean this bathroom for me?

I glance in the trash can and, sure enough, there are a bunch of balled up paper towels, one streaked with pink lipstick. He DID.

And this tiny gesture gives me far more pleasure than it should.

CHAPTER 8

WHEN I STEP OUTSIDE, ready to thank Case, my words dry up. Because it's hard to talk watching the way he peels himself off the wall where he was leaning, watching the door. His smile, coming slow and looking heated, does me in.

“How do you feel about dancing?” he asks.

“What?”

“Dancing. Some people love it and some hate it. Where do you stand on the issue?”

“Um. I'm for it, I guess.”

I actually *love* dancing. But I also happen to have about ten left feet that appear when I hit the floor. Going dancing requires me to make a conscious choice between my urge to boogie and my hope to preserve my dignity.

Right now, the choice is more between my desire to dance with Case (an alluring idea for sure) and to prevent him from seeing me at my worst (an idea I like a lot less).

Dancing is an excuse to touch, to get close to someone else with no pretense, no promises. It's just a dance. You can say things with your arms, your hands, your hips—things you might not be ready to confess in words. Dancing makes you light and loose. It feels a little like a free pass.

I swallow around a knot in my throat, one made from a mix of desire and nerves. “I don't know if ...”

“Let's do it,” Case says, and his smile demolishes the last of my resistance.

How can I say no when he smiles at me like that?

Plus, Case has already seen me with tights on my head and knows I'm pretty much a child when it comes to taking care of my car. I'm not sure if I could look more foolish.

"Fine." I try to say it like it's a chore, but I know his assessing eyes don't miss the way I'm already bouncing on my toes and trying to hide a smile.

"The party's outside," Case says.

He holds up my coat and helps me into it, his chest close to my back. I almost lose my mind when he sweeps his hand over my neck, gently lifting my hair out of the coat.

Like cleaning up the bathroom, this is totally an underappreciated romantic gesture. I'm going to feel the ghost of his fingertips on my neck for a long time.

"Thank you."

Case takes my hand again and holds open the back door. There are definitely more people out here than inside the small building. Christmas lights crisscross a big area surrounded by more tall, metal heat lamps like Wolf had inside. A crackling fire pit adds a warm glow and speakers play a Loretta Lyn Christmas song. Small clusters of people stand around talking, with one couple swaying in the middle of everything, like they're the only two people in the world.

The night is cold, but holding Case's hand has warmed me through and through. "How does one dance to Christmas music?" I ask, hesitating.

"Merrily and with great cheer," Case answers with a grin.

While I'm distracted, laughing, he pulls me out onto the makeshift dance floor, consisting of packed dirt and gravel. Like movie magic, the song on the speakers switches to a slow song. Slow dancing, I can do. I sway with the BEST of them.

Case slides his hands inside my coat, finding my waist, and I draw in a little breath at the feel of his hands only a layer of fabric away from my skin.

“This okay?” he asks, and when I nod, one side of his mouth lifts in a teasing smile. “Then maybe you should put your arms around me.”

Invitation: accepted.

I slip my hands under the collar of his coat, hesitantly at first, then touching his neck more firmly as his fingers tighten around me. I like the way his hair feels under my fingertips, and I do some exploring, sliding my fingers up and playing with the soft strands. He shivers.

“That’s nice,” he says, his voice rough.

I explore with a little more intention as he pulls me a little closer. One of his hands drops to my hip, his fingers hooking through my belt loop.

“This isn’t at all what I expected when you texted me that you were coming along on the trip,” I say. My smile is shy, but my fingers gain confidence, giving his neck a light massage.

“You mean you weren’t imagining us slow dancing to ‘O Holy Night’ at a country bar?”

I scrunch up my nose. “It *is* a little weird slow dancing to this song. Feels like some kind of blasphemy.”

“At most, it’s light heresy,” Case says. “But since we aren’t bumping and grinding, it’s probably okay.”

I laugh, shaking my head. “Why don’t you show this side of you more? I mean, I had no idea you could be funny. Or even smile.”

As though it’s embarrassed by the mention, Case’s smile retreats.

“Sorry—was that too personal?” I ask. “I tend to always say more than I should.”

“I like your words,” Case says. “I like the way you don’t mind being a little goofy or just being honest. You are always yourself, Jillian, and I happen to love that about you.”

He didn’t say he loves YOU, I try to tell the part of my brain that’s throwing confetti and picking out wedding dresses

at the use of the L-word. It's no use. There is a premature celebration happening in my mind.

"Sorry," he says. "I know you want me to call you Jilly."

I'm already shaking my head. "No. I love the way my name sounds on your lips."

Now we're BOTH throwing around the word love like it's table salt that should be sprinkled liberally on everything.

He grins. "It doesn't remind you of your great-grandmother who hates you?"

"No. Her beard isn't quite as fetching."

"Good. Because the last thing I want is to have you thinking about your great grandma right now."

He pulls me closer by my belt loop until we're pressed tightly together, his body warm and solid against mine. The hand on my waist slips just under the hem of my sweater, his fingertips brushing my skin lightly.

I'm lost in his eyes, but not so lost I don't hear the lone dissenting voice in my head yelling warnings about office romance and tropes never working out. I ignore it, like you do walking past someone shouting about the end of the world on a street corner.

Not today, friend. Not today.

"Jillian, unless you have any reason why I shouldn't, I'm going to kiss you," he says, slowly dipping his head toward me.

Instead of helping the situation along by pulling his lips down to mine the way I'm tempted to, I say, "What kinds of reasons? Like bad breath? Or having a virus?"

"Jillian," he says again in that rumbly voice—and why did I ever think I didn't like him saying my full name?

"Respectfully, I'd like you to stop talking now."

And then his mouth is on mine. There is no hesitation, no soft exploration or any question, just a full-on, I'm gonna ruin you for all other men, staking my claim kind of kiss.

What's even better? There isn't so much as a hint of mistletoe in sight.

The rasp of his beard on my cheek is the most delicious contrast to the softness of his lips on mine. His mouth is hot and demanding, and it's stoking a five-alarm fire in me.

I am more than happy to be burned to ash.

I match his movements, my lips doing their darndest to keep pace with his, like I've got something to prove. My hand grips his neck the way he's holding my waist—firmly, possessively.

The kiss is so very *Case*: intense, confident, and savagely tender. I'm not sure that last one's ever been an existing combination, but it is now.

Despite how kiss-drunk I'm feeling, I don't miss shouts around us and someone calling, "Look at that!"

I guess we're making quite the spectacle of ourselves. I pull back, hating the disconnection, and whisper, "I think we've attracted an audience."

"Let them look," Case rumbles, capturing my mouth again.

But we jerk apart again as someone yells, "Watch out!"

This time, Case takes a step back, loosening his grip on me, but keeping me close as we both turn. People are running for the building or around it toward the parking lot. One guy is climbing a tree. He isn't making much progress, but I'd give him an A for effort.

The music switches to "Jingle Bell Rock" just as I see what everyone's running from: a sheep. No, a *ram*—a large one, with horns curving around its head.

And this ram is NOT feeling the Christmas spirit. He barrels toward a man in overalls and a Santa hat, barely missing him as the guy jukes to the side. The ram hits the metal building with a horrible metallic smack, but a moment later, he's shaking it off and looking for his next victim.

Considering we're the only two people standing still, we're it.

“Run,” Case says, giving me a shove toward the doors. Then a little more urgent as the ram barrels our way. “Run!”

And though I *want* to be better than Rose, who took the door for herself and let Jack sink into the icy waters, I do as Case says, and I run for the doors.

I reach the entrance just as the grizzled man complaining earlier about his ram steps out, shouting, “Get back here, Fabio!”

Fabio? This raging ram’s name is *Fabio*?

It is oddly perfect.

