

A WISH FOR THE SINGLE *DAD* COWBOY



USA TODAY BEST SELLING AUTHOR

APRIL MURDOCK
CHRISTMAS IN SWEET BLOOM TEXAS

A WISH FOR THE SINGLE DAD COWBOY

CHRISTMAS IN SWEET BLOOM TEXAS -
BOOK 1

APRIL MURDOCK



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Cover design by Erin Dameron-Hill.

For Jenna, Kristen, and Ginny.

You made Sweet Bloom come to life. This sweet town wouldn't exist if not for your imagination and creativity. I'm grateful for your friendship.

SWEET BLOOM, TEXAS IS ALL ABOUT...

Community. Small town values. And love. Definitely love.

A WISH FOR THE SINGLE DAD COWBOY

CHRISTMAS IN SWEET BLOOM TEXAS -
BOOK 1

APRIL MURDOCK

CHAPTER ONE

MID SEPTEMBER

Organ music floated through the air, following Allie from the church building behind her. She hugged her bible to her chest, always in awe of how a simple sermon could do so much to soothe her soul even though it happened every week like clockwork.

Two children hustled from the building, bumping into her as they darted down the chapel steps. She jumped to the side and collided with someone else.

Laughing, Allie turned toward the poor unfortunate soul who had been just as affected by the troublesome children, only to suck in sharply. A pair of dark eyes hovered over a crooked smile—one that she could have traced with her eyes closed.

“Good morning, Miss Patrick,” a small voice chirped, dragging Allie’s gaze lower. Molly had her mother’s blue eyes and blonde hair, a sad reminder of someone who left this world all too soon.

Allie’s smile returned and she waved. “Good morning, Molly. How did you like the sermon?” She was painfully aware of Luke’s eyes watching her—she was always aware.

Molly hopped up on her toes and chattered on about how she thought Noah should have left certain animals behind. “I don’t think there’s any use for mosquitos anyway,” she concluded.

Luke chuckled, his warm, honey timbre always sending a shiver down Allie’s spine. “Then what would the spiders eat?”

His daughter rolled her eyes. “There are other bugs, *too*, Dad.”

“Yeah, *Dad*, there are other bugs. Sheesh.” Allie mimicked, then winked at Molly who grinned back. She locked eyes with Luke and her heart almost stopped. It was as if time stood still whenever she was around him. But then Luke glanced down at his daughter, breaking the spell.

“Well, if anyone would know about the ecosystem, it’d be your new fourth-grade teacher.” Luke returned his focus to Allie and slugged her playfully in the arm. “It’s what you get paid the big bucks for, right?”

Allie rubbed her arm absently. Luke would never look at her as anything more than his sister’s friend. She smiled feebly and nodded. “That’s right.” It didn’t matter how often she made goo-goo eyes at the man, she’d always be overlooked. That was just how it was.

She could feel the blush crawling up her neck and she knew there was no way she could stop it. Shoot, why did this always have to happen? She’d go and flirt like a lunatic and then get put in her place and the embarrassment would smother her.

What was she thinking? She was Luke’s kid’s teacher. Even if she had a chance at winning his affection, he wouldn’t do anything about it.

Allie looked away, hoping an autumn breeze would cool her heated skin. It didn’t get all that cold in Sweet Blooms, Texas, but being late September, she might just get lucky. She closed her eyes and a breeze did in fact tug at her hair, but it wasn’t cool at all.

“How’s everyone settling in for school, *Miss Patrick*?” Luke’s voice whipped her from her thoughts and her blush deepened.

She glanced toward Luke again and hugged her book a little tighter to her chest. “Oh, you know it’s the beginning of the school year. What can you expect? Everyone’s rowdy and wishing summer break was still going. Sound familiar?”

Luke nodded, his grin still plastered to his face. He tugged at his tie, loosening it from where it was around his neck. “Yeah, sounds about right. But I hope this one isn’t giving you any

trouble.” He shot a knowing look toward his daughter. “Molly should know better by now.”

Molly’s wide eyes met Allie’s, prompting another small laugh from Allie. “Molly is a sweetheart. And everyone is trying to find their place anyway. I’m sure it will all settle down in no time.”

No matter how much time had passed, Allie couldn’t seem to get over this man who seemed to be just as perfect as ever. He had everything figured out despite being a single dad and running his own business. The fact that he hadn’t gotten remarried only meant one thing; even after nine years, he was still in love with his late wife.

Allie’s stomach twisted. Shellie had been just as perfect and when she married Luke, they’d been the *it* couple. And it was all thanks to Allie and her big mouth.

She should have never let Luke meet her roommate. That was when Allie’s life had turned sideways and she knew she’d never get the man of her dreams.

“Allie, you okay?”

She stiffened. Why couldn’t she stop daydreaming when she was around him? There had to be something wrong with her. Allie’s nervous laugh sounded more like a pig in distress than anything else. She shifted, taking a step back from Luke for no other reason than an attempt to keep her wits about her. “I’m sorry. Just thinking about what I have going this week.”

“For school? What are we learning this week?” Molly’s excitement for education never ceased to amaze Allie and her question brought a smile to Allie’s face.

“Well, we’re going to dive into multiplication and cursive for the next several weeks. How does that sound?”

“Cursive? Like signing stuff?” Molly beamed. “I’ve been practicing at home.”

“She has,” Luke muttered, “on everything but the notebook I bought her.”

Molly crossed her arms. “That notebook is too pretty to practice in. I need to get really good before I use it.”

Luke rolled his eyes, but his amusement was still clearly visible. There was nothing that beat the love he had for his daughter. From day one, he sacrificed everything for her. But no one could blame him. Losing his wife during childbirth was bad enough. To lose his only connection to her would be a death sentence.

He lifted his gaze to meet Allie’s and once again it was like she was connected to him though some kind of electrical cord. Her insides went haywire, and she almost forgot to breathe. In that exact, unfortunate moment, someone else leaving the church building bumped into her, forcing her to stumble into Luke. His hands shot out to steady her, grasping her upper arms to prevent her from losing her balance.

Allie stared up into Luke’s dark eyes and for a moment she could pretend that he’d pulled her in for a hug.

But it was just for that moment, because he gently held her back at arm’s length before putting his hands into his pockets. “It was nice *bumping* into you,” he chuckled, “*twice*.”

Molly giggled. “You’re so dumb, Dad.”

He pulled a hand free from his pocket and placed it on Molly’s shoulder. “Come on, sweetie. Let’s go get some lunch. I have a feeling that Uncle Brent and Aunt Jackie might be making enough for us to crash their party.”

“Aunt Jackie always makes enough for us...” Molly’s voice faded the farther they got from Allie.

She watched until they got to the corner of the small block where the church sat and then she released a pent-up sigh.

“What’re you lookin’ at?” Pippa sidled up next to Allie and peered down the street.

“Nothing,” Allie murmured.

“Yeah, right.” Her best friend craned her neck but didn’t seem satisfied with what she could see. “There’s always a reason someone is staring off into space like that.”

Allie shook her head, forcing a smile. “Nope. Nothing. Just thinking.”

Pippa flipped her dark hair over her shoulder then looped her arm through Allie’s. “You know what I was thinking about today?”

“I dunno,” Allie murmured as they headed down the chapel steps, “maybe the sermon that Pastor Petrie was giving us?”

“Nope,” Pippa laughed, “though that would probably have been the right thing to be thinking about, huh?” She released Allie’s arm and faced her once they reached the sidewalk. “I was thinking about how we’ve been friends for twenty years.”

“Has it been that long?” Allie’s urge to glance down the street where Pippa’s brother had disappeared was so strong it made her chest hurt. “It doesn’t feel that way.”

“Yep. We met in third grade. And you know what else? I think we should celebrate. Who says anniversaries are just for married folk? We should do something fun to commemorate our friendship.”

“I’d love to do something! But gosh, I’m so busy now that school’s started back. Th restaurant can’t spare you, either. I know I’m not wrong about that. How can we fit something in?”

Pippa pouted. “Sounds like you’re trying to get out of it.”

“I’m not! There just really is a lot going on. I’m just being practical.” Allie put a hand on her hip and tilted her head.

“I’m not interested in practical. You know that. Why can’t we just plan something for next weekend?” Her dark eyes, so similar to Luke’s, brightened and she grasped onto Allie’s hands. “What if you came by the restaurant after we close and we can bake something like we used to when we were kids?”

Allie gave her a pointed look. “I think you remember those times a great deal differently than I do.”

Pippa laughed again, her voice light and beautiful. “Okay, you want honest? I’ll admit I remember doing all the cooking and you and Luke doing all the eating. But it was still fun.” She

slugged Allie in the arm just like Luke had. “I know, we could make a whole big thing about it and invite Luke—”

“No,” Allie said far too quickly. She cleared her throat and gave in to the blush that crept across her cheeks. “I mean, he’s probably busy, too. He’s got Molly and his work. If we’re going to do something it should just be the two of us, like you said.”

Pippa’s eyes narrowed as she studied Allie. “Is this about your crush on Luke—”

“No, it’s not about Luke. It’s not about anything.”

“Allie...” Pippa drawled. “Are you already forgetting that this is our twenty-year friendiversary? I *know* you. And I know you’ve had a crush on my brother since we were kids. That sort of thing doesn’t just go away.”

“Well, this time it did. I don’t have a crush on him anymore. That would be ridiculous. He got married, he has a kid for heaven’s sake. I’m not going to spend my whole life pining for a guy who doesn’t have the slightest interest in me.” Her voice had risen and a few people glanced in her direction.

Allie covered her face with one hand and groaned before meeting her best friend’s eyes. She lowered her voice and forced a smile she had no business wearing. “Just because I don’t want to hang out with your brother anymore doesn’t mean that I still have feelings for him.” Pippa probably knew she was lying, but Allie didn’t care.

She didn’t want to talk about this anymore and she certainly didn’t want to admit that it wouldn’t matter how hard she tried, she’d never be able to get over Luke. A seed had been planted, and like a weed it had grown out of control. There was not a prayer in heaven that she’d be able to get over him.

Heck, even if she found someone who loved her, she’d always have feelings for Luke. Deep down, she knew that without a doubt.

Pippa tilted her head, her eyes shining. At least she wasn’t pushing the issue. But what were friends for if not to play along and enable someone when they definitely didn’t need it.

“Sure, okay. No Luke then. But we seriously need to figure out something because I feel like we go too long not hanging out and then we grow more and more apart. So what do you say? Come to the restaurant and do something fun with me?”

“Of course,” Allie sighed with a smile. “You always come up with such good ideas. I just want to make sure I’m not slammed at work so I won’t be a dud date. And I don’t want to have to cancel at the last minute.”

“So what about lunch? A girl’s gotta eat, right? You can come by for lunch.”

Allie peered at her friend, both hating and loving her for being so persistent. “What day?”

Pippa shrugged. “I’m there every day. You pop in and I’ll make sure we get lunch.”

“But you’ll be working.”

She placed both hands on Allie’s shoulders and looked her square in the face. “I own the place, Allie. I think I can take a lunch break on a whim.”

Allie laughed. “Okay, fine. Some day in October. That’s the best I can do. It will probably be a Saturday. And it might only be like thirty minutes long.”

“Deal.”

“Really?”

Pippa released her and shrugged. “Sure. Why not? We can do it in October if that will be best for you. There are four Saturdays this October. I’ve got a twenty-five percent chance you’ll show up randomly and be ready to dish on all the hilarious things the fourth graders are up to. And maybe by then one of us will have some real dirt to share.”

Allie lifted a brow. “What do you mean, real dirt?”

“You know. Boyfriends. Crushes. The stuff we used to talk about ad nauseam.”

This time Allie laughed. “Don’t count on much from my end. But if you have anything to share, I’m all ears.”

“It’s a date.”

“It’s a date,” Allie confirmed. “Now, let me get going so I can grade some papers.”

“Grade some papers?” Pippa spun around as Allie passed her. “It’s the second week in September. What kind of homework are you assigning those kids?”

“The kind that needs grading,” Allie called over her shoulder. She smiled as she headed for her car. Pippa always knew how to turn a gloomy situation into one that wasn’t. It had to be a Duncan thing. All of the Duncan children seemed to have a sunny disposition and a knack for brightening someone’s day. Perhaps that was one of the reasons she’d been so drawn to Luke in the first place.

He’d been perfect then.

And he was still perfect now.

She just wasn’t perfect for him.

CHAPTER TWO

LUKE PULLED UP IN FRONT OF HIS CHILDHOOD HOME AND immediately his daughter catapulted from the truck and sprinted toward the barn. The small cottage he'd had built for his family was about a hundred yards from the main house and closer to the side of the property where he ran most of the agricultural business.

He climbed out of the truck and watched his daughter disappear inside the barn, knowing full well she'd return smelling like her favorite horse. It was about time he handed over the reins figuratively and literally to Snowshoe. The Arabian was getting on in age, and as such, she was one of the gentler horses at Rolling Hills Ranch and Farms.

Molly had been begging for a horse of her own for so long. Perhaps Snowshoe would be a good fit. Luke leaned up against the side of his truck and crossed his arms, allowing himself to get lost in thought.

His life should have been so different. Shellie should have been alive and setting the example Molly needed in her life. She should have been present for all of the firsts. Molly, of course took it all in stride—as was her way.

But he couldn't help wonder if he'd done everything he could for her. Had Molly been a boy, maybe this wouldn't have been much of an issue. But that wasn't the case.

He peered off into the distance toward the farming area of the ranch, an addition that had taken place just before Molly was born, and the guilt swept over him again. He'd been so

focused on succeeding that he hadn't taken nearly enough time making sure everything was stable at home.

And now everyone around him said he was doing the best he could, but what if that wasn't good enough? His doubts had been speaking louder lately, exclaiming that he was missing something.

But what?

"Luke? What are you doing here?" She laughed as her head tilted to the side. She wasn't really surprised to see him because he and Molly were regulars for Sunday lunch.

A truck pulled up beside him, the window rolled down. His sister-in-law had her elbow perched on the edge of the open area, a small smile gracing her face. Brent had married up with Jackie and everyone knew it. The preacher's daughter, the best cook in town—except for Pippa, of course—and beautiful to boot. She was the strongest, most genuine person Luke had the pleasure of knowing which was why he didn't mind handing over the reins of the ranching business to his brother in its entirety.

"Oh, you know," Luke murmured, "It's lunch time. And Molly thinks I'm a terrible cook."

"That's because you are," Brent called from the driver's seat. "What makes you think we'll be willing to share? Maybe I want it all for myself this time. Leftovers would be nice every now and then."

Jackie faced him, probably to give him one of her looks that told him to keep his mouth shut. She turned toward Luke again. "You know you're always welcome. Lucky for you, I put a roast in the crock pot early this morning. It should be just about done if you and Molly want to join us." She peered around the truck, her gaze sweeping the area. "Where is she?"

Luke chuckled. "I'll give you one guess."

"Well, you let her know that lunch will be ready in ten. Then she has to leave that poor horse alone and come eat."

"Will do."

Brent pulled the vehicle forward and into the waiting garage. The back doors opened and Luke's niece and nephew hopped out. Brent had the perfect family—the kind that if Luke wasn't careful, he'd be jealous of.

It wasn't hard to imagine the kind of mother Shellie would have been for Molly. That woman loved kids more than anyone he knew—well, maybe not as much as Allie. Now, that was a woman who had known she wanted to teach children since she was one.

Allie's pretty face filled his thoughts. Her splash of red hair seemed to compliment her green eyes in a way that seemed almost unnatural. The combination had been something Allie abhorred when she was younger, but as she aged, her beauty only increased.

But it wasn't her eyes or her hair that stood out to Luke. No, if he were pressed, he would say that it was the dusting of flawless freckles across her nose that made her stand out.

What was he thinking? Allie was his sister's friend. He'd grown up with her. Never in his whole life had he considered her looks to be anything of consequence. And suddenly she kept popping up in his thoughts.

Something had to be wrong with him. It probably had something to do with Molly turning nine last week. That had to be it. Her birthday was the definition of bittersweet. The anniversary of his wife's death and the celebration of his daughter's existence.

That day alone was the one day a year he never knew if he'd come out stronger on the other end until he did.

Luke was just missing his wife. That was all.

He pushed away from his truck with the intention of tracking down his daughter, but she came skipping out of the barn at that very moment, a smile as wide as the Mississippi on her face.

“Dad! Snowshoe was so excited to see me today. I think she's really starting to like me.”

“I don't doubt it, kiddo.” He held out his hand and she took it.

“I bet she likes me more than Casey and Danielle.”

“Don’t tell your cousins that,” he chuckled. “They might start spending more time with Snowshoe just so they can say she likes them better.”

Molly’s eyes went wide. “Do you really think so?”

He moved his hand to her shoulder and pulled her closer to him. “I haven’t a clue. But it’s probably not a very nice thing to point out anyway.”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right.” They headed for the house and Molly’s footsteps slowed. “Dad, can I ask you something?”

Immediately his heart stopped. This was it. The conversation he knew he was bound to have about her mother or the fact that he’d never remarried. It was one of those things that sat in the back of his mind waiting for the bomb to be detonated.

The worst part was he had no answers for any of the questions he expected her to ask.

“When will I get my own horse?”

He blinked as he gazed down at his precious daughter. “What?”

“A horse. Casey and Danielle got their first horses when they were seven. And I’m nine, now. When will I get to have my own?”

Luke rubbed the back of his neck, torn between feeling so much relief over avoiding the question he couldn’t answer and hesitant to give her the truth about the question she’d asked. “Well... Casey and Danielle’s Dad manages the horses on the ranch. They’ve been riding since they could walk. And Uncle Brent knows the best way to train them and the horses.”

Molly scrunched up her face, her nose wrinkling the most. “But I’ve been riding a long time, too. I should be able to get a horse now.”

He patted her shoulder. “You’re right. You’ve been riding a lot more recently, but there’s one thing you don’t have that they do.”

“A mom.”

“Supervision.” He froze. “Wait, what?”

“Aunt Jackie is out there all the time, showing them what they need to do. And when they fall down, she helps them get back up especially when Uncle Brent isn’t there.”

Luke dropped down in front of his daughter. “It’s not because you don’t have a mom. It’s that I can’t be there to keep an eye on you when I’m running the tractors. There’s a lot of work that goes into what I do—”

“Yeah, it does. If Mom was alive, she could keep an eye on me. She could help me like Aunt Jackie.”

“That’s not necessarily true.” He was floundering and he knew it. Molly was as smart as her mother had been and he never even had a chance from the moment he met Shellie. He reached for both of her hands and held them tightly in his own. “I suppose you make a good point. But let me tell you something. Your mother wanted to be a teacher like Miss Patrick. If she was a teacher, then she wouldn’t be home to help you learn either. You having a horse has nothing to do with who your parents are.” Or rather that one was more noticeably absent.

Molly sighed. “I know.” Her words sounded heavier than a three-ton tractor. “I just really want my own horse.”

“I hate to break it to you, kid, but life isn’t fair.” And it never would be. But perhaps a new horse for Christmas might be just enough to lift her spirits. “Besides,” he nudged her, “you don’t want a horse. They’re way too much work. You have to feed them, and train them, and pick up their—”

“I’ll do all of that, Dad! Even the yucky stuff. I’d take care of her so good—”

He held up a hand and laughed. “Okay, okay. I get it. You really want a horse.”

“I want Snowshoe.”

Just like he’d figured. “Well, Snowshoe belongs to Uncle Brent...”

Her features faltered then almost instantly brightened. “Maybe he’ll give her to me.” She didn’t even wait for a response before she sprinted inside.

Thankfully, Luke didn’t have to worry about whether or not his brother would go against his wishes when it came to raising Molly. They’d have to have a talk before any horses changed hands.

Luke shook his head, a chuckle escaping his lips as he headed toward the door. It was a good thing Molly hadn’t quite figured out how to manipulate her uncle yet, though it was only a matter of time.



LUKE PASSED MOLLY the small bowl of roasted veggies that had been cooking with the beef while they were at church. The kitchen was quiet as most of the family had dug into their food already.

Brent nodded toward Luke. “How’s the harvest coming? Are you going to need any of my men this season? I’m sure I can spare a few.”

“That’d be great. There’s actually a lot more than I expected. And I’ve been toying with another idea lately, but I’m not sure how it’s going to go. I’ll have to figure out the logistics first.

“Molly, how is school going?” Jackie handed her son a roll she’d just buttered but her eyes were on her niece.

“Good,” Molly mumbled with her mouth full of potato.

“What’s your favorite part so far?”

Molly took a big sip of her water then wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. “I really like my teacher. She’s super smart. And she lets me read when I get my work done early.”

Jackie grinned. “That’s wonderful. Who’s your teacher again?”

“Miss Patrick.”

Luke couldn't be sure, but he could have sworn Jackie's gaze darted to her husband briefly before returning to Molly. "Really? She's Aunt Pippa's friend, right?"

Molly shrugged. "I don't know."

Nodding, Luke placed his fork next to his plate. "Yes, it's Allie Patrick. Apparently, she moved from the fifth grade to the fourth grade this year. So far, it's been great."

Brent lifted his eyebrows but only marginally, it wasn't enough for Luke to know for certain if his brother was trying to get any information across. Before Luke could ask, Molly spoke up again.

"We saw her at church today. She says we're going to learn about multiplication and cursive next week. And I told her I've already been practicing. I bet it's going to be super easy."

Casey shook his head. "Cursive is hard. You have to get all the letters just right and if they're lopsided you get bad grades."

For the first time that day Molly appeared concerned. "Is that true, Dad?"

"I dunno. I guess it could be. But Allie is a great teacher. I don't think she's going to do anything to hurt your grade on purpose."

"Yeah, she's really nice," Molly conceded. "She's the best teacher in fourth grade and there are four of them. Did you know she can sing and draw and..."

Boy, the more Molly gushed about her teacher, the harder it was getting to ignore those strange sensations in his stomach that had accosted him today. Allie might be the prettiest and smartest teacher at the grammar school where Molly attended, but she was also funny and kindhearted.

It made him wonder why she'd never settled down. She'd had ample opportunities to do so. Heck, she'd gone to the same college he had, and he knew for a fact there were several men who would have jumped at the chance to take her on even one date.

As if his sister-in-law had been able to read his mind, she murmured, “I wonder if she’s dating anyone. Luke, do you know?”

Luke stiffened. “What? No. Of course not. That’s something you’d have to ask Pippa, but I’d wager you’d get a better idea of things by going directly to the source.”

He shook his head, but it did nothing to clear it. Allie’s love life was none of his business. It never had been, and it never would be. He had far more important things to worry about than who Allie might or might not be seeing.

“Well, this town is pretty small. I’m sure if she were dating someone, we’d all know about it by now.” Jackie tossed that same look as before toward her husband but didn’t say another word regarding the woman who was dominating the topic of conversation at the lunch table.

Too bad Pippa wasn’t here. She would have loved being part of this discussion. Of course, she might also try to set him up with Allie. That had been her goal back when they were all going to college. But he’d found another woman who had stolen his heart faster than that crazy fast bird. What was it called again?

Oh yeah. A roadrunner.

CHAPTER THREE

OCTOBER

Allie shouldn't be nervous. She was the educator and part of her job was to hold parent teacher conferences for every student in her class.

And this year that included Luke and Molly. Her last encounter with Luke had its own disappointments. Every time she saw him, her body reacted in the most hopeless way. It was like her heart didn't care that a relationship with Luke wasn't in the cards for her. And what made it worse was every now and then she'd manage to believe that maybe they had a chance.

It was dumb and juvenile and deep-down Allie knew that trying to win Luke over in that way would only spell disaster. He'd found his true love. He'd married her, had a child with her, and lost her. He wasn't about to forget any of that.

She nibbled on her lower lip as she paced behind her desk. It didn't matter how prepared she was, Luke would show up and she'd turn back into the nervous high-school girl who had never gotten over her crush on him.

How was she supposed to be professional?

A quiet knock on her classroom door drew her attention. She spun around, expecting to find Luke but instead it was Kate from down the hall.

"Sorry to bother you, but I can't find any of my pens. I swear, I lose them at school far more than I ever did when I was a

waitress.” She gave Allie a crooked smile. “Mind if I borrow some of yours?”

Allie flicked her hand toward a cup on her desk. “Go wild.”

“Thanks. You’re the best.”

“It’s no big deal. I have more in m bottom drawer.”

Kate gathered a fist full of pens and hurried out of the classroom.

Allie turned toward her window, going over everything she wanted to say to Luke just so she wouldn’t go off course. She needed to make sure he knew that Molly was a great student and with only a few minor adjustments she’d be an even better one.