I change my mind about leaving Case. After the best kiss of my life, I at least owe him that much loyalty. If he’s going down by ramicide, I’m going down with him.

But I turn back just in time to see Fabio hit Case square in his very shapely butt. Case goes flying, arms flailing, straight into the fire pit, which tips over, spilling Case and flaming logs to the ground. Sparks shoot into the air like so many drunk fireflies.

I gasp, the ram’s owner tackles Fabio, and Wolf tosses a cooler full of icy water over Case’s smoldering back with a loud hiss.

CHAPTER 9

“I’M *FINE*,” Case insists, limping along next to me on the way to the car.

“You were just rammed by a ram named Fabio, tossed into a fire pit, and doused with icy water while it’s freezing degrees out here. Stop trying to be a hero and let me look at your back.”

Case shivers. Wolf managed to locate a scratchy blanket covered in bits of hay, which Case draped over his shoulders. I don’t think he was burned—a Christmas miracle—but at the very least, his coat caught fire. His coat! On fire! I need to check in case we need to head to the hospital instead of the loft.

“Case, *stop*. Just let me look! Then I’ll get the truck warmed up and drive us back to the loft.”

He stops next to the truck, and while he’s debating, I lean in and turn it on, setting the heat to high. When we first got into Tank’s truck, Case and I got into a debate over how to best heat a car. He insists on putting it on auto and letting the car decide when it’s ready to really blow. Whereas I put everything on blast from the start. Why let tech decide for me? If I want it hot, I’m gonna make it HOT.

“You turned it all the way up, didn’t you?” Case asks, his teeth chattering a little.

“I’m driving. My rules. Take off the blanket.”

He pulls the blanket tighter. “I’m cold.”

“You’ll be cold regardless. I need to see if you’re going to be cold on the ride to the hospital or back to the loft.”

He smiles, a small, crooked one. I think his lips are turning blue. “Are you just trying to get me out of my clothes?”

Forgetting he might be burned under his clothes, I smack his arm. “Take it off.”

“Because I feel like I heard somewhere that sharing body heat is the best way to—”

“*Off.*”

“Yes ma’am.”

Gingerly, Case lifts the blanket off his shoulders, and I don’t miss the way he avoids letting it brush his back. I swallow thickly. Burns aren’t anything to mess around with. Depending on the fabric and how it handles heat, his clothes could have melted into his skin and—

“Jillian, I’m okay. Promise.” His voice holds a tender edge that only pushes me closer to crying.

“It’s my fault,” I say, forcing steel into my wobbly voice. “I said we should come to this excuse for a bar.”

“And I’m glad. I enjoyed it. Especially the dancing. Before the whole, you know, ram attack.”

“You liked the dancing?”

“Mm-hm.”

“*Just* the dancing?”

Because I’ll be honest; the kissing trumped the dancing, and the dancing was pretty great.

“No,” Case says, smiling. “Not just the dancing. Can you check my back now? I’m freezing.”

I step behind him and am relieved to see that, while he’s definitely going to need a new winter coat, his button-down shirt looks fine other than some ashy smudges and being soaked through.

“How am I, nurse? Is it fatal?”

“Unfortunately, I don’t think you have long. Best get your affairs in order,” I say, carefully putting the blanket back up over his shoulders. “Now, let’s get you back to the loft.”

I open the car door for him and close it carefully once he’s inside. Smiling, I jog around to the driver’s side. I don’t hate the feeling of taking care of Case. Not at all. Especially now that I know he doesn’t have second-degree burns that I’ll feel guilty about forever.

“What did I tell you?” I ask when I climb inside. “It’s toasty warm because I put it on high. Repeat after me: I’m not always right.”

Case grumbles, but it’s a good-natured grumble. “You’re not always right.”

“Case! That’s not what I said.” I carefully maneuver the truck over the gravel drive, hoping I remember how to get back to town.

“You said, ‘I’m not always right.’ I think it’s great you’ve learned to admit it.”

We spend the rest of the drive like this, bickering good-naturedly back and forth while I’m quietly wondering when we’ll kiss again and, once we get back from this trip, if this version of Case will get swallowed up again by the one I thought I knew.

The moment we step into the loft, Case starts stripping off his clothes. I’m not too alarmed when he drops the itchy blanket by the door. Or when he sheds his coat. But when he starts unbuttoning his shirt, then gives up and rips apart the front like he’s auditioning for the next *Magic Mike* movie, I get nervous.

“What are you doing?” I ask as he toes off his shoes.

“I’m not walking through the loft tracking water and mud and who knows what else. Avert your eyes if you can’t handle it.”

Oh, I *definitely* can't handle it. But I don't avert my eyes.

Not as he pulls his T-shirt over his head, revealing a back rippling with muscles and no burn in sight.

Not as he undoes his belt—why does that sound seem to echo inside me like a sonic boom?—and lets his pants puddle at his feet, leaving him only in a pair of damp boxer shorts.

I'm laughing before I can stop myself, slapping a hand over my mouth.

"This is amusing to you, Jillian?" His voice has the crisp hardness I'm used to hearing in the office, but there's a playful lilt to it. I can tell he's smiling, even with his back to me.

"Your boxers!"

"They were a gift," he says.

The boxers are a cheery, Christmas green and covered in reindeer up on their hind legs, decked out in running gear. The phrase "Run, Rudolph, Run!" is printed all over in gold.

"I thought you were too scandalized to watch me," Case says, moving toward his bathroom at a good clip, his arms wrapped around himself.

Even from the back, it's still a mighty fine view. And not anything worse than I'd see at the beach, though it feels far more intimate. I'm actually grateful for the ridiculous boxers for keeping the mood light.

"I had to check for burns!" I yell, and he slams the door.

"Thank you for being so very thorough, Nurse Jillian. I'll be sure you get a Christmas bonus. And don't bother with the mess! I'll take care of it when I get out of the bathtub."

"When will that be?"

His voice is muffled, and I hear the water starting. "In four to six hours when I'm warm again and sufficiently pruned."

Chuckling, I shake my head and look at the pile of clothes, the spreading pool of water, and the mud. No way am I leaving this on Tank's nice hardwood floors. We also never got dinner, and I'm not someone who thinks beer counts.

It's time for me to make some romantic gestures of my own.

CHAPTER 10

THE LOFT HAS washer and dryer hookups but no machines. Thankfully, I don't have to wonder too long what to do with Case's soaked clothes because there's a knock on the door just after Case disappears into the bathroom. I look through the peephole, unsure if it's needed in a town as small as Sheet Cake, and see Tank.

"Did you come to pick up your keys?" I ask.

But he grins, stepping inside with a cardboard box in his arms. "I come bearing gifts." He tips his head toward the pile of gross clothing I've kicked closer to the door. "And to help with that. Heard y'all ran into some trouble at Backwoods Bar. Or, more like trouble rammed into you."

I open the door wider, and he sets the box on the granite island. He pulls a big trash bag out and gets to work scooping the blanket and wet clothes into it.

"How did you hear about that so fast?"

"Sheet Cake has its own online version of the grapevine by way of a forum called Neighborly. There was even a video. Looked pretty painful. Is Case okay after that?"

"A little banged up, but he didn't catch fire. A video, you say?"

Thirty minutes later, I'm curled up on the couch, watching Case getting Fabioed for the thirtieth time. It's an AFV winner for sure. Total viral material.

“What’s got you smiling?” Case asks, startling me into tossing my phone. “And what’s that smell?”

“Nothing.”

His eyes narrow, and before I can grab it, he snatches my phone and turns the volume up.

Is he going to murder me? Or fire me? As much as Case has started to feel like a strange part of my life after so much concentrated time together, I can’t yet predict how he’ll respond to most things.

I definitely wouldn’t have expected him to laugh. I mean, before this weekend, I didn’t think he was capable of laughter at all. Then again, the video is hilarious.