Another knock tapped on her door and without turning, Allie called out, “You’re going to have to call me the queen of fourth grade if you’re going to want anything else.”

“I think I can manage that,” a low voice replied.

Allie squeaked as she jumped and spun toward the visitor. Luke leaned his shoulder against the doorjamb, grinning at her like he always had.

“Based on what I’ve seen with Molly’s school work, I have no problem shouting it from the rooftops.”

She flushed not only deeply, but hotter than she’d ever recalled. A burst of laughter escaped her lips but she couldn’t move, her feet were stuck in place. “Kate Mason keeps *borrowing* pens from me. I swear I keep buying them just for her.” Shoot, that sounded like a fake excuse. “Personally, I think she’s just stashing them like a chipmunk or something.”

Luke gave her a funny look and her blush intensified.

Why did she have to keep digging deeper? She’d already dug a hole big enough to hide in. Allie looked away and cleared her throat. As much as she prayed for her blush to fade, she knew that wasn’t a possibility. She’d just have to deal with it like she always did.

She pointed toward the table where her stack of folders lay. “Please take a seat. We can go over everything Molly has worked on this year so far and at the end you can ask whatever questions you’d like.”

He lifted his brows and smirked at her playfully. “*Anything?*”

“Well, yes, of course. I want you to feel confident and comfortable with Molly’s education...” her voice trailed off as it dawned on her that Luke might actually be flirting. He’d never done anything like that before.

She had to be wrong. There was no reason for Luke to change his ways so suddenly. She was just imagining things.

And just like that her blush returned with a vengeance. It wasn’t fair! Why did she have to get Molly on her roster? Life was so much easier when she’d see Luke in passing, or occasionally when Pippa had a family get together where she’d invite Allie to tag along.

Allie didn’t know what she could do besides what she’d rehearsed, so like the idiot she felt she was, she shoved the folder with Molly’s name on it toward Luke. The folder flipped open, and a few pages fluttered to the ground.

She gasped and lunged toward the papers at the exact same time Luke did.

Their heads collided, sending sparks of pain ricocheting through her skull. Luke grunted and she sucked in a sharp breath.

“I’m so sorry,” she stammered. “It’s not supposed to happen this way. Normally I can get through a conference in a few minutes. I honestly don’t know what’s going on.”

Luke was still rubbing his head, but at least he was smiling. “It’s fine, Allie.” His brows creased. “Or should I call you Miss Patrick?”

Allie waved a dismissive hand through the air, though even she could tell it trembled a bit. If she were honest, she’d tell him she loved the sound of her name on his lips. But that would be highly inappropriate. Instead, she settled for

something that wouldn't get him staring at her like she'd lost her mind. "Um, Allie is fine."

"Right," he murmured. "Man, how long has it been?"

"Twenty years."

"That doesn't sound right."

She nodded. "It's true. I met Pippa and the rest of your family when I was nine."

Luke whistled low and slow. "Wow. Twenty years. That's gotta be some kind of record. Usually friendships fade before then, don't they?"

"I wouldn't know," Allie murmured, fighting the urge to point out that her friendship with him had faded about ten years earlier. She swallowed hard and pointed at the papers in front of him—anything to get his focus off her and on the matter at hand. "This is only the first conference of four. We'll do one every ten weeks or so, including at the end of the year. The reason for that is to let you know what to expect as Molly heads into fifth grade."

"She's already in fourth grade," he uttered softly. "I can't believe I'm old enough to have a fourth grader."

"Well, you certainly don't look it."

His head lifted and he stared at her.

Shoot! Had she seriously said that out loud?

What was *wrong* with her?

"Anyway, the good news is that Molly is a great student. She loves to read. I'd say she's at least three levels above where she's expected to be right now." Allie beamed at Luke, though she didn't know why. This wasn't something she could take credit for. Most of the time kids who had higher reading capabilities was because their interests exceeded the requirements for school.

"That's great, right?"

"Oh, it's wonderful. Higher test scores in reading usually correlate with higher academics in other subjects. You just

keep supporting her love of reading and you're going to have a college scholarship on your hands.”

Luke smiled, but this one was different than the flirty one she could have sworn she'd seen earlier. This one was pride. And he had every right to be proud of his daughter. She was doing so well that there wasn't much to be worried about.

Except perhaps one thing.

“For the most part, Molly is well behaved which is probably why her citizenship score is right about average. She's close with her friends—”

“Wait a minute. Mostly well-behaved? That doesn't sound good. In fact, it doesn't sound like Molly at all. What's up with that?”

She gave him a smile she prayed wasn't as patronizing as she thought it might be. “Molly is a nine-year-old girl. She loves to chat with her friends, and often this occurs when I'm giving a lecture on a new subject. I'd love to see her paying more attention in math. And obviously, talking when she and the others are supposed to be learning isn't how things should go.”

“I thought you said that her academic scores were high.”

“They are,” she hurried on to say. “But if you'll see here, there are a few test scores that are a little lower than I think she's capable of.” She pointed to the grade printout she'd prepared. “And there's one missing assignment. If she could bring in that assignment it would improve her overall grade quite a bit.”

She glanced up from the paper to find Luke scowling at the document they were discussing, and her confidence wavered. She'd always hated giving bad news to parents and Luke was no exception. Already she could see the cogs in his head whirring and trying to come up with solutions for Molly, and possibly even an excuse or two.

Without thinking, she reached across the small table and took Luke's hand in hers. His eyes locked onto her and he blinked once.

“Look, it's not uncommon for girls her age to giggle and chat during class. It happens all the time. When it becomes a

problem is when it starts to affect her grades.”

He gestured vaguely at the paperwork. “You have proof it’s already doing that.”

Allie glanced down at the document. “This is just a little update on where she is so far this school year. Her grades can definitely improve.”

Based on the way his features continued to darken, she wasn’t doing her best to help him see the positives. Dang it, she should have started with the bad news first. She’d done this the wrong way yet again.

It wasn’t until she squeezed his hand that she realized she was still holding it. Quickly, she snatched her hand away from him and clasped it with her other one in her lap.

“I know it probably doesn’t help to hear this right now, but Molly is a sweet girl with a mind that could conquer the world one day. She’s got the brains and the social skills to do just that. While her C in math is an indicator, she needs a little help and more focus there, it’s not the end of the world. This is only the first of the year. Work with her on her homework and encourage her. She’ll figure it out. You’ll both figure it out.”

Luke didn’t look convinced.

“I know this is hard to take, but as she gets older this won’t get a whole lot easier. Molly’s going to want to be with her friends and spend time with them instead of you. All you can do is sit back and let her live her life.”

As soon as she said these words she knew they were wrong. And oddly enough, she didn’t even believe this way. She’d never agree that children should be let go to just live their lives as they wanted. She was so flustered talking to Luke she was botching the parent teacher conference.

Luke got to his feet, gathering the papers as he did so. “There’s one thing you’re wrong about. She’s only nine. I’d rather run off a cliff than let Molly have free rein of her life. She’s not ready for that yet.”

“I didn’t say she is.”

He gave her a sharp look and she knew she had to clarify her statement if for no other reason than to let him know she wasn't all about letting kids boss the world around.

“What I meant to say was that considering all the variables, Molly is turning out to be a girl with promise. If I were you, I'd stop being so worried about her and let her have a little bit of freedom—just enough to let her spread her wings but not enough to make her think there are zero consequences in the world.”

Luke glanced down at Allie, holding her gaze briefly before he nodded. “I'll have a talk with her when I get home. There is no reason why she can't stay focused for schoolwork. It may not be clear, but I do expect that of her. I'll also make sure she apologizes—”

“Oh, that's not necessary,” she laughed but stopped the second she saw the look on his face.

“It's entirely necessary. I raised her to respect the adults in her life. You are one of those people who deserve her respect, if for no other reason than to set an example for her peers. We'll make sure her grades are up by Christmas.”

“I'm sure they will be, but you don't—”

“Is there anything else I should be aware of?”

“Well, no, but—”

“Then I thank you for your time today, Allie. I hope to see you again at church. It was nice running into you.”

Before she could say another word, Luke had slipped out of the classroom. Allie stared after him having the strangest feeling that this wasn't going to go over all that well with Molly.

No, the young girl wouldn't come up to her and complain, but there were days when Molly definitely showed her displeasure in the form of a cold shoulder. Out of most of the children in Allie's classroom, Molly was one of the bubblier personalities. She brought light and life to the discussions they had in the classroom. She had the imagination of a fantasy author, and

even more. Allie didn't want to mess with that dynamic in her classroom.

Well, that was too late.

Allie sighed as she dropped her head to her hands and took in a deep breath before releasing it. That was when she realized her hands were shaking. She dug her fingers into her hair, but the motion did nothing to quell the nerves she was experiencing.

She was the teacher. She was expected to report on the good and the bad. Sometimes the parents didn't do much. But apparently there was another end of that spectrum where, like Luke, the parents were going overboard.

"Allie? Is this a good time?"

She snapped her head up so quickly she nearly gave herself whiplash. These had to be the next parents in line. They belonged to one of the boys in her class.

Allie forced a smile and -gestured toward the seat that Luke had vacated and the one beside it. "Jim and Patty. Glad you could make it. Please have a seat."

CHAPTER FOUR

THE WHOLE WAY HOME FROM THE SCHOOL, LUKE COULDN'T help but feel defeated. Already, he was struggling with wondering if Molly needed more than he was providing. Now, he *knew* she did. She should be paying attention in school. He did have high expectations but now he was trying to figure out when he stopped making that clear.

Where had he gone wrong?

He gripped his steering wheel a little tighter, his hands turning white from the pressure. What more could he do? He'd worked his tail off to make sure he provided for his family. He'd made his family's ranch a household name. He'd been a good dad, hadn't he?

But one thing was still missing.

Molly didn't have a mother.

Sure, she had several women in her life to help lead her the best they could. But they would never be a replacement for Shellie.

His heart constricted as his late wife's face filled his thoughts, accosting him with memories he'd all but buried. Emotions burned behind his eyes, and he rubbed at one with the heel of his hand. He couldn't do this now.

Nine years ago, she'd left this realm but it wasn't her absence that caused him the most pain. Luke was struggling to handle the insecurities of being a single father to a child who would soon be a teenager.

He took a deep breath and shoved away that terrifying thought. One step at a time. For now, he needed to focus on the future. There was no telling what his life with Molly would have been like if her mother had still been alive. And it was just borrowing trouble to linger on that thought.

Luke would always miss her, but there were more important issues—like his daughter and his job. There was only one good thing about his meeting with Allie today. She'd seemed sure that Molly was going to be okay. Granted, she'd mentioned that Molly was being raised by a single father and because of that, she could have been worse off.

That statement rubbed him the wrong way more than it should have.

He heaved a sigh as he pulled up to his brother's home and stared at the front porch. The light overhead made the railing appear as if it were glowing, but then again, that could be the white paint. The farmhouse had a classic look, one that could have been dropped in any time period and remain just as beautiful. Once upon a time, he had thought this home would belong to his little family. But after Shellie died and Brent got married, it just didn't make sense.

Molly was inside somewhere playing with her cousins, waiting for him to come home. How was he supposed to bring up the problems he'd discovered during the parent teacher conference without making her feel like she was the problem? Molly could be so sensitive sometimes.

Luke climbed out of his truck and shut the door. He closed his eyes, drawing on all the strength he had before he headed toward the house.

The weathered steps creaked with his weight. Screeches and laughter filtered through a window that had been opened a crack.

He smiled. Even if he didn't have Shellie anymore, he still had a strong family unit. He couldn't be more grateful for that fact. His hand wrapped around the doorknob and he turned it, pushing the door open to find three children staring at a television screen with video game controllers in their hands.

They tilted and ducked as if their movements would help their cartoon characters race around the track with more accuracy.

“Hey!” Danielle hollered when her older brother dropped an object in her way. “That’s not fair.”

Casey snickered and jumped up from the floor, the intensity in his eyes increasing.

“That’s okay, Dani. I’ll get ‘im.” Molly’s thumbs clicked more feverishly than before.

“I don’t think you’re going to be able to get them to quit their game before they finish this round,” Jackie murmured behind him. “They’ve been at it for the last thirty minutes and no one can beat Casey.” She laughed softly. “It’s too bad, too, because I was really rooting for a girl to beat him.”

Luke glanced at the television screen. The cartoon characters darted and swerved. “Things are so different from when we were kids.”

Jackie laughed. “That’s the truth. All the games. I still can’t get the hang of them all these years later.” Her gaze shifted from the kids to Luke and she jutted her chin toward the kitchen. “We’ve still got some dinner left over if you want some.”

“I’ll never turn down a free meal from you, just don’t tell Pippa.”

She laughed as she wandered toward the kitchen. “Deal. And you don’t have to tell her that I think she uses too much salt in her potatoes.”

“Blasphemy,” Luke tossed back at her. When they reached the kitchen, Luke’s eyes immediately landed on his brother. Brent sat at the table looking over some documents. He only lifted his gaze briefly before murmuring, “Oh, hey, Luke. How was the parent teacher thing?”

“Good... I think.”

“You think,” Jackie shot him a surprised look then filled his plate with some roast and potatoes. “What is that supposed to mean? Is Molly doing okay?”

“Yeah. Well, mostly. But her teacher says she talks a little too much. I guess she’s a distraction and she’s got a C in math right now. I’m not happy about that.”

Her smile was probably supposed to reassure him, but it did nothing of the sort. “Oh, is that all? She’ll be fine. Danielle is the same way. She talks too much but that’s just how girls are. They’re social. And while Casey wasn’t a chatter box, he was always distracted with other things. Once his teacher caught him with one of those portable video game things. It could be worse, you know. She could be failing all her classes.”

“Yeah, you sound a lot like Allie. She seems to think that I should look at it in a different way. I’m just a single dad and we’ve both had it hard.”

Brent shot him a look but Jackie spoke first. “She’s not wrong that things haven’t been really traditional with you.”

“That’s not the point,” Luke sighed. “It’s been nearly a decade. I’ve been doing as much as I can since she was born. It’s not like she lost her mother last year. She’s never known any different.”

“But having a single parent household is a struggle on its own. When all the other kids are making Mother’s Day gifts or talking about their families, Molly probably feels... different.”

Brent put down his papers. “Don’t brush this off. Luke’s right too, and his concerns are valid.”

“Well, I didn’t say they weren’t valid. But there are certain things in this life that we can’t change.”

“But this wasn’t one of them,” Luke muttered.

Both his brother and sister-in-law stared at him.

“Think about it. I’ve had a long time to get through this and consider dating again. What if I had found someone who could have been Molly’s mother when she was younger? Then she wouldn’t even remember not having someone to fill that role.” Luke yanked out a kitchen chair and settled down in it, the defeat weighing on him more than it should.

“You know why you didn’t do that. We all do,” Jackie whispered. “And none of us blame you.”

“That being said,” Brent offered, “are you suggesting that you think it’s time to get out there again?”

“I don’t know what I’m suggesting. I don’t have a clue what I should do next.” Luke peered at his brother as if he would have the answers. Of course he wouldn’t. “Man, I sorta wish Mom was here. She’d know what to do.”

“Yeah,” his brother drawled. “I don’t think she’s going to leave Italy just because Molly has a C in math. She’ll be here for the holidays like she always is, though.”

“You’re probably right,” Luke muttered. Had his father been alive, she might have come more frequently. But losing a spouse did something to the mind and he couldn’t blame her for avoiding Sweet Bloom as much as she could.

Too many memories.

Giggles erupted from the living room and the three adults smiled. Jackie nodded toward his plate. “Just get something in your stomach and then we can all have a chat about expectations. Our kids could use it too.”

Luke offered her a grateful smile. “Thanks. I don’t know what I would do without you guys.”

“You’d starve,” she said simply.

Brent laughed and it was hard not to join in.

He ate in silence for a few minutes but then Jackie took a seat beside him at the table. “You know, I bet Allie would be willing to help a little. Didn’t you guys hang out a lot when you were kids?”

Luke shrugged. “She was more Pippa’s friend than mine.”

“Yeah, but Pippa followed you around a lot more than she did me. And Allie was there all the time,” Brent reminded him. “I swear, everyone in town thought you and Allie would end up together.”

Luke snorted just as he took a sip of water. It went right up his nose, the burning sensation making him cough. This wasn't new information, but he hadn't thought his brother had agreed with the sentiment.

When he looked up at Brent, he found him smiling like he was the cat who'd caught the canary. "Come on, Luke. You know as well as I do that Allie liked you—*really* liked you."

"You know what I think? I think you're all full of it. She might have had a small crush on me, but it wasn't that bad. If it was, then why would she introduce me to Shellie?"

His brother exchanged a look with his wife. "What else does someone do when they're at college?"

Luke rolled his eyes. "Allie's nice and all, but she doesn't have feelings for me in that way."

"But what if she does?"

Luke stopped, his fork hovering just an inch above his plate. He stared at the mashed potato, not really seeing it. "I guess we'll never know because that's not how she feels." Even as he said it, he wasn't sure. She was always so nice to him, but then she'd always been nice to everyone. Just because he was feeling vulnerable, didn't mean he was about to fall for one of his brother's teasing sessions. He shot a stern look at his brother. "None of that matters because it was all in the past. I don't have any reason to look at her any differently. Besides, she's my daughter's teacher. How would that look?"

"How would *what* look?" Brent's voice lifted an octave. Great. He *was* going to poke fun at him. "Do you mean how would the people in town look at a single dad dating his kid's teacher?"

Luke opened his mouth in an attempt to halt this conversation in its tracks when his daughter's voice made him stop cold.

"Daddy? I didn't know you were back."

Luke mouthed the words, "Drop it," to his brother then turned in his seat and faced his daughter. "I just got back, sweetie. You were so interested in your game, you didn't notice."

She glanced from her aunt and uncle to him then shrugged and wandered into the kitchen. “Oh.” Molly climbed into his lap, though she was almost getting too big to do so. She draped her arm around his neck and smiled up at him. “What did Miss Patrick say?”

He pressed his lips together and briefly met Jackie’s eyes. She gave him a firm nod and then sighed. “Well, she said that you are *very* smart.”

Molly beamed.

“And she said that you’re reading at a level that is a lot higher than where you need to be, but that doesn’t mean you get to slack off.”

She nodded, her expression turning serious. “I won’t.”

“That’s just the thing, kiddo. She said you’re a little too talkative in class and you’re missing out on important information when it’s time to do your math.” Just as he said it, she flinched and looked away.

“Oh,” she murmured.

Good. She was already aware that there were some improvements that had to be made.

“I’m sorry. I try to pay attention, I really do.”

“I know,” he lifted her chin and forced her to meet his gaze. “And every so often it’s not a big deal. But if your grades continue to slip then we’re really going to have to come up with a solution so you can get back on track. School is very important. If your mother were here—” He stopped himself, but it was too late.

Molly was brave. She’d always been that way. But there was no hiding the disappointment in the back of her eyes. There, it flickered like a lone candle in the wind. Lately he noticed it more often than not. “She’d want me to get good grades, too,” Molly whispered. “I know.”

“That’s right.”

“But grades aren’t everything, Molly. It’s important to have balance.” Jackie jumped into the conversation and gave Luke a

pointed look. He knew that look. She was trying to remind him that when he spent too much time in the field, his home life suffered.

He swallowed at the lump in his throat and ignored the shame that came with her statement. As much as he hated it, he had to agree with his sister-in-law. “Your aunt is right. School is important but so is having a social life. You’re getting older and as such you’re going to have to learn how to balance all of it. Do you think you can do that?”

Molly didn’t blink. She didn’t look away. Her confidence returned and she nodded. “I’ll try.”

He pulled her into a hug and rested his chin on her head. “That’s all I can ask.”

CHAPTER FIVE

WHY WAS IT SO DANG HARD TO GET OVER A MAN WHO HAD zero interest in her? Allie was cute, she had a decent figure, she always did her hair and makeup, and she was rarely seen without a smile on her face.

There were men who had asked her out, some she accepted and some she turned down. But none of them held a candle to the man she found herself praying she'd see in passing whenever she wandered through town.

This Saturday was no exception. And since she was visiting Pippa's restaurant, her hopes were higher than usual. She didn't even know if Luke ate at The Local Table all that often, and yet here she was, wearing a pale blue summer dress.

Her eyes scanned the immediate area of the restaurant when she stood at the hostess's podium to wait to be seated. Every time she caught sight of short, dark hair, her breath caught in her throat. But then the man would turn just enough to make it clear that he was not who she was looking for.

"Allie! I didn't expect you to come today. What are you doing here?" Pippa launched herself at Allie and threw her arms around her. When she pulled back, she grinned widely. "I thought you said you were going to let me know before you came."

"I'm letting you know now," Allie said in a small voice. "Besides, it's almost the end of the month and I said I'd come in October. Did you forget?" Allie smiled and scrunched up her nose.

Pippa laughed, looping her arm through Allie's. "I'm just glad you came. I thought for sure you'd cancel on me. But now you're here and I'm so excited to have you try a dish I'm working on." She tugged Allie toward the swinging doors that would take them to the kitchen all the while describing the dish that required a reduction which was never a bad thing.

"That sounds so yummy! I can't wait to taste it."

"You're going to love it. I may have some tweaks to make, but when you taste it you can help me figure that part out." Pippa turned and reached for Allie's hand just before they went into the kitchen. "I really am glad you're here. I've missed you."

Allie looked at her friend and nodded. "Me, too."

Allie shamelessly continued searching for that certain someone on their trek to the kitchen and couldn't decide if she was more disappointed or relieved when she entered the busy chef's domain without seeing him at all.

Sizzles, smoke, and steam filled the area. Chefs and waitresses alike called out to one another. Pans clanged, dishes clattered, knives thumped against cutting boards. This was the surest sign of all the hard work and vision Pippa had put together when she was in high school. Who knew someone that wasn't classically trained could open a restaurant that was deserving of Michelin stars?

At least Allie thought so.

"You wait here. I'm going to get our food and then we're going to get a table in the back so we can catch up." Pippa's squeal sounded more like the squeak of a squirrel before she darted off just like the animal she emulated.

Allie glanced around her, noting the different tools and sharp objects. This place was louder than her classroom during Christmas. If she waited too long, her ears would begin ringing just from the sounds surrounding her.

The only saving grace was the smell of delicious food as it wrapped around her like a boa constrictor, making her mouth water with every little nuance she experienced.

“Okay, follow me.” Pippa returned, balancing four dishes in her arms. She jerked her chin toward the doors and grinned. “I can’t wait for you to get a whiff of what I’m cooking up. Just you wait until you try it. Your tastebuds are going to demand you never leave this place.”

“I don’t have any doubt,” Allie murmured.

They headed back through the crowded restaurant then took a left toward a more vacant area. Pippa placed the dishes on the table with a flourish then laughed. “I guess you can tell I’ve been missing the whole waitressing gig.”

Allie smiled, taking a seat across from her best friend. “Yeah. But I mean, look at all of this.” She gestured around them. The restaurant had started from nothing and now they sat here in a room full of people for a lunch rush. “You have to admit that you made your dream a reality and it couldn’t have happened without your hard work and vision.”

Pippa shrugged as if to brush off Allie’s compliment, but her eyes and her smile made it clear she was eating it all up. She motioned toward the food. “Dig in. And tell me what you think about it.”

Each plate had a different menu item. Chicken, beef, pasta, and sliders. They all looked better than the last. Allie pushed aside her disappointment over Luke and picked up a fork. She cut into the breaded chicken and swirled it in a creamy sauce then placed it in her mouth.

Salt and savory flavors hit her tastebuds, exploding in a combination that brought a moan from her lips. “This is amazing, Pippa!”

“Right? The secret is the extra little bit of kick I added to the sauce. It’s made with a combination of cayenne and bourbon. All of these dishes have a version of the sauce.”

Allie took another bite and another. “You’ve done it again. I can’t believe how good this is!”

Pippa beamed. “I’m so glad you like it.” She picked up her fork and took a bite as well. “I’ve been playing around with the combination of spices lately and when this one happened,

it was just..." she kissed her fingertips. "Tell me about what's going on with you? School going well? Have those little fourth graders driven you crazy yet? Are you ready to come work for me?" She laughed, winking.

Rolling her eyes, Allie leaned back in her seat. "First of all, school is great and there's no way I'm going to stop being a teacher even if you offered me a million dollars."

Her friend lifted a brow. "Is that so?"

"Yeah. It's so. I knew what I wanted to do for my career since I was a kid, remember?"

"Not even for a million dollars?" Pippa pressed.

Allie laughed. "Okay, maybe you could persuade me for a million dollars."

Pippa laughed along with her. "Good. I was almost going to start worrying about you. So what's up? Anything new besides work?"