Case leaps over the back of the couch like my brother used to do in high school and plops down beside me, close enough to make me fall into leaning on him. When he wraps an arm around my back, I want to purr like a cat given a big bowl of cream.

“This is ... epic,” he says.

“You make for good TV, Case Winchester.”

“Are you sure you don’t mean Fabio? I think he steals the show.”

“Nah. You’re the leading man. Fabio’s just in the supporting role.”

We watch a few more times, laughing just as hard every time the ram goes into him and he goes into the fire.

“It could have been so bad,” I say, wiping tears off my face. “What if you’d been burned?”

“But I wasn’t. And now I’ll probably become a viral meme, which has always been on my bucket list.”

He isn’t wrong about being a meme. If it’s already being passed around by the so-called Sheeters, I imagine it’s only a matter of time before it hits TikTok or Facebook.

“You never said what that smell is,” he reminds me.

I gasp, jumping up and running into the kitchen, where the smell has shifted from savory deliciousness into burning.

I didn't set a timer, totally sure I'd remember the homemade mac 'n' cheese Tank dropped off. When I open the oven, a plume of smoke escapes. But when I survey the damage it's not TOO bad. At least the fire alarms don't go off. Namely because Case grabs two dish towels and waves them madly in the air until the smoke clears.

When he's done doing his best impression of a member of the color guard at halftime, we survey the damage.

"What is—or *was*—that?" he asks.

"Tank brought mac 'n' cheese. Mari made it. But now it's more like ... crispy mac 'n' cheese."

The entire top is blackened, and the edges look downright crunchy. Case sets down the dish towels and leans in for a closer look, pressing his body close to mine in a way that has me forgetting all about dinners, burned or not.

"Looks good," Case murmurs, almost right in my ear.

I whip my head around, which brings our faces mere inches apart. "It looks *good*? It's practically annihilated."

His eyes drop to my lips. "I wasn't referring to the food, Jillian."

Every time Case says my name now, it tugs at some inner part of me, like he's found a way to hot wire my heart.

"Oh," is all I can say.

Case angles his body my way and gently turns me to face him. His eyes never leave my lips.

"I think we should give that a few minutes to cool, don't you?" he murmurs.

"Maybe a few hours?"

Case laughs, and I love the way his beard frames his smiling mouth, like an exclamation point at the end of a perfect sentence.

His hand reaches up, cupping the back of my neck, tangling in my hair. “I’m not opposed to that idea,” Case says, leaning closer. “Though I have to say I’m *very* hungry.”

“Me too,” I say. “Starved, actually. And I’m not referring to the food.” Then I lift up on my toes and press my mouth to his.

An hour later, Case and I have sufficiently tested the strength of his arms as well as the countertops, the island, and several of the walls. The construction here is excellent. Five stars. I’ll be leaving an excellent Yelp review. And Case’s arms hold me like I’m precious and have the strength to lift me like I’m nothing. Also five stars.

No—maybe ten.

I haven’t kissed anyone like this since ... well, *ever*. Guys are always in a hurry to skip to the next step. Where Case seems like he wants to master kissing before making any other moves.

Not that he *needs* to master it; the man already has a doctorate. He kisses me like he has all the time in the world, as though he wants to commit every touch to memory and leisurely savor every moment of every kiss.

I’m an instant fan.

But by the time he pulled away, setting me back on the ground from where I was perched on the edge of the island, we were both starved—for *actual* sustenance. After scraping the top layer off the burned mac n cheese, it turned out the middle was very edible.

Now we’re snuggled on the couch watching *A Charlie Brown Christmas* and eating the gooey middle of the mac n cheese. Only a few bites have any crunch.

I set my plate down and burrow my way closer to Case, practically climbing into his lap. He laughs and manages to set his plate down without jostling our position. Then he wraps

me up in both arms, pulling my legs over his and curling me into his chest.

More and more, this feels like a perfect bubble shimmering in the air, beautiful but poised to pop out of existence at any moment. I want to ask about it, to ask what happens when we go back home, but I'm not ready. Playing house is just too much fun.

"What are your Christmas plans?" I ask, watching Charlie Brown pick out the worst tree.

"Spending it with my sisters and their families."

"They're both married?"

"Yep. My oldest sister doesn't have kids, but my other sister has three to make up for it. They're wild."

I smile at the sound of a smile in his voice. "I bet you're a fun uncle."

"I thought my vibe was more ... stuffy and too serious— isn't that what you said?"

I search for a ticklish spot on his ribs, but he captures my hand and places it over his heart. I'm meltier than the center of our mac and cheese.

"What about your parents?" I ask.

"They're both gone. It's been a few years now."

Every time Case talks about his family, I feel a tug in my heart. "Oh, wow. Were they in an accident? Or bad health? Sorry. I'm nosy. You just seem so young to have lost both of them."

He shrugs. "They waited until they were a little older to have kids. And like I said, they were workaholics. Despite both being doctors, they didn't take care of themselves very well. Long hours, not enough sleep, weird meals at weird hours. Dad had a stroke, and Mom had a heart attack about a year later. I'm not saying I wasn't sad, but in so many ways, they felt like strangers or colleagues rather than my parents."

That's so deeply sad—all of it—that I have no words. So, I snuggle in closer and place a kiss on his neck, right where his beard starts.

“What about you? Do you have family plans?”

I let out a breath. “I did. But ... my brother got to my parents' house first with his wife and kids and gave everyone the flu. The whole house is basically under quarantine. I'm on my own.”

Case tips his head back to meet my gaze. “Come spend Christmas with me and my family.”

I swear, my heart lifts off like it was just filled up with helium. “Really?”

“Yes. You'll love it.” He pauses. “Though, I do need to give you some caveats.”

“Such as?”

“You're sure to get hit on at least one of your kneecaps with a hockey stick thanks to my sister's kids. So, you'll have to sign a liability waiver first. Also, my oldest sister insists on making all the food like some kind of kitchen martyr, and she is a terrible cook.”

“It can't be worse than burned macaroni.”

He chuckles. “Trust me. This was about a thousand steps up.”

“Why do y'all let her cook?”

“When Marcy insists on something, it's best to yield. Sometimes Karen and I sneak out later for pizza or whatever we can find that's open.” He pauses, then begins stroking my arm, his fingertips dancing along my skin and drawing out rows of goose bumps. “Come. No one should be alone on Christmas.”

“I'll think about it,” I say around a yawn, though there's nothing to think about. Because even if it's way too soon, I'm already picturing more nights like this on the couch, more holidays, more EVERYTHING with Case.

I settle into him, fighting to keep my eyes open.

But apparently I lose the battle, because sometime later, I'm aware of being lifted up and held tight as Case carries me back to my room. He places me gently in bed, pulling the covers up to my chin and smoothing my hair over the pillow.

I want to ask him to stay, but I can't open my eyes, much less my mouth.

Case leans close, his lips brushing my cheek, their softness contrasting with the scratch of his beard. "Sleep well, Jillian. At the risk of sounding like a narcissist, I hope you dream of me."

CHAPTER 11

I WAKE to the sound of my phone buzzing on the nightstand. Case must have plugged it in for me, because the last thing I vaguely remember was him carrying me to bed. I smile at the memory and answer my phone, despite it being an early morning and an unknown number.

Side effect of no coffee.

“Hello?”

“Is this Jillian Peters?” a man with a deep Texas accent asks.

“That’s me.”

“This is Don at the garage. I’ve got y’all’s car all fixed up and ready to go.”

This snaps me out of my post-sleep gaze. I might as well have just done the polar bear plunge right here in the bedroom. “So soon?”

He chuckles. “And here I thought y’all’d be mad about the wait. Pick her up anytime.”

When I hang up, it’s with the sound of a doomsday timer blaring in my ears. This weekend, wonderful as it was, is far too much, far too soon. I mean, spending the holidays together? Meeting his sisters?