Allie's thoughts immediately drifted toward Luke and how he'd managed to get so woven into her life since his daughter became her student. The worst part was their little meeting outside of the church a little over a month ago. Why did she have to go and flirt with him in the first place?

"Ah... see? I can tell something's up." Pippa scooted to the edge of her seat, her smile broadening. "Is it a guy?"

Allie glanced toward her friend then heaved a sigh. "You know what happened a little while back? I bumped into Luke and Molly at church."

Confusion flickered across Pippa's gaze then understanding. "I thought you said you didn't care anymore. Do you still have a crush on him? You do, don't you?"

Allie flushed and looked away. "I don't know. I thought I was over it then I talk to him and... it all comes rushing back. I'm such a mess, aren't I?"

Her friend reached for her hand and squeezed it. "You're not a mess. He's an idiot."

It was hard to suppress the smile that came with that statement. “You don’t have to say that.”

“Sure, I do. Luke is a lot of things but sometimes he’s not the smartest guy in the world.”

“You know what happened when we ran into each other?”

Pippa shrugged. “He proclaimed his undying love for you?”

Allie snorted, giving her a flat look. “No. He punched me in the arm—like you did.”

Her friend snickered.

“Why does everyone in your family do that?” Allie moaned, digging her hands into her hair. “It’s like all he sees me as is just his sister’s friend and that’s all he’s ever going to see.” Her blush intensified. This wasn’t how this lunch was supposed to go. She had planned on showing up and hanging out with her friend, a rare treat seeing how busy they were, but instead she’d gone straight to venting.

Allie lifted her face to peer at her friend.

Pippa’s expression was nothing but sympathetic and Allie couldn’t decide if that was worse than Pippa making fun of her for her crush in the first place. “Hey, it’s not like you don’t have a shot.”

Allie snorted again, but this time it got stuck in her throat. She coughed and sputtered, reaching for her glass of water but unable to make her coughing fit resolve.

The smirk she got from Pippa was to be expected. Not even she could control herself when something funny like this happened.

When Allie finally got her coughing fit under control, she took in a deep breath and set a firm gaze on Pippa. She prayed her stern gaze was enough to make Pippa believe her when she said, “No. I have just as much of a shot as I did when he started dating Shellie. The second they met, he was hooked and I was never going to get close to him.”

Pippa rolled her eyes, settling back in her seat with a huff. “Well, to be fair that was sorta your fault, right? You were the

one who introduced them.”

“Ugh. Don’t remind me. I didn’t think they’d hit it off! I just wanted... I dunno. Maybe I thought if they could be friends then I would have had more opportunities to spend time with him. But that doesn’t matter anymore. That was ages ago.”

Pippa didn’t say anything. In fact, she’d gone so quiet that Allie wouldn’t have been surprised if she had gotten up and walked away.

She glanced up toward where Pippa was sitting, finding her staring at her with a funny kind of look on her face. Her brows were furrowed, but her eyes were thoughtful. “You know, I think this is just a problem of him not seeing what is right under his nose.”

“Pippa—” Allie started, but was cut off.

“No, listen to me. Luke has a kid. He’s got a career. And he’s not getting any younger. He’d be lucky to have you.” It was clear Pippa was trying to encourage her, but Allie could only feel pity from this whole conversation. “Think about it, Allie. You’re a teacher. You’re good with kids and you have a career too. He wouldn’t have to worry about drama. There’s literally no one better for him.”

“Thanks, but—”

Pippa gasped. “I know. You should totally ask him out.”

“What?” Allie snapped.

“Yeah, why not? You should just bite the bullet and ask him out on a date. Tell him you’ve liked him for ages and that you’ve finally got the nerve to do it. How much would you bet that he’d say yes.”

Allie shook her head, her heart going into overdrive simply by the thought of doing something so ridiculous. Her hands shook and she clasped them tightly together to quell them. “Now I know you’re just making things up.”

“I’m not. Luke is dumb. He’s not going to come up with this idea on his own. But if you asked him out then he’s smart enough to know when he’s got a good thing going for him.”

A flush crept along her skin, once again making her feel like she was on fire. As much as Allie wanted to believe it would all work out if she did what Pippa told her to, she knew it wouldn't. Deep down, she already knew the outcome of such forward behavior.

Luke would tell her he was flattered and he'd put more distance between them. He'd blame it on the fact that she was his daughter's teacher and he didn't want to ruin the professionalism between the two of them.

Next, he would stop coming in for parent teacher conferences and opt for an email instead. In the end, she would have put her heart out on the line and Luke would leave it out there in the sweltering desert, allowing the vultures to peck at it until there was nothing left.

"Allie? Did you hear me? You gonna do it? You finally gonna ask him out on a date? I'll babysit Molly." Pippa clapped her hands together. "I can't believe I didn't think of this sooner. We should have been planning this—"

"Pippa."

Her friend stopped mid-sentence.

"Thanks for trying, but I just don't think it's going to work out."

"If you ask him out—"

"I'm not going to ask him out. That's a bad idea for *so* many reasons. It's been too long. I'm just going to have to let my crush fizzle out."

Pippa frowned, her eyes drilling into Allie hard enough that she needed to look away. "Like your crush fizzled out when you were in college? Like when you moved back to town? Come on, Allie. This is your chance."

"There's no way I'm going to ever ask him out. If it was meant to be, then it would have happened a long time ago. I might as well just go to the wishing well and throw some coins in to get me over this once and for all."

“That’s ridiculous,” Pippa muttered. “If you want something, all you need is a good work ethic and a plan. If you have both of those, then you can work through any bumps in the road.”

“This is my life, Pippa. Not some restaurant.” Allie grimaced, hating the way her words seemed to diminish the value of Pippa’s business. Thankfully, her friend didn’t seem fazed by the statement.

“Eventually you’re going to accept that you aren’t going to be happy unless you fight for what you want. And if that means fighting for someone like Luke, then you’re going to have to roll up your sleeves and get your hands dirty.”

Allie scowled. “I hardly think relationships require getting one’s hands dirty.”

Pippa’s trademark smile stole across her face once again. “You know what I meant. And if you ever change your mind, you know who to come to for ideas. I’ve got all the juicy details for how to get him to fall in love with you.”

Now, that was a little more tempting.

But Allie needed to rein it in. Dating Luke, whether she liked it or not, was a bad idea.

CHAPTER SIX

MID NOVEMBER

It was quiet in his little cottage away from the main house. On Friday nights, Luke tried to stay out of his brother's hair. Their family liked to do activities with the kids on the weekend and it just felt like too much of an intrusion to butt in when Brent and Jackie planned their evenings like tonight.

Molly sat at the kitchen table, her small pink tongue inching out from between her lips as she focused on her homework. Since the parent teacher conference a couple weeks ago, it had seemed like everything was going smoothly at school.

Allie hadn't emailed him or called to tell him that there was a problem, so he took that as a good sign his daughter was finally falling into line. He couldn't begin to explain the relief he felt knowing this.

Finally, he could focus his full efforts on his next venture. Harvesting season was just about at an end. They only had the root vegetables left. He'd been planning for a while now, never getting the nerve to tell his family. But that time might be here now. The thought of sitting down with his brother and pitching another idea caused his stomach to flip over on itself.

He had no idea how he was going to do it, but he'd make sure they knew he'd already dug in his heels and there was no going back.

Christmas trees.

The time was going far too fast these days. He watched it slip away and year after year he missed out on something he was

excited about. Last year he put his foot down—fronting his own money to get started. Between the farm and Molly, he didn't have much time just for himself.

Well, at least that was what his brother and sister-in-law said. He knew they'd like him to find a good woman to date, though they didn't really pressure him to do it. The problem was he already knew all the women in town and he wasn't really interested in getting to know any of them. Perhaps he was being a little biased, but he'd found the love of his life already. He didn't need anyone else. That was why this Christmas tree thing interested him so much.

He smiled as he sat across from Molly, their supper all put away. "What are you working on?"

She glanced up at him then turned her paper around. "I'm really trying to find the best way to write my signature. It's really dumb. I only have four letters and one of them goes in there twice. None of them are pretty."

He chuckled. "Hey, look at who you're talking to. I only have four letters in my name."

"Yeah, but the capital L is the most fun to make. And you can curl the letter e at the end. Your signature is really cool."

Luke lifted a brow, cocking his head a bit. "You really think my signature is cool?"

"Well, yeah. See? I wrote it already."

He craned his neck around to see her neat penmanship. She had drawn the letters with perfect accuracy which only made him laugh. "Sweetheart, that isn't my signature."

She frowned. "Yeah, it is. That's how you spell it and that's how the letters go."

Shaking his head, he grabbed the paper and scrawled his sloppy name right beneath it.

Molly's slack-jawed expression was priceless. She gaped up at him then poked the paper. "That's just a scribble. It's not a signature."

“I’m sorry to break it to you, kiddo, but those two things are one and the same.”

She scrunched up her nose and moved closer to the paper until her chin nearly touched the table. “But I can’t even read it.”

“Yep. That’s about the size of it.”

“Then why am I learning cursive?” Molly shoved the paper away. “It’s not going to do me any good anyhow.”

He pushed the paper back toward her. “Because there are several documents out there that will require you to learn how to read stuff like that to the best of your ability. Did you know there are several people out there who go to school just to learn how to read scribble cursive? They make lots of money, too.”

Molly glanced down at his signature again then peeked up at him. “Really?” The disbelief all but oozed from her tone.”

“Really. Really.”

She sighed and pulled the paper closer before picking up her pencil again. “Okay, fine. I’ll keep practicing. But I’m going to make my signature pretty. I don’t want a scribble one.”

He chuckled again, leaning back in his seat to observe her and the incredible focus she had for her work. Allie must have been proud of how well his daughter was doing now. “How’s school?”

She shot a look toward him then resumed her focus. “Good.”

“You know I want more than that.”

Molly sighed. “It’s *really* good.”

Luke reached out and took her pencil from her grasp, earning himself a disgruntled sound. “Okay, little miss. When I ask for an update at school, I expect you to give me *all* the details.”

His daughter let out another exaggerated sigh. “What do you want to know?”

“I don’t know. I guess I want to know what you learned. Did anything interesting happen during the week?” More

importantly, did she get in trouble? Was she behaving? But those questions could be weaseled out of her a little later.

Molly's eyes shined brighter and she sat a little taller in her seat. "We're getting ready for the Thanksgiving party. Everyone gets to bring treats or drinks or other kinds of stuff. I told Miss Patrick that you wanted to bring popcorn balls."

"Did you, now?"

She nodded. "And she said that sounded *lovely*."

"Sounds like this school year is working out as well as is to be expected."

Molly nodded again.

There was a lull in their conversation and Luke shifted in his seat. Now was as good a time as any. "And you're behaving? No more getting in trouble?"

It was small, like a brief twinkling of a star. Molly glanced up at him then away. She picked up her pencil and drew little circles in the corner of her paper. "Well, Miss Patrick made me and Sarah move our desks away from each other."

He stiffened. This didn't sound good. "What do you mean you had to move your desks away? Were you playing a game?"

Molly shook her head and didn't lift her gaze again.

"What happened? Were you two in trouble?"

She pressed her lips together tightly, still drawing those maddening circles.

"Molly," he said firmly. "You need to tell me what's going on so I can make sure I'm doing what I'm supposed to be doing. Was there a note? Something she sent home so I could read it?"

Another shake. "I don't think she was *really* mad. She didn't yell at us or nothin'. She just told us that we needed to focus on our work and stop giggling."

Stop giggling. "You weren't following the rules." It was a statement, one that finally made her lift her eyes to meet his.

“No, sir.”

He felt his frustration rise. Allie was supposed to let him know if there were problems that he could help her with. Hadn't they agreed to something like that? He could have sworn as much.

“Are you mad?” Molly asked timidly.

His gaze cut to hers and he forced a smile. “No, sweetie. I'm not mad. I might be disappointed, but I'm not mad.”

“So it's okay?”

“Now, I didn't say *that*.” He worked his jaw. This was a learning opportunity and if he didn't help her understand where she went wrong, these problems would continue to grow. “One day you're going to want to get a job. You'll get hired to do certain things. And do you know what you're going to get in exchange?”

“Money?”

“That's right. You're going to get paid to do work that someone needs you to do. School is pretty much the same. But instead of money, you get grades. And instead of friends you work with, you have friends at school. What do you suppose would happen if you got in someone's way of doing their job? Do you think they'd like it? Do you think your boss would like it?”