I don’t realize I’m chewing on the skin around my thumbnail until I go too deep and the skin looks pink and starts to throb.

Don't wreck this, some little voice inside me says. Don't freak out and sabotage what could be a good thing.

But my anxiety often arrives like soldiers pouring out of a Trojan horse of happiness, and they are heavily armed. Some of my anxiety is just a feeling of restless worry, but some of those worries have specific names. And right now, they center around the fact that Case is exactly what I didn't want—a man of many tropes.

Case and I work together—the classic office romance trope, even if he's not my boss. There are so many ways it could go sideways. I still don't know why he really came with me, and he was all kinds of dodgy about it.

Before we started this trip—and actually after as well—we were barely more than civil. Which gives me total enemies to lovers vibes. How did it switch so quickly? How long can I expect this new dynamic to last before it reverts back into conflict?

He's also older—checking the age gap box. I don't know by how much but at least by a few years. Five? Ten?

And I barely know him, as evidenced by point number two. What was I thinking letting him carry me around and put his lips on mine? And my neck. And along my collarbone right at the edge of my shirt.

I shiver at the memory before I throw back the covers and stand. My muscles feel twitchy, my adrenaline pumping. I recognize this in myself. It's familiar, like a pair of jeans that fit comfortably even if they're not even the slightest bit flattering.

My mom used to say I came equipped with a big, red self-destruct button and a twitchy trigger finger. And even though I know this about myself, it doesn't stop the rising wave of panic and the too-loud worries bubbling up.

“Knowing is half the battle,” Mom always says, apparently some quote from a childhood TV show she watched. But knowing I tend to jump out of moving vehicles isn't helping me win the other half of the battle right now.

When Case knocks on the door, I jump.

“Jillian?” he calls softly. “Are you awake?”

I dart toward the en-suite bathroom, then call, “Just getting in the shower!”

“I brought you coffee,” he says.

“Leave it on the bed! Thanks!” I slam the bathroom door and crank the shower as hot as it will go, waiting for the sound of the bedroom door closing again before I strip down and step into the scalding spray.

Though I did my best to scrub away my worries, it doesn't help any more than talking myself down did. I emerge from my bedroom after gulping the coffee and picking at the grits Case brought me.

You know it's a sad day when I can't enjoy my coffee. Case is on the couch, frowning down at his phone. It totally takes me back two days to the grumpy man who couldn't stop staring at his phone long enough to carry on a conversation.

See? This is normal Case. The last day or so was just a weird, escapist slice of time. A flash in the pan, as they say. It's time to settle back into our respective places. And those places are not next to each other.

“My car is fixed,” I say by way of greeting.

“Good old Tina's back in action?” He sets down his phone and turns my way. His smile fades quickly at whatever he sees in my expression. “Everything okay?”

“Yeah. I think I'm just preparing myself for things to reset.”

It would be nice if Case made this easy and nodded like he understood. And yet a huge part of me is screaming for him to drag me away from the big red button before I slam my hand down on it.

He frowns. “Reset?”

“You know—where we shake hands and part ways as colleagues, just like we were two days ago.”

“I didn’t think—that’s not what I—”

“Don’t worry about it. I had a good time. But you know what they say about good times.”

Case stands and walks slowly toward me like he thinks I’m in danger of bolting. But he’s too late. I’ve already emotionally packed my bags and hopped on the first train.

He stops just a few feet away. I ache at the distance, even as I cross my arms protectively over my chest.

“Did something happen between last night and this morning? Did I do something?”

I glance away toward the big windows facing the street. The sky is a brilliant, cloudless blue, painfully bright. “No.”

Before I can dodge away, Case closes the distance between us and wraps me up in his arms. Mine are still crossed over my chest so I can’t escape, but I find I don’t want to. Within seconds, I’m melting into him, smelling that deep, masculine scent. He strokes my back, then my hair, and I take a shuddery breath.

“Talk to me,” he pleads.

“I don’t know how.”

“Oh, you’re very good at talking, Jillian.”

I laugh a little at this, amazed by how easily Case can disarm me. “I’m scared about work.”

“You don’t need to worry about work.”

“Why?”

Case kisses my temple. “Trust me. But for now, let’s table the work conversation.”

Alarm bells try to ring in the self-destructive part of my brain, but I tell them in a less than polite way to shut up.

“What else?” he demands.

“I mean, there’s the fact that I’m twenty-six, and you’re ...” I search for the right way to say this. “You’re, uh, *not* twenty-six.”

He goes still, and I start to panic a little.

“Did you just call me old?”

“No, I didn’t mean—”

“Are you discriminating against me because of age? Because I will consider legal action, and I bet my dentures, I’ll win any lawsuit.”

Now, I’m giggling. “You’re ridiculous.” I pause. “But you don’t wear dentures, right?”

In response, Case dips his head and growls softly in my ear. “No dentures. And I’m only thirty-two. Six years apart is not so bad.”

“But when you were in college, that means I was—”

“Don’t say it.”

“In junior high,” I finish.

He nips at my ear. “See, now you just made it seem gross. But it only would have been gross back then. Right now is totally fine. Any more concerns I can demolish?”

It’s amazing how much calmer I feel now. The worries in my head have gone dormant, and I like them much better that way. I just don’t know how long they’ll stay quiet.

Will Case want to put up with my anxiety over and over? I’m skilled at imagining the worst case scenarios—and not just about quicksand or bear attacks.

“I’m not good at this,” I tell him.

“Define the *this* in that sentence.”

I shrug.

“Hm. Tell me if I’m getting warm,” Case says. “You aren’t good at hugging.”

A smile tugs at my lips. “Cold. You’re basically in Antarctica.”

“I agree. You’re *definitely* good at hugging. Let’s see ... you’re not good at goodbyes?”

“A little bit further north. Sub-tropics.”

“Okayyyy. You aren’t good at talking about your feelings?”

“A little closer to the equator.”

Case pulls me in tighter and leans closer so his mouth is next to my ear, sending tingles through me. “Do you think you’re not good at relationships?” he asks carefully.

My voice comes out a little soft, a little watery. “More like I’m good at wrecking them.”

“I see. So, in the past, did you tend to be the dumper more than the dumpee?”

“You’ll be surprised to know I’m usually the dumpee. I’m quite skilled at making someone else break up with me. I’m kind of a ruiner.”

“Ah.”

“I mean, half the time the relationships sucked anyway. But even when they didn’t ...”

I trail off, the heat of embarrassment rising in my cheeks. Surely this flaw is enough to scare Case off. If anything, it will highlight our differences and the age gap, because this is totally immature. I’m self-aware enough to know that.

Before he speaks, Case trails his lips over my cheek, then along my jaw before moving back to my ear, where his words land like caresses.

“You can huff and puff, Jillian, but you won’t blow me down.”

Relief is like a warm breeze, blowing through me. I sink further into Case’s chest, managing to free my arms so I can wrap them around his waist.

“Thank you,” I tell him, emotion making my chest tight, but a good kind of tight, matching the way he hugs me harder.

“I know things are new. There are conversations to be had about work and lots of other things. But I’m not going to let go of you this easily, Jillian.”

I smile. “I probably will try to blow your house down again,” I warn.

Case pulls back, cupping my cheeks as his gaze roams all over my face with something like adoration in his eyes. “Good thing I built my house out of brick, then.” He nips the tip of my nose. “And I happen to have a weakness for big, bad wolves.”

I smile and kiss him like I’m trying to test the limits of his strength, all the while hoping he’s strong enough for the next time I push him away—or maybe that I’ll finally learn to walk away from the big, red button.

CHAPTER 12

WE DECIDE to have one last breakfast at Mari's diner. Which is mostly for my sake since Case is still eating his boring but bowel-friendly foods. Which reminds me ...

"I didn't ask last night about the mac and cheese." He just stares at me blankly. "You know, if you could eat it with your IBS."

Case rolls his eyes, but there's a tiny smile there. "It's adorable that you're worried about me. Traveling means I have to go with the flow a bit since I don't always have control over my food choices. It was delicious—other than the burned bits—and I took some medicine after just in case. I'm of the opinion that mac and cheese is always worth it."

"You're a cheese man, huh?"

"Never met a cheese I didn't like. As for whether my stomach likes them, well, it doesn't always get a say. What about you?"

"I like cheese—I'm not a monster—but I'm more of a chocolate woman."

"Noted."

The conversation goes like this—playful, fun, seasoned with laughter. We're getting to know each other but in an easy way. I think I could talk to Case forever. Which is one more shocking thing I've discovered about him. His quick wit in conversation. Totally my weakness.

I love good biceps or abs or a winning smile as much as the next woman, but for me, there is nothing like a man who can spar with words.

“I’ll be right back,” Case says, sliding out of the booth. “Don’t try to pay for this, Jillian. I’m leaving my card right here.”

“Fine.”

Normally, I’d protest. At least a little. I do like a man who offers to treat, so long as I can return the favor. But not knowing how much Tina’s bill will be ... I’ll happily ride the free breakfast train.

Case’s phone, which he left next to his wallet, lights up with a text. Then another.

Would it be snooping if I turned his phone around and read the previews? Absolutely!

Is it snooping if I read them upside down just in the few seconds the screen is illuminated? I mean ... technically? Ish? But all the cop shows I watch have me thinking that this is in plain sight. It’s fair game.

And while I’m still wading through this moral quandary, another text arrives. It’s David, our boss, and so were the first two.

I don’t have time to read everything before the screen goes dark, but what I do see makes me grab onto the edge of the table, my breath coming in fast bursts.

Maybe it didn’t mean ...

Maybe if I saw the rest of the message ...

Maybe it’s not what it looks like?

Because what it looks like is that David is checking in with Case, asking for a full report the minute he’s not with me anymore.

It’s amazing how quickly those worries and worst-case scenario things come flooding into my head. I only wish the book my brother gave me had a chapter dealing with what to

do if you think your new (maybe?) boyfriend slash work colleague is spying on you for the boss.

I'm right back to the fears I had at the start of the trip about Case getting in the way of me leveraging this for a raise. I remember him being glued to his phone, but being secretive about it and changing the subject. The first night I put together a whole presentation, leaving gaps for what we'd hear from Tank on the tour and then anything else I needed to research. I was planning to finish it over the holiday so I can present it to David the day we get back.

But if he wants a report from Case the minute he's not with me ...

"Still haven't paid?" Case asks, glancing around. He grabs his card. "I'll go up to the counter. They're pretty busy."

I'm glad he didn't pause for another second to see how I'm still white-knuckling the table. Partly because I need stability and partly because I don't trust my fingers not to grab the phone and illuminate the screen. Right now I'm still at plausible deniability for invading Case's privacy.

The phone lights up again.

David: Can't wait to hear how you survived. We'll get drinks and discuss man to man ...

And one more.

Marcy: You should really hurry home. Your girl misses you ...

Your girl.

That's all I can see. Didn't Case say he was single? No—he said unattached. Now I'm wondering if that was a fancy way of saying he's dating around. *Your girl* sure sounds like commitment to me.

And a text like that paired with the ones from David do not paint a very good picture of the man I thought I was getting to know. My stomach is incredibly unhappy with my decision to eat so much breakfast.

“Hey—what’s wrong?” Case slides into the other side of the booth. He puts his credit card back in his wallet, but his eyes don’t leave my face. “Jillian?”

Concern colors his voice. *Fake* concern or real? Is all of this fake? Was this part of some mission David sent him on? I just don’t understand.

Everything in me wants to run. To call Tank and give him a flimsy explanation why I need him to take me ALONE to pick up Tina, leaving Case right here, where he can figure out his own ride back to Austin.

Where he asked you to spend Christmas with him and his family, a voice sounding suspiciously like reason says. Would he do that if he were involved in something shady with David? Or dating someone else? No. He would not.

But the texts! The secret watching of the phone! Maybe it’s not even about stealing the credit for this idea but lay-offs, like I suspected Friday night. Case said no but ...

Ask him, clarity chimes in. You know what they say about assumptions.

And you know what trope you hate above all the tropes? another voice adds. *MISCOMMUNICATION.*

ASK HIM. They’ve all ganged up now, all the voices in my head, shouting at least as loud as the cacophony of worry.

Case says my name again, and it’s like I’m hearing him from the bottom of a tunnel. My finger is hovering over the red button again, but I remember what Case said about letting me huff and puff.

“I saw your texts,” I blurt out, and it’s like all the noise in my head clears instantly. Case holds my gaze, and the lack of fear in it reassures me. “I didn’t mean to, but they kept coming in, and I’m nosy. I know it was a violation of your privacy but ... I have questions. Maybe you should look at them first.”

I nod to his phone, and Case touches the screen so he sees what I saw. His features smooth into understanding and he reaches for my hand. But not before I tuck it under the table.

“Let me explain,” he says.

An ugly laugh bubbles up out of me. “That is the quintessential start to every bad conversation ever.”

“Jillian.” Case’s voice is careful. “Remember what I said? I’m not going anywhere. Ask me the questions. Okay? Ask.”

“Are you and David planning some kind of work sabotage or firing me or—”

“No.” His lip curls a little as he says it. “I cannot stand David, and I’ve been building case to present to HR and the board about his behavior, especially the way he treats the younger women in the office.”

This news practically makes me jerk back. “Really?”

“Really. I’ve seen a pattern with him, and I had a feeling he was going to try to use this trip as an excuse to fire you. I’m here to protect you, to make sure he can’t do that.”

It takes me a minute to process and to let out the breath I’ve been holding. So, David is as much of a jerk as I suspected. And Case is ...*not* the jerk I originally thought he was.

“I’m sorry I assumed.”

He shakes his head and holds out his hand closer to me, palm up, an invitation. But I still have questions.

“And the text about”—I swallow around a knot in my throat—“your girl?”

At this, Case flashes me a grin and, still leaving his hand open on the table, he uses the other to turn on his phone and navigate to an app. He looks set to show me, but then clutches the phone to his chest.

“You have to promise not to make fun of me.”

“Why would I make fun of you?”

“Promise.”

I watch Case carefully, feeling my muscles unclenching as I do. Whatever is on the screen, I feel certain that Case does

not have another woman in his life. He isn't coming for my job. He is the man I've been discovering since we set out on this trip.

Before saying a word, I reach out and slide my palm into his, giving it a big squeeze. A tiny gesture, and yet a huge one for me, offering trust before he gives me the full explanation.

"I promise not to make fun of you ... too much."

He groans, but grins, sliding the phone across the table where it's open to some kind of webcam.

"What ...?"

"That is my girl," he says.

"It's a bunny," I say, dumbfounded. The tawny golden rabbit is hopping around a stainless steel enclosure with torn newspaper at the bottom. It has tufts of hair sticking up everywhere around its face like a permanent case of bedhead.

"She's a lionhead rabbit. She had surgery Friday morning. My sister did it—that's why I was in Austin. And I've been watching her on the webcam, just to check in."

"You've been watching your pet rabbit—"

"Persephone," he adds.

"You've been watching your pet rabbit named Persephone on a webcam after her surgery."

"See why I made you promise?"

Case shifts a little on his side of the booth. He has nothing to worry about though. I think this is a-freaking-dorable.

"Will I get to meet her?"

His grin widens. "You'll have to. We're a package deal, me and Percy."

"She has a nickname but I don't?"

"I tried Butter and you didn't like it."

"Who would want to be called Butter, Case?"

“I’m sure some women would appreciate it. Do you want me to call you Jilly? I will. But you feel like a Jillian to me.”