She shook her head slowly. “No.”

“Exactly. That's when either you or that other person would get fired. Right now you won't get fired from school, but you might get your desk moved. Either way, there are consequences to your actions. This week you learned something very important.”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

He got to his feet and pointed at her paper. “You keep working. I have to make a phone call.” Namely, he needed to speak with Allie about her lack of communication. If she continued to have problems with his daughter and refused to fill him in, then they would have bigger issues to work

through. He stopped long enough to make sure his daughter was working, then left the room.

He pulled out his phone and suddenly realized he didn't know if he had her current phone number. Back when they were in college, he did. But since then, she might have changed her number.

Luke groaned, throwing his head back. The impatient part of him didn't know if he could handle waiting until school started on Monday for her to answer an email. They needed to nip this in the bud if he wanted to make sure a change would occur.

Pippa. She'd have Allie's number. He'd get his sister to give it to him.

Finding her number in his contacts, he didn't even hesitate before dialing. But he probably should have. That only occurred to him too late.

"Hello?" Pippa's voice chirped on the other end.

"Hey, I need Allie's number."

There was a pause—a very pregnant pause. "I'm sorry, you want what?"

"Allie's number. I know you have it. Can you just text it to me?"

Her voice sounded like she'd added pure maple syrup to it. "Why?"

"What?"

"Why do you want Allie's number?"

Luke sighed. "It's not what you think. I need to talk to her about Molly."

"Then wait until Monday." Pippa's voice normalized. "Just because you knew her before she was Molly's teacher doesn't mean you can call her whenever you want and make demands. What happened to being friends first?"

Her words were like a dagger to the chest. She was right. He would need to stop treating her like a friend and more like an educational professional.

And he'd start after tonight.

"Just give it to me, Pippa."

Another silence.

"I'm not going to abuse it. I swear. I'll just touch base with her on something and that'll be it."

He knew he'd won this battle when he heard her sigh. "Fine. But if she tells me that you're abusing your connection to her, then I'm gonna—"

"You're gonna what?" He bit back a smile. "There's nothing much you can do, is there?"

"I don't know, but it'll be good."

"Are you going to send me that phone number or not?" Luke glanced at his watch. "I know it's a Friday night and all, but I'd prefer not to call too late."

His phone beeped and the line went dead.

"Pippa? Hello?"

Just as he pulled his phone from his ear to see if the call had been dropped, a text message came through.

PIPPA: Here's her number. Don't make me regret this.

LUKE GRINNED. He didn't bother texting her back, he just tapped the contact card that came through.

The phone rang a few times then she picked up.

"Hello?"

"Allie?"

"Yes..."

He strode toward the window and stared out at the darkness.

"Um, hey. It's Luke."

There was some stunned silence—or at least that's what it felt like.

Luke rubbed the back of his neck as heat emanated from it. He didn't know why he was embarrassed. He had every right to speak to his daughter's teacher—perhaps not on a Friday night though. "I wanted to talk to you about Molly."

"Oh."

Was that disappointment in her voice? Or maybe it was annoyance. His jaw tightened, suddenly feeling just as annoyed in himself. "She told me you split her up from her friend."

"Oh."

There was that word again. Boy, this was far more awkward than he had expected it to be. He cleared his throat again, forcing himself to get the courage needed to just say what he was going to say. "I wanted to talk to you about that because I feel like we didn't land on the same page at the last parent teacher conference. I just... I just wish you would have let me know."

"What? Are you telling me you want me to call you with every little thing that happens in my classroom?" There was definitely some defensiveness to her tone this time. "Is that why you called me on a Friday night?"

He cleared his throat again. "No... well, yeah... but..." Luke blew out a sharp breath. "I'm not explaining myself very well. Maybe we could meet in person to discuss my expectations for when Molly isn't following the rules."

There was more silence, then she finally said, "I can meet with you tomorrow."

He froze. Tomorrow? On a weekend? Before he could think it over, he nodded. "Sure. We can meet tomorrow if you want. Where are you thinking?"

"We could meet at that coffee shop in the town circle."

"The Cozy Cup?"

"Yeah. That one. How does ten-thirty sound?"

Luke nodded. "I'll be there."

They both hung up the phone about the same time, but Luke stared at his phone after the call. Was that strange? Or was Allie just too nice to tell him no? He'd have to figure out a way to show his appreciation for her willingness to meet with him.

CHAPTER SEVEN

ALLIE SPLASHED COOL WATER ON HER FACE THEN LIFTED HER gaze to the mirror above the sink. Water droplets fell from her face back into the sink and she blinked to shake off a few more before grabbing the hand towel to her side.

She patted her face dry then tossed the towel aside.

Allie couldn't get Pippa's words out of her head. All night long, she rolled restlessly from side to side trying to figure out what she was going to tell Luke to help him understand that Molly wasn't a problem.

Just because she had to separate the girls, didn't mean anything. This happened quite often when kids were playing around and not paying attention in class. And she wasn't all that happy about his comment that he wanted to share his expectations for how his daughter should be handled when she was misbehaving. She took the concerns of parents very seriously, but she also wouldn't let parents make decisions about the basics of managing a class.

And what was she even doing? Meeting with a parent on a Saturday wasn't the best idea, but meeting with her high school crush was an entirely different ballgame. The professionalism she needed to maintain was only getting harder. It was like the more frequent these little meetings got, the stronger her feelings became. It was like she was back in college again, wanting him to notice her and being thrilled each time he chose to spend time with her.

But this meeting wasn't about her. It was about Molly.

Allie needed to get her head out of the clouds and just accept that Luke wasn't interested. At best he saw her as a sister.

At worse... well, he didn't see her at all.

She picked up her cosmetics bag and rifled through it, trying to pick the perfect shade of eye shadow that would make her green eyes pop. Then berated herself for even thinking about that. What happened to resolving to let Luke just go on his merry way?

Allie stared at her naked face once more. It wasn't that she was trying to impress him. Had she been in love with him for over a decade? Sure.

But just because he was the one she was meeting with today, it didn't mean she couldn't look super good. And if he noticed? Then that was a win-win.

She couldn't look overdone, though.

A sigh burst from her chest and she put the makeup bag aside. Her thoughts were getting the better of her. Now she was second guessing herself.

Luke was the kind of guy she didn't think she'd ever stop loving. Why? Why was she so willing to throw her heart at someone who hadn't given her any kind of encouragement?

Placing both hands on the bathroom countertop, she closed her eyes briefly.

Because there was still a small part of her that thought there would always be a chance something could change. She was a fool and she knew it—an addict to the crumbs of attention she'd gotten when they were closer.

Scowling at herself, she let out a heavy breath then yanked the makeup bag toward her. Who cared if she still had an unresolved crush? And if he knew about it, he certainly didn't show it—a fact she didn't think she wanted to delve too deeply in.

She applied a pale plum shimmery eyeshadow over her lids with a darker shade of plum at the edges. Just a touch of dark liner to define her eyes but still appropriately casual for a

Saturday and some mascara finished off her eyes. She wore no base makeup but brushed on some bronzer. Stepping back, she was satisfied that she looked polished, but not over-done.

She fluffed her hair and took one last look in the mirror. Satisfied, she hurried to the kitchen and grabbed her purse from the creamy granite countertop. Heading out the door she let out a long breath and hoped for the best.

This was just like the other parent teacher conference. At least that was what she'd told herself over and over as she drove into town. He wanted details on his daughter. He wanted to reprimand her for not having an open line of communication. Then he'd leave and she'd go back to her usual day.

Allie pushed the door open and slipped inside the Cozy Cup. Her eyes immediately found Luke sitting at a window table. She could see part of his side, but most of his back faced her. On the table there were two coffee cups and what looked like a mug.

Her eyes darted around the room, half-expecting to see another woman heading toward him. Or Molly. There had to be a reason for the three cups because surely he wasn't going to drink all of that caffeine by himself.

She squared her shoulders and strode toward him then pulled out the chair and plopped down. It took everything in her to school her features and not melt as his dark brown eyes landed on her. Luke gave her a crooked grin and pushed one of the recyclable cups across the table. "It's a latte," he murmured. "Extra caramel."

Her eyes widened, darting down to the cup. "You got me a latte?"

Luke tilted his head, chagrined. "I thought I remembered it was what you liked, but that was a while ago. If you want me to get you something else—"

Wrapping her hands around the warm cup, she shook her head vehemently, hating just how thrilled she was over his thoughtfulness. "This is great." To prove her point, she

brought it to her lips and took a sip. Then her eyes landed on the object she thought had been a mug.

She'd been right, but not entirely so.

The ceramic mug had the words, *Being a teacher is easy*, in big, bold letters. Beneath that statement the words continued but smaller. She cocked her head slightly, her eyes narrowing as she read the rest out loud. "It's like riding a bike. Except the bike is on fire. You're on fire. Everything... is... on... fire." Her eyes lifted to Luke and she smirked. "Nice mug."

Luke jumped and reached for the mug she only now realized was filled with pens. He shoved the mug at her, a cheesy grin on his face. "These are for you."

Allie stared at the mug. "Pens," she said blankly.

"You know, because of the chipmunk who teaches down the hall from you?"

She blinked and a sharp laugh escaped her lips. "You mean Kate—the teacher who steals all my pens."

He nodded. "Exactly."

If the latte was thoughtful, this mug with its variety of pens took the cake. She laughed again. "Thank you, this is really sweet."

"Sweet enough to make you forgive me for overstepping last night?"

Just like that, the warm fuzzy feeling evaporated. Luke was sweet, but he was sweet to everyone. This wasn't because he liked her, it was because he felt guilty.

Allie sighed. "Yeah, I guess. But you know what? You really don't have to be worried about Molly. She's not really causing any trouble. Honestly, I think the problem is that she's not being challenged enough. Kids get that way, you know. When tasks are too easy, they find other ways to fill their time. And sometimes grades will slip because they're not interested." She took another sip of her latte and set a firm gaze on Luke. "Maybe what needs to happen is some additional work. I could see what I can do about getting her an extra workbook. Or you

might look into some chapter books she could read when she's done with her homework."

"That's actually not a bad idea," Luke mused. "I never thought of that."

"Molly is very bright. She does need to be reading at home—she truly does love to read. Don't wait for her to ask about that. Every assignment she turns in rarely has mistakes—at least since we had our first meeting. Whatever talk you had with her seemed to help greatly."

Luke seemed pleased with that statement, his warm smile lighting a fire within her once more. Allie looked away, setting her focus on her cup in her hands.

"You know," she murmured, "I really appreciate how involved you are. But if I were to make a suggestion..." She lifted her head to meet his gaze, not surprised to see him hanging on her every word. "Let her fail."

His head reared back. "Isn't that counterintuitive? I send her to school to succeed."

"Of course you do. You want her to succeed, but failing can make her stronger. Everyone has to learn what it's like to fail."

Luke's brows furrowed. "I'm sorry, but that's not making much sense."

"Okay, think of it this way. You're at the gym. You have a spotter, right?"

"Sure."

"What if every time you got out the weights, your spotter held ten percent of that weight for you? Yes, over time you'd still put on more muscle and you'd improve, but one day your spotter changes and that one doesn't do the same thing. You won't be prepared to handle the additional ten percent when it's a percentage of a higher number. The bar might not kill you, but you could be seriously hurt."

Luke frowned but she could see the wheels turning in his head.

"Molly needs to know her own limitations. If we're there constantly trying to prevent her failing, she can't learn from it."

She can't grow and adjust for future failures. Right now, you're available. You're here to pull her to her feet. When she goes to college? Who will be there to catch her then?"

This time he nodded. "I guess you're right."

She smiled, reaching across the table to touch his hand but then stopped herself and withdrew. "We'll keep an eye on her. She'll be fine." Allie glanced around the coffee shop, then moved to gather her things, "If that's everything—"

"Actually, I was thinking about getting a cookie or something. Would you like to split one? They're pretty big here."

Allie hesitated. More time with him meant more problems.

And yet she couldn't seem to get the strength to walk away. "Yeah, okay." Her eyes followed him as he hurried toward the display of the oversized cookies, purchased one, and returned.

With one swift movement, he broke the cookie in half and held it out to her. She took a nibble, glancing at him once or twice as she tried to deduce what this meant. Probably nothing.

"Do you remember when we were teenagers how I told you about farming at my family's ranch?"

She nodded.

"You were the only one who told me to go for it. Not even my dad approved."

"I thought Brent was for it," she said thoughtfully.