“I like the way you say my name,” I admit.

“*Jillian*,” he whispers, shifting his features into something so over the top faux sexy that I can’t stop laughing.

“Easy, tiger. Save that voice for when we’re not in a diner.”

“Noted,” he says, picking up my hand and kissing my knuckles. “Now, are we okay? Any more questions?”

“We’re good. I’m sorry for looking at your phone. And for assuming.”

“I don’t want secrets between us. You can look at my phone any time. I completely understand how those texts would seem. But you came to me with your questions. You did good. Trust means we come to each other directly if we’re feeling unsure or anxious. Okay?”

“I’ll try to fight against my instincts to self-destruct.” I pause. “You don’t think I’m too much for you?”

“Oh, you’re definitely too good for me.”

“That’s not what I asked.”

“Too bad because that’s my answer. Now, don’t we need to get going?”

“Is someone anxious to see his *girl*?”

He points a finger at me. “You promised.”

“I promised not to make fun of you too much. That seems like just enough.”

CHAPTER 13

“So, JILLY.” Marcy, Case’s oldest sister, leans across the kitchen island, smirking. “Do you want to have a big family?”

I glance around, making sure we’re alone. Case is helping Karen and her husband load their three kids and all the presents into the car. “After that, I’m not sure I’ll *ever* be ready for kids.”

Marcy laughs, then clinks her mug of eggnog against mine. “We’ll see how long that lasts.”

“I don’t know. The scar on my shin will be a good reminder.”

Case wasn’t kidding about getting hit with a hockey stick. Or an ice cube—which really hurts when a five-year-old hurls it at your face. The cut on my shin, though, wasn’t from either of those things, but more of an incidental child-related accident. I stepped on a Lego dinosaur, then fell into the fireplace. Thankfully, it was not lit. One fire-related accident in a matter of days is enough, I think. Case still needs a new coat.

Despite being tiny terrors, Case’s niece and nephews are adorable. Exhausting, but adorable. Avery, the three-year-old, fell asleep on my lap until Case carried her out to the car. I almost fell asleep right along with her.

“I never thought I’d be ready either.” Marcy gives me a sly look and rubs a hand over her stomach, which looks totally normal-sized to me, but the mischief in her eyes says otherwise. “But then again ...”

“You’re pregnant?” I whisper.

“Yes!” she whispers back. “But no one knows except Greg.”

“But why are you telling me? I mean, you just met me yesterday.”

After we picked up Tina, whose bill had mysteriously been paid—based on Case’s inability to fake shock, by him—and drove straight to Marcy’s house. She did not seem surprised to see me, and I swear I saw her exchange money with Greg when we came inside the house. A bet of some kind? I meant to ask Case and forgot.

After dinner, Case and I hit up Target, where we had to fight the last-minute shoppers so I could get gifts for his family. I also managed to pick up something for him while he was arguing with a guy who ran his cart into ours. I’ve been saving the gift for tonight.

Overall, Case’s family has been so welcoming, it’s like I’ve known them all forever. My parents were thrilled I didn’t have to spend the holiday alone, but they threatened to disown me if I don’t bring Case home the second they’re better. Marcy and Karen tease Case just as much as he told me they do, which gave me endless amusement. Before our trip, I never could have pictured it. But then, I wouldn’t have pictured any of this. Definitely not me practically sitting in Case’s lap after spending Christmas with his family.

Is this all moving really fast? Yes. Does it feel strangely like the perfect speed? A little slow, if you ask me.

“I’ve got a feeling about you,” Marcy says, which makes me feel all warm inside. “Plus, isn’t it fun keeping a secret?”

Um. Actually, NO, because I am terrible at keeping this kind of secret. The absolute worst.

“Who’s keeping a secret?” Case asks, walking into the room and dropping his coat and scarf on the stool next to mine. Then he scoots the stool closer so we’re practically fused together, pressing a quick kiss to my cheek. I shoot his sister a panicked look that has her chuckling.

“Isn’t everyone?” Marcy asks lightly, winking at me as she slides Case a mug of eggnog.

He takes a sip, then makes a face. “No bourbon? Since when do we drink virgin eggnog?”

Marcy locates a bottle of bourbon, then hands it to Case. “You go ahead,” she says.

“Thank you,” he says, pouring a bit into his mug. He gestures it toward me, and I hold my thumb and finger close together. He adds a little to my eggnog. “Now that the little people are gone, I think we all need a little bourbon.”

He passes it back to Marcy, who shakes her head and puts the cap on. “It’s not good for the baby,” she says, just as Greg walks in, sliding his hands around her waist so they rest on her belly.

They both grin at Case, who’s taking a sip of his eggnog. He nods absentmindedly, then pauses and quickly sets down his mug. “Wait—what?”

Greg kisses his wife’s cheek. “Turns out, Karen’s kids did *not* scare us off from the idea of starting a family.”

“Somehow,” Marcy laughs.

“You’re pregnant?” Case asks, his voice sounding all high-pitched and his smile huge. He looks almost as excited as the kids did opening their gifts. “Seriously?”

“Yep. Due in June,” Marcy says.

Case is on his feet in seconds, hugging his sister and slapping Greg on the back, looking almost as excited as the parents-to-be. “Wow—that’s so great! Congratulations! Wow!”

If I wasn’t sure how Case felt about kids, the number of exclamation points in his sentences are giving me an idea. Or, at least, how he feels about being an uncle. THAT conversation I’m happy to leave for later.

We talk all things baby for a few minutes, before Greg heads to bed.

Marcy yawns. “I should probably get to bed too. It’s been a long day. All the cooking wears me out.”

Case gives me a subtle look, a reminder of what he told me before—how Marcy insists on cooking everything. He was right about that. And about it being terrible. I’m honestly starving and so glad they’re going to bed so we can raid the pantry.

“Merry Christmas, Jilly. I’m so glad we finally got to meet you,” Marcy says.

I tilt my head. “Finally?”

Next to me, Case waves his hand in front of his neck in a cutting motion. “Goodnight, sister,” he says, a little too loudly.

Marcy ignores him. “What—he didn’t tell you?”

“Tell me what?”

“Nothing!” Case says. “Man, it’s getting late. You should really get some rest. For the baby.”

“He’s been talking about you for years. We never thought he’d actually make a move.”

“Years,” I repeat. “Really?”

Case puts his head down on the counter. “You are the very worst, Marcy.”

Her grin gets bigger. “We had a bet going about whether or not he’d end up winning you over or scaring you off with his oh-so-charming personality on this trip.”

“I can be charming,” Case says. “Back me up, Jillian.”

“There’s definitely *some* charm present. Beneath the grumpy layers.”

Marcy laughs. “I’d agree with that statement. So, he didn’t tell you how long he’s been into you?”

“He most certainly did not,” I say, poking Case in the ribs. He jolts and sits up, swatting my hand away. The tips of his ears are burning red. “Why did you wait so long?”

“My brother likes to take his time on big decisions. I’m sorry in advance for the patience you’ll need to deal with him.”

“You’re making me sound like a giant dork,” Case says to Marcy. “Don’t scare her away before I even get confirmation that she wants to be my girlfriend.”

Marcy puts her hands on her hips. “Jilly, do you want to be his girlfriend?”

I bite my lip as Case groans and puts his head back down, muttering about sisters.

“If Case were to hypothetically ask me to be his girlfriend, in all likelihood, hypothetically speaking, I would say yes. That is, if Persephone approves.”

“She does,” Case says.

“I’ve got bunny preapproval? Nice!”

“Is the eggnog influencing your decision in any way?” Marcy asks. “Because Greg has a very cute younger brother, and—”

“Go to bed,” Case orders in a snarly voice that reminds me of the way he talks to everyone in the office. “Go.”