"Oh yeah. Him too." Luke shifted in his seat, his expression brightening with an excitement she recalled all too well. He leaned forward and his voice lowered. "I'm trying something new."

"Really?"

He shifted even closer. "It's crazy. I'm sorta winging it and I haven't told Brent about it yet."

But he was telling her—the girl he passed up for someone else. She swallowed that bitter pill and forced a smile. "What is it?"

“Christmas trees.” He was practically bursting from the seams, and it was hard not to be infected by it. “I set aside some money last year and used some land we hadn’t allocated to anything yet so I can get them started growing. It’s not much, but it’s a start.”

“That sounds amazing. And Christmas trees! Yay!”

“Do you really think so? It happened so fast. But it just felt... right, you know? Growing my business is always on my mind and this was an opportunity I couldn’t walk away from.”

“Doesn’t it take a long time to grow them? How can you sell them this year if they’re not mature enough?” Allie tilted her head and squinted.

“Yeah, the ones I planted aren’t ready yet. I heard about an organic farm that’s failing. They wanted to sell their inventory because they couldn’t afford to keep their place going so I bought it.” Luke shrugged. “I helped them while taking a shot to learn about the sales part before I get ready with my own.”

“That’s interesting. I’m not sure I would have thought of that. Good for you, Luke.” She smiled and her eyes twinkled. “But doesn’t it take a while for trees to grow big enough?”

“It does take several years. I know mine won’t be ready right away so I agreed to fund the other farm until mine are ready. Now that I’m a partner in their business, I’ll probably offer those trees here for a while. It’s a work in progress for sure.”

“Impressive. Isn’t that what they call a win-win?”

He laughed and nodded. “It is.”

“So what you said about growth, that’s how I feel about teaching,” she offered him a reassuring smile. “I want to always be learning more so I can teach more. And it’s the right thing for me. When you know, you know.”

“Yeah, I guess so.” His smile was so bright he could have lit one of his new Christmas trees with it. Luke chuckled nervously and took a bite out of his cookie. “I just have to figure out how to tell Brent because with Thanksgiving coming up, I have a ton more to do than I realized.”

“Like what?”

“Build a stand, find some volunteers, get supplies to sell hot chocolate and cookies—”

“Volunteers? Don’t you mean employees?”

Luke shook his head. “I want to donate everything to the local children’s hospital this year. I don’t know if it will take off or anything. Before I figure out if it’s actually viable as a business, I’d rather not have to pay any extra employees.”

“I love that idea!” She moved to the edge of her seat. “Where are you going to set up your stand?” Her eyes widened and she made a small squeaky sound. “What if you asked about setting it up in the square? You could make signs and let people know that it’s for charity.” She gasped. “No, let the kids in my class practice their penmanship. They can make the signs for you.”

“The signs are a great idea! I know Molly will get a kick out of doing something like that. As for the square, I think we’re going to stick with selling at my farm. I’ve got all the specs ready for a micro farmer’s market area for my remaining produce and the trees.” He beamed at her. “I don’t think there’ll be room on the square anyway. The Santa’s Village takes up a ton of space and the kids will be running wild there.”

“Yeah, good idea to avoid that area to sell trees.”

They stared at each other for what felt like an eternity. It was as if the coffee shop was a distant memory. The chatter and voices of the other patrons faded into the background and she could pretend this was the moment Luke fell in love with her.

He got to his feet first and she mirrored his movements.

“Thank you so much, Allie. I know I haven’t exactly been the easiest... parent to work with.”

“Oh, you’re fine,” her voice squeaked again, causing her to clear her throat. “You’re fine. Just don’t let it happen again,” she teased.

Luke chuckled and pulled her in for an unexpected hug. His strong arms wrapped around her shoulders, pulling her close

against him. He smelled of peppermint and coffee—a dangerous combination when mixed with the undertones of his pine aftershave.

She turned her head slightly, toward his neck and took in a deep breath. Her eyes fluttered closed and she allowed herself to hug him back. This was not the first time he'd hugged her, but it was the first time since he'd dated and then married Shellie.

His shoulder muscles flexed beneath her touch and just like that, he put a good two feet between them. The cool air washed over her, making her feel even more flushed if possible. Luke placed his hands on her shoulders, keeping her at arm's length as he grinned at her. "Thanks again, Allie. You don't know just how much this means to me." He patted her shoulders once more then grabbed his coffee before giving her a little wave and escaping out the front door.

Yeah, she likely didn't have a single clue about how much it had meant to him to spend time with her.

CHAPTER EIGHT

LUKE WAS STILL ON A HIGH BY SUNDAY WHEN HE WAS SEATED with his family for supper. Talking with Allie had given him the surge of confidence he'd needed to tell Brent and Jackie about this new idea.

That talk had also made him realize just how encouraging she'd always been with him. She was the kind of person he knew he could count on for support. The more he'd thought about it, the more he'd realized that was how it had always been.

In fact, he couldn't recall a single time of his life when Allie wasn't there to cheer him on.

And he'd let that friendship fizzle out. He overlooked her as Pippa's friend when she really was a friend of the family. A friend to all of them.

Guilt attempted to take over the buzz of excitement he had going for himself, and he had to push it away so he could tell his family what was going on.

Luke focused on his brother and sister-in-law as he clinked his knife against the glass in his other hand. They glanced toward him, but his brother was the only one with a smirk.

"You have an announcement to make or something?"

"Actually, I do." Luke put his glass and the knife back on the table. "I wanted to let you guys know that I will be busy this holiday season with something new."

The smile faded from Brent's face but he didn't look upset. That was a good sign.

Luke's stomach twisted and churned. He'd been through a similar conversation with his dad when he'd told them about the farming idea. With his father passed, he didn't have the same kind of nerves going on, but it was still difficult to find the words he was looking for.

"Christmas trees," he finally blurted.

Brent squinted at him. "Christmas trees? What do you mean?"

"Yeah. I invested in an organic tree farm. It's small, just north and almost to the state line. They were struggling, so I was able to help us both out. I've been thinking about this for a while... So, um, I'm going to sell them on the farm and donate the profits to the children's hospital. If everything turns out the way I think it will, then I'll do it next year, but turn it into a business venture with only a percentage going to charity."

His brother and sister-in-law exchanged looks, but Luke had zero clue what they might be thinking.

"I know this might be a leap—"

"Organic trees?" Brent steepled his fingers. "Will you be planting some here as well? I can't imagine getting them shipped in every year would be a viable option."

"This tree farm is different. They plant them in pots so that the people who buy them can replant them. It's really different. No cutting involved." Luke's nerves were already getting the better of him. He shifted in his seat and looked away.

"But is that sustainable?" Brent wouldn't look away from him and Luke really wished he would.

Man, it would have been nice if Allie were here for this conversation.

Strange that his thoughts went immediately to her. He wasn't wrong. Having Allie here probably would have helped the unease that continued to grow. She would have been able to explain it better than him.

“I think it’s very sustainable. And I guess I didn’t tell you that I planted several acres last year. In that area by the southeast fence that we never use. It’s on the side of my farm.” Luke grimaced as he shared more of his idea that was already set in motion.

“You did fail to mention that.”

“Anyway, the organic farm is also sending wreaths and fresh garland. I’m not sure how it will go, so this year will be all about the charity. If it doesn’t pan out, then…” He shrugged. If it didn’t work out, he was only out the money he’d invested. And he’d only invested his own money—none of the ranch funds were used for this venture. “Of course I’ll advertise a lot. I don’t want to soil our family name with an experiment that you didn’t know—”

“I think it’s a great idea,” Jackie jumped in. “Don’t you, Brent?”

His brother looked less convinced. He rubbed his jaw as he seemed to be considering everything Luke had said. Then he glanced toward his wife and nodded. “I don’t know of anyone locally who sells fresh trees. Usually, we get some from a guy who’s a few towns over. It’s probably one of the smartest ideas you’ve had so far.”

Luke exhaled and laughed. “You like it?”

“I like it,” Brent confirmed. “And I think you’re going to be surprised at how well it’s going to do. Personally, I would have liked it if you would have clued me in from the beginning. I would have shared the investment cost with you.”

A smile spread across Luke’s face. “Really?”

Another nod from Brent and he laughed. “You really have to start being more confident in these family meetings. We’re going to start wondering if your ideas are actually good ones.”

Jackie whacked him in the arm. “Be nice. You know how hard it was for him to get your father’s approval. He died still arguing about how the farm wasn’t a good idea.”

Luke’s focus bounced from Jackie to Brent and back. He wasn’t aware that his life had become pillow talk for these

two.

Well, right now it didn't matter. There was still so much to do in order to prepare for the arrival of the trees next week. Thanksgiving weekend was prime time for selling Christmas trees. "Allie is going to help with the stand and some signs so we can set up at the little market area by my office."

That statement seemed to capture their interest. "Allie?" Jackie murmured. "As in Molly's teacher?"

"Yeah. She wanted to volunteer her students for the sake of the charity."

Jackie looked over at Brent but didn't comment on why that confession surprised her. "That's nice of her."

"I know, right?" Luke got up from the table and gathered his dishes. "I was surprised too."

"I'm not," Brent muttered.

Luke shot him a strange look. He had to have misheard his brother, but he wasn't willing to ask him to repeat himself. At the moment, all he could think about was Allie and telling her how well his conversation with his family had gone.

Calling her seemed so... impersonal.

No, he wanted to share this information in person.

Only there was one problem.

He didn't have her address.



"WHAT DO you mean you want her address?" Pippa demanded, her arms crossed. She glanced to her side to watch a waitress take a few plates then stopped them with her hand. "Wait. You're forgetting the garnish." She snatched something green and placed it atop the dish the waitress was holding before turning back to him.

The restaurant was in full swing despite being a Sunday evening. Dishes clattered, chefs talked over each other, the

kitchen was in uproar. But that didn't detract from the absolute delectable smells emanating from the pots and pans simmering on the commercial stoves.

Pippa gave him a dark look. What was the problem? He just wanted to visit his friend and tell her how things were going. Yes, he'd seen her yesterday, but he had this need to share his good news and there was no one better than Allie.

"I wanted to pay her a visit and... thank her for meeting with me."

His sister lifted a brow. "She *met* with you? As in another parent teacher conference thing? Geez, Luke this is going too far. You're taking advantage of her."

He held up his hands and took a step back. "I just wanted to clear the air. I think I offended her." The way he'd practically accused her of keeping things from him—his tone of voice—he was certain she wasn't thrilled about how their last conversation had gone.

"You *think*?" Pippa dragged her hand down her face and let out a groan. "You can't be this dumb."

"What are you talking about?"

She shot a steely stare at him. "Okay, maybe you are this dumb. Why do you think Allie isn't married?"

Luke didn't know what he was expecting her to say next but it wasn't that. He stilled and his hands dropped listlessly to his sides. "How would I know? She's your friend. Maybe it's for the same reasons you're not married."

Pippa snorted. "I'm like you. I'm a workaholic who doesn't seem to care about finding someone to spend the rest of my life with. Maybe we got it from Dad."

"Hey," he sputtered, "that's not fair. I got married."

"Yeah, and then she died when Molly was born. It's been *nine years*. When are you going to find someone new?"

His back straightened and his face flushed. "I don't need to find someone new."

“Yeah, you do. If not for yourself, then for Molly. For heaven’s sake, Luke. You can’t live your life alone. Neither one of us should.”

Now he was flustered and confused. “What does any of this have to do with asking for Allie’s address? Maybe I’m just rekindling a friendship we used to have.”

“Friendships don’t just fade away after you get married, Luke.” The disdain in her voice only increased the guilt he was feeling. She moved closer to him, her eyes narrowed. “Think about it, Luke. Think really hard. You can’t tell me you haven’t seen it. We all have.”

“Seen... what.”

She groaned again and her eyes flashed. “Sometimes I really want to slap some sense into you. Allie likes you. She always has.”

He let this information wash over him, numbing him.

“Somewhere in that pea-sized brain of yours, you have to admit you knew. I mean, the signs are all there. The way she spent so much time at our house when we were teenagers. How she tagged along for every activity you wanted to do. Heck, she even followed you to the college of your choice.”

Luke lost the feeling in his legs. His sister was right. All the evidence was there from the very first day and somehow he’d made himself ignorant to it. No wonder Pippa was so upset about him asking for her number so he could talk about Molly.