“Night, night, you two!” Marcy turns off the overhead light, leaving us bathed in just the dim light from the electric candle in the window and the tree in the adjoining family room. “Oh, and I hope you realize you’re sitting under the mistletoe. You’re welcome,” she singsongs as Case tosses a balled-up napkin at her retreating back.

I glance up. Sure enough, there’s a scraggly piece of plastic mistletoe hanging over our heads. It’s a hasty job, barely clinging to the ceiling with several pieces of scotch tape. I don’t know how didn’t I notice it earlier, but as I look around, I realize there are several other similar ugly hanging pieces, like someone cut up a full half of the stuff and planted it around the house.

“Karen,” Case says, following my gaze. “I don’t know when or how, but that’s definitely Karen’s work. Is your

family half this bad?”

“Not quite so bad. My dad doesn’t even have a shotgun to pretend to threaten you with.” Which is saying something, considering this is Texas.

Case leans on the island, turning to study me. “Are you really here?”

“The more important question is, did you really have a crush on me for years?”

“I hate the word *crush*,” he says with a scowl.

“Like you hate the term *single* because it’s beneath you?”

“I never said it was *beneath* me, Jillian. I said it sounded too *young* for me.” He brushes a fingertip over my cheek, his coffee-brown eyes turning soft. “And now, it sounds completely inaccurate.”

“So, you’re *not* single?”

He shakes his head slowly. “I wouldn’t say so.”

“Or ... unattached?”

“Doesn’t feel that way.” He cups my jaw, leaning a little closer.

My heart is racing, and somehow, his hand on my cheek—a simple touch—has lit a fuse that has my skin tingling and my nerves being all ... nervy.

“What does it feel like?” I ask, my voice low and breathy. Maybe a little desperate.

His gaze roams over my face, slowly, deliberately, reverently. “It feels like,” he says slowly, inching closer with every word, “I’ve wasted a lot of years admiring you from a distance, wishing I could get up the courage to talk to you, hoping you might like a slightly older but not creepy-older man.”

He’s so close now I’m seeing him double, all out of focus. Our lips are almost brushing, our breath mingling.

“The question is, Jillian—what does it feel like to you?”
His beard tickles my skin, making me shiver.

“It feels like to me, you’re both wasting good mistletoe by talking under it instead of kissing!” Marcy calls from the hallway.

I giggle, and pull back just enough to see Case with his eyes squeezed shut. It looks like he’s counting to himself.

Marcy pokes her head around the doorway. “Sorry to interrupt, but I forgot my crackers. I get nauseated if I don’t keep them next to the bed. Pretend I’m not here,” she says, darting in and grabbing a box of crackers off the counter.

“Impossible,” Case says, but he’s smiling.

And as Marcy leaves again—hopefully for the last time—Case leans back in. “Now, where were we?”

“We were right at the part where I say yes, I’ll be your girlfriend even though technically your sister is the one who asked me. And now we’re at the part where we agree she’s also correct and we should be doing a whole lot less talking and more kissing.”

“Fine,” Case growls, and then he pulls me closer and fuses his hot mouth to mine in a kiss that feels completely mistletoe-worthy.

EPILOGUE

six months later

I CAN'T STOP STARING at Case, who can't stop staring at the baby in his arms. The wonder and love in his eyes as he gazes down at his days old niece—well. Let's just say if spontaneous pregnancy were to join spontaneous combustion as pseudo science's new darling, I'd be patient zero.

“She's so ...” Case fumbles for words. Then he smiles, first at the baby, then at me. “Perfect.”

Clover—whose name sounded a little goofy until we saw her and agreed, it totally fits—squirms a little, then makes the tiniest sound. Case's adoring gaze shifts straight to panic.

“She must be hungry. Marcy! She's rooting.”

“Calm down, dude,” Marcy says, yawning and plopping down on my other side. “She just ate. But it's adorable you've picked up the word *rooting*.”

If Case holding a baby makes me want to have my own, Marcy helps temper the desire. She does have a glow about her, but she also has the look of a woman who got hit by a truck, used superhuman strength to defeat said truck, and emerged victorious.

In that analogy, Clover is both the truck and the spoils for the victor, which I'm gathering is pretty much the summation of parenting.

Case frowns. “Are you sure she isn't hungry?”

“I’ll take her,” I say, reaching out. “I already washed my hands.”

Careful to keep Clover tucked in his arms, Case angles his body away from me. “No.”

Marcy lets out a soft groan and sinks into the couch, closing her eyes. “You two can fight over her. Someone wake me up when she’s actually hungry. Or if she has another diaper blowout and *someone* can’t handle the smell.”

“It was a perfectly normal reaction,” Case says.

“You barfed in the diaper genius thing,” I remind him.

“Diaper *Genie*,” Marcy corrects, not opening her eyes.

“If it was really a genie, it would make the dirty diapers disappear.”

“High five to that.”

Marcy doesn’t so much as raise a hand, so I high five myself.

Case whispers, “Shh! You’re going to wake the baby.”

Marcy cracks one eye open, and the two of us exchange a quick smile.

“When are you going to look at the last house?” Marcy asks.

“It went under contract,” I say glumly. The real estate market here is no joke, so I shouldn’t have gotten excited about a tiny fixer upper craftsman. But I’d been eyeing the renovation nightmare for months while it sat on the market, allowing me far too much hope.

Case and I were already here looking at apartments for me and houses for him (and, hopefully soon for BOTH of us) when we got the call that Marcy’s water broke in the ice cream aisle of HEB. We put off looking at my very favorite house, to be with Marcy, Greg, and Clover.

Now ... it’s off the market.

With Brightmark moving its main office to Austin (thankfully without David, who was quietly fired) and using Sheet Cake as the primary set location (my brilliant idea), Case and I are moving. My parents and brother were more than a little excited about frequent visits to the hill country, and obviously, Case's sisters were thrilled.

We considered Sheet Cake—Tank did have a few open lofts—but I'm not ready for small-town life. Or to have my job literally outside the window. Case, I think, is still scarred from his run-in with Fabio.

“How about the apartments?” Marcy says, her voice starting to slur with sleep.

“An apartment is an apartment,” I say with a shrug. “Depends on where Case finds a house.”

Am I disappointed that we're looking at separate places? Yes. Would I prefer to have a ring on my finger and a promise of cohabitation in my near future? HECK yes.

But after our whirlwind first weekend, Case pumped the brakes, saying he wanted to move *slowly*. I should never have mentioned my concerns about working together and our slight age gap, because Case seems determined to take those issues seriously.

TOO seriously, if you ask me. But he's a cautious sloth, and I'm a cheetah on caffeine.

On the one hand, I appreciate his care and conscientiousness. On the other, I'd be on a plane to Vegas in five minutes if he asked, ready for an Elvis-officiated wedding.

“We've got more important things to do now.” Case's smile is soft as he places a kiss on Clover's head. He looks up at me, a gleam in his eyes. “But, we do have an appointment in a few hours.”

“We do? Which house?”

“You'll see.”

“Ugh. Fine. Is it my turn to hold the baby yet?”

“Nope.”

As Case pulls into the driveway, I blink in confusion at the craftsman house I tried and failed not to get attached to.

“You said the realtor said it was under contract.”

“It is. But contracts fall through.”

The paint is a chipped blue, half the shutters are missing, and the porch looks rotted. What were probably once azalea bushes are now dead twig clusters and the grass is knee-high. But I can see what it once was, what it could be.

It reminds me of the *Giving Tree*. I can almost feel the house shuddering with happiness, telling us to come sit on its porch and drink an iced coffee in its shade and make babies in its bedrooms.

Except ... it's someone else's dream now. This feels like the worst kind of tease.

I cross my arms. “I'm not going in.”

“What?” Case turns off the engine and glances my way. “Why?”

“My heart can't take it. I'm already halfway invested, and that's just looking at the outside. No way am I going to fall all the way in love when someone else already bought it.”

I don't mention how my heart also can't take the waiting for our next step. For some sense of how long Case wants to wait. Getting to see and hold Clover only worsened my delicate emotional state. My insides feel like an unbalanced washing machine trying to spin while overloaded with wet towels.

“Talk to me, Jillian.”

My weakness is still when Case says my full name. I spin his way. “Fine. You want me to talk? I'll talk. I'm tired of waiting. I'm done with this slow pace. I don't want an

apartment. I want a house. *This* house—or one just like it. With you. As soon as humanly possible. I don't care about a pretty ring or a big wedding. Stick a rubber band on my finger, find a judge and let's do this thing."

Case stares at me, but I can't tell if my words have shocked him or if he's just processing. The man does like to process. I should have known if he had a crush for four years before making a move, he'd have zero qualms about moving glacially toward the next step.

Me? I have all the qualms.

"Okay," he says slowly. "I appreciate your honesty."

"And?"

Case opens his car door and climbs out. "And let's put a pin in it while we look at this place."

He slams the door, walking slowly around to my side, like he knows I need a moment. Which I do.

When he opens the door, I focus on becoming one with the seat.

"Jillian," he cajoles. "Come on."

"Nope."

"Please?"

"As much as I love you begging, no."

"That wasn't me begging. This is." Case gets down on both knees right there in the tall grass next to the driveway.

"You'll ruin your pants!"

"I'll buy more. Come on. Look at this house with me."

"I can't."

"Don't make me do this." Case climbs to his feet, leaning in to unbuckle my seatbelt.

I grab it with both hands, and he pries it from my fingers. His breath is hot on my cheek, the scratch of his beard against my neck making me think about other things I'd like to be doing. Our back and forth always has that effect on me.

“You asked for it,” Case says, and in a move straight out of the movies, he picks me up and throws me over his shoulder, marching up to the porch.

It’s ridiculously hot. Even if I plan to keep my eyes closed the whole time we’re inside. He can carry me inside, but he can’t force me to look.

The porch creaks under his steps, and I listen as he fumbles keys in the lock.

“Wait—where’s the realtor? How do you have keys?”

Case pushes the door open, and it groans on its hinges. “I love your brilliant mind and your plethora of thoughts. But for now, will you stop asking questions and walk inside with me if I put you down?”

“Case, I *can’t*.”

Sighing heavily, Case steps inside. “This wasn’t how I imagined carrying you over the threshold, but you leave me no choice.”

My eyes pop open, landing on the scarred but still gorgeous hardwoods. *Carrying me over the threshold?*

I grab the back of his shirt in my fists. “Explain. What do you mean?”

Case sets me down, making sure to slide me down the front of his body slowly. When our eyes meet, his are gleaming. “I mean that I was hoping to save carrying you over the threshold for later. After I’ve given you this.”

Case takes my hand and presses a small object in my palm. I gasp because it feels like ...

“Is this an engagement ring?”

His dimples appear as he nods. “It is.”

My eyes narrow. “But the house! It’s under contract ... with *you*?”

He leans forward and kisses me, smiling against my lips. “Like I said, brilliant mind.”

I'm melting a polar ice cap under a giant heat lamp. "What happened to Mr. Slow Decisions?"

"I'm done waiting."

"But—how? When did you do this? Do your sisters know? What about my parents."

He kisses me again, chuckling as he does. "Do you want me to answer now or do you want to look first?"

I take his face in my hands. Or—in one hand and one fist since I'm still clasping the ring. "First things first—Yes."

His brow furrows. "You haven't even looked at the ring. Or the state of this house, which is honestly a little scary."

I'm already shaking my head. "I don't need to see either one, Case. I only need to see *you*."

And if he didn't get the message, I press my mouth to his in the kind of kiss that feels like the start of forever.

The
END

Want to know what Case was thinking when he first met Jillian? Grab a bonus scene in his POV- <https://emmastclair.com/casepov>

Don't miss the full novels, [Love Stories in Sheet Cake](#), which follow Tank Graham and sons as they find love in a small Texas town.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you so much to Jenny Proctor, best critique partner ever. A big thank you also to Devon, Rita, Marti, and Sarah for reading and catching typos! Thank you to Lindsay of [Always Reading A Novel](#) for winning the award for most typos found! LOL <3

This novella is REALLY only here because Jillian from [ReadwithJillian](#) on Instagram dm-ed me with some story about tropes not working out in her real life. BOOM! This idea popped into my head. With the name Jillian, I HAD to create a play on words with a Christmas title, and I knew I needed this story to take place in Sheet Cake. I'm SO glad for that dm, Jillian.

I'm so grateful to all of my readers—new and old. I'm also glad y'all don't get TOO mad when I take a long time editing one book and then write a surprise novella. You guys are the very BEST.

A NOTE FROM EMMA

Every year at Christmas, I start seeing all these adorable covers and thinking... man, I wish I'd planned to write a Christmas book this year.

Two years ago, I told myself I didn't have time. *Don't do it!* I told myself. *There's no time!*

Then ... I did it anyway. I wrote *The Twelve Holidays* while on a mini road trip with my husband.

But this year, there was no way. For sure. None.

I have to finish editing *Royal Gone Rogue* and... and... and... and then Jillian from [ReadwithJillian](#) dm-ed me and sparked an idea.

I am 100% an ideas person. I'll die one day with all these stories inside me—which suddenly sounds SUPER morbid. *Anyway*. When I get an idea, sometimes I'll just file it away in a Google doc, but other times, I start to hear the characters.

Jillian started talking to me. And she wouldn't stop!

The timing actually turned out really well, because I was getting bogged down in edits for *Royal Gone Rogue*.

I love writing. Editing is fine ... to a point. Then I start to lose my mojo. If there's one thing you NEED in writing romcoms, it's mojo.

So, writing this helped me get that back for my edits.

And now I don't have to have FOMO about all those adorbs Christmas covers because I think this one is pretty dang

adorable.

Is there any illustrated guy hotter than this Case? NOPE.

I always like to share any real-life inspirations from my books, so here are a few!

I am VERY much a worst-case scenario person (as are other characters I've written) and I have the *Worst-Case Scenario Handbook*. (It makes a great gift!)

Like Marcy, my water broke in the ice cream aisle in HEB. If you're not from Texas, HEB is the best grocery store EVER! Their ice cream aisle is a pretty great place to have your water break, because then you can just snag the ice cream and GET THEE TO A HOSPITAL.

The ram attack came from a well-timed video someone shared with me. If you're in my [Facebook group](#), you saw it. Poor guy. The ram really didn't seem to like him!

I also was home-permed when I was younger ... but by a well-meaning aunt. My hair took to it a little too well. I didn't look like Bob Ross, but I DID look very much like Slash from Guns N Roses. I regret nothing.

Thank you so much for reading and for going on these random journeys with me—surprise launches, books I don't mean to write, and shifting launch dates. Y'all are the best readers and author could have. I hope to keep telling stories every day forever.

ALSO BY EMMA ST. CLAIR

Graham Brothers

The Buy-In

The Bluff

The Pocket Pair

Sweet Royal Romcoms

Royally Rearranged

Royal Gone Rogue

Oakley Island (with Jenny Proctor)

Eloise and the Grump Next Door

Merritt and Her Childhood Crush

Love Clichés

Falling for Your Best Friend's Twin

Falling for Your Boss

Falling for Your Fake Fiancé

The Twelve Holidates

Falling for Your Best Friend

Falling for Your Enemy

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Emma St. Clair is a *USA Today* bestselling author of over twenty books. She lives near Houston with her husband, five kids, and a Great Dane who doesn't make a very good babysitter. Her romcoms have humor, heart, and nothing that's going to make you need to hide your Kindle from the kids. ;)

You can find out more at EmmaStClair.com

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