Just like that he was accosted by memories that once held no meaning. Allie was generous, bright, and bubbly. She always had a smile and she was so willing to help others. She’d probably give the shirt off her back if she thought it would help.

“Yeah. There it is. See? Every single moment you spend with her has got to be torture.”

He huffed. “I doubt that.”

“I mean it, Luke. Someone doesn’t hold onto a crush that long unless it runs deep. So, no. I’m not going to give you her

address. You're just going to have to ask for it yourself. But be aware you're heading out into treacherous waters. Don't rekindle the friendship you had if you have no intention of giving her a fair shot."

"Don't be ridiculous," he muttered, though as he said it he knew in his core that she was right. The strange thing was that the harder he thought about Allie, the more he wanted to see her. He needed to see for himself.

Hadn't he admitted to himself that Allie was a catch? The side of him that wondered if he should find someone to spend his life with could see himself with her. That was crazy, wasn't it? Was he just playing into Pippa's confession?

His mind turned to when they'd been at the coffee shop yesterday and he'd given her a hug. There had been a strange connection then, too. It was like a spark of electricity had bound them together for just a moment and at the time he'd brushed it off.

"I know that look." Pippa's voice dragged him to the present again.

"What look?"

"Don't do it, Luke. Just don't."

"I'm not doing anything." He attempted to bite back a smile but he failed miserably.

"Luke," she warned, "seriously."

He shrugged. "It's like you said. I'll call her instead." He headed out of the kitchen through the door, ignoring her calls. If he'd been blind to Allie all this time, what could it hurt for him to just... notice a little more?

His chest tightened and a thrill shot through him—something he hadn't expected would ever happen after losing Shellie. Luke stopped short of his car as he stared at the phone that was now in his hand.

What was he thinking? What did this say about him that he'd be so willing to give a relationship a chance when he'd avoided one for so long? He couldn't visit Allie—and forget

about calling her. Everything needed to remain status quo. Even if he took the initiative to see where things might go with her, he'd always wonder if he did so for all the wrong reasons.

Disappointment drowned him for no other reason than because he had really wanted to see her tonight. He'd wanted to experience her sunny outlook and her enthusiasm. He wanted to drink it all in and just spend some time with her.

Now, that all felt wrong.

Luke sighed and shoved the phone back in his pocket. He'd get to see her soon enough when she started to help him with his tree stand. That would have to be soon enough.

He climbed into his truck and started up the engine. This was a wasted trip and one that left him feeling ten times worse than when he'd shown up. He didn't even get a chance to tell Pippa about his tree stand which was really the main reason for coming.

Maybe he deserved this feeling of loneliness. It was like Pippa had said. They were the same. They worked and worked until they didn't see anything or anyone. And he had seen nothing wrong with it.

Until now.

Now, he wanted a connection. He wanted a connection with the one person he didn't deserve.

CHAPTER NINE

ALLIE KNOCKED ON THE DOOR THAT LED TO LUKE'S OFFICE. The small building was farther away from the house than she would have expected, but it made sense. From what Pippa had said a few years ago, he'd had it built just for this business and now he didn't have to go to town to haggle over prices with potential buyers.

It was getting late and being out in the fields with the sun going down sooner made her uneasy. She should have just called him rather than visiting his house and now this office first.

Straightening her shoulders, she plastered a smile on her face. She'd offered to help him and that was what she was going to do. There was a reason she was stopping by tonight and it wasn't just so she could make goo-goo eyes at him.

The flyer in her hand was proof of that.

At least she hoped it would be enough proof.

What was she doing? She should have called.

Allie turned away from the door just as it opened.

"Allie? What are you doing here?"

The hairs on the back of her neck stood on end. Just hearing his voice was enough to set her nerves on fire. Slowly, she turned around, an impish grin on her face. "I wanted to talk to you about something."

His eyes were guarded. In fact the way he was looking at her was different than any way he'd stared at her before. The

difference wouldn't have been noticed by anyone but herself—and that was because she'd spent her whole life studying him.

Allie swallowed hard and lifted the flyer. "I wanted to help you with some advertising ideas. I was thinking after our meeting that you might need some tips on spreading the word. Before I changed my major—"

"You were going to go into marketing, I remember."

She blinked. Then her smile widened. "I can't believe you remember that."

"Lately, I've been remembering a lot of things."

"Hmm?"

Luke shook his head. "Nothing. It's... nothing." He gestured for her to enter his office. "I'd be happy to get any and all the help you are willing to offer." The door shut behind her and suddenly the room shrunk to half its size.

She stood frozen, facing his desk as his footsteps clipped against the floor toward her then around her. Luke moved in front of her and leaned against his desk with his arms folded. "Okay, so what do you have for me?"

Allie handed him the mockup she'd put together but due to her shaking hands it probably looked like she shoved it at him like it was a hot potato.

By the time he got his hands on it, the paper was slightly wrinkled. Luke's eyes swept over the information she'd put together, rubbing his jaw as he did so. He hated it. She could feel it in her bones. She should have done something different.

Heck, she shouldn't have come at all.

Already she could feel the blush filling her face as she stood before him feeling more vulnerable than she'd had in ages.

Then he turned, put the flyer on the desk and scrawled a few things on it before handing it back. "I think it's great. There are just a few minor changes—details that I want on there."

She took the paper, her finger brushing against his and her breath escaped her. Allie didn't even bother looking at what

he'd written. "I'll make the adjustments and get these printed for you."

"You don't have to do that. I can get them printed. I just don't know how we'll distribute them." He was still too close for comfort—but that was probably due to the way his gaze seemed to be peeling back all the layers of protection she'd placed around herself. It was unnerving at best.

She had to be imagining things. Even still, she took a step backward. "I have you covered on that. I was thinking about enlisting some of the high school students. They could put them on cars in parking lots and take them around to the businesses. We just need to know how many you need. We'd coordinate with the high school teachers." Allie tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. "I think they'd be willing to do it for free since this is for charity. I'm sure the teachers would be happy to give extra credit to their students in exchange for volunteering."

"If that could work out it would be great." His voice was soft, almost alluring in a way she'd never heard him speak to her before. It was putting her head through a tailspin.

Yes, she was definitely losing it. She'd gotten to the point where she'd made her delusions a reality. "Anyway, that's all I wanted to show you." It would be better to get out of there before she put her foot in her mouth.

He took a sudden step toward her and she gasped but thankfully, he didn't seem to notice. "Do you mind staying for a little while? I'd love to talk to you about some of the other ways to market this." He gestured toward the flyer. "Maybe there are some variations from your design that we can use in other ways?"

Allie glanced down at the flyer again then lifted her gaze to Luke. It would be dangerous to stay. She knew that already. But the only one she'd be hurting was herself. Finally, she nodded and offered a small smile. "Sure. I've got a little bit of time. But you need to be aware that my degree is in education. I didn't even take any business classes, let alone marketing. So you might get what you pay for here."

His laugh filled the room and she felt her heart soar. She'd never thought of herself as funny, but here he was laughing loudly at something she'd said.

Over the next half hour, they'd moved from standing to sitting on the floor with the chairs pushed aside and various pages strewn out before them. Her walls melted away as time turned backward and they became friends again. Laughter, jokes, and past memories were shared between them. There were no expectations to where this night would go.

It was a whole new world.

Luke pointed to one of the drawings she'd sketched out. "I really like this. Do you think I could commission a logo?"

Her lashes fluttered as she stared at him in surprise. "You want to use one of my drawings as a logo?"

"Why wouldn't I?" He picked up the picture and flicked it with his fingertips. "This one is really good." His gaze captured hers, diving deeper beneath the surface. She wasn't mistaken. He really was staring at her like she'd always hoped he would. "You're amazing, Allie. All the stuff you can do, it's just... wow."

His hushed voice combined with the late hour gave her a wave of goosebumps. "It's really nothing," she murmured. "It's a doodle. That's all."

"No, it's more than that. You really are talented." He put the paper down with the others and pointed to some of the other ideas she'd jotted down. "You're looking at this in a way I never could. It's like you have the ability to zoom out and see the bigger picture when I've just been..."

"Unable to see the forest for the trees?"

His eyes jumped up to meet hers. "Yeah. Exactly that. In every way possible." And then he laughed again. It was music to her ears that her silly pun had hit him just like she'd hoped it would.

A lump formed in her throat and she glanced away. The goosebumps weren't leaving any time soon. She felt like they had been transported back to when she was in high school and

they were just two teenagers talking about their math assignment—only it was all just code words about who liked who.

Luke shifted where he sat letting the silence go on longer than was reasonable. This was her cue. She should take her leave before anything got awkward. But before she could make a move, he spoke again. “Has that ever happened to you?”

Her mouth was dry. It was like she’d been dropped in the middle of the desert with nothing more than a tablespoon of water. “Has what ever happened to me?” she whispered.

“That you became so focused on something you missed out on the bigger picture?” His brows lifted only so much that he could meet her gaze. “Like you spent all this time thinking you needed to do something or be something that you didn’t see what was in front of you.”

Allie shook her head. A strangled laugh escaped and she was embarrassed that she almost had to cough her head off were it not for the peppermints she had stashed in her pocket. The last thing she wanted to do was ruin a good moment of conversation by getting choked. “I mean, yeah. Of course. Everyone does.”

“Really? Because the way I remember it, you’ve always had a good understanding of where you wanted to go in life. You’ve always known the path you were going to take.”

She tore her gaze away, trying to find her words. “Yeah, well, that’s not the same thing as what you’re describing.” Allie fidgeted. This conversation had turned more intimate than she’d been prepared for. “There... are times... when I feel... like I want something different. Sometimes I realize I’m where I am because I’m just stubborn.”

He chuckled, drawing her eyes toward him. “You? Stubborn?”

“I mean it,” she laughed in spite of herself. “I knew I wanted to be a teacher, but I also was creative. I thought marketing would be a way to blend the two. But that didn’t turn out to like I thought it would.”

“Seems like it takes creativity to inspire kids.” Luke raised his eyebrows making his statement feel like a question.

“It does in a way. And I guess my stubborn side made sure I went back to what I always knew was really right for me.” Her face brightened. “And I’m not sorry about that.”

“You shouldn’t be. You influence lives. That’s important.”

“It is. But no one gets through this life without realizing they made mistakes and wished they’d been able to change things. It’s like they say... hindsight is twenty-twenty.” If she could have gone back in time, she might have never introduced Luke to Shellie. But then he wouldn’t have had met the love of his life. He wouldn’t have his daughter. She would never wish that on him.

Luke’s brows furrowed. “Like what?”

She froze. It was as if he’d read her thoughts. “What?”

“What do you have to regret?”

Immediately, her face blossomed with heat. There was no way she could use the example that had come into her head. He’d think she was a stalker or obsessed with him.

But wasn’t she?

Allie sighed heavily. “There have been too many to count, Luke. Just know that people aren’t perfect. We all make choices that we wish we could take back. It’s part of being human.”

“Yeah, I suppose you’re right.”

He turned his focus to the papers on the floor then pushed one toward her. “Do you ever wish you’d stayed in marketing?”

“Nope.” Her answer was quick and firm. That was one thing she knew she’d done right. “Being a teacher is one of the best things that has ever happened to me.”

Luke gave her a funny look then he laughed. “Forgive me, I have a hard time believing that.”

“It’s true,” she laughed with him. “I firmly believe teaching is my calling. I don’t know how to explain it, but... it just

resonates with me. I get to touch so many lives and help those kids build a firmer foundation in their self-confidence. You'll never know just how amazing it is to watch their eyes light up with excitement when they've finally mastered something that has been a struggle since day one." Allie shook her head. "There's truly nothing like it."

When she glanced up, she was surprised to find him staring at her again with that look from before. Her stomach knotted, twisting and churning with the same old desire. What she wouldn't give for the confidence to throw caution to the wind and just kiss him, right here, right now.

One taste, one touch. That was all she'd ever wanted. Maybe then the age-long spell would be broken. It would either become her best or her worst memory. She lost track of how long their eyes were locked, finally breaking the bond when a stiff breeze pushed against the small building outside. The structure creaked and she blinked.

"I'm sorry, I don't want to wear out my welcome." Her heart fluttered madly against her chest as if escaping was the only cure for the heat that had burst to life deep in her stomach. Allie swept the pages into a pile and scrambled to her feet. "Let me draw up a few other options for that logo idea and then you can decide based on that."

She glanced at the clock on the wall and her jaw nearly dropped to the floor. It was almost midnight! How had she let time slip away so fast? She flashed Luke a smile and hurried toward the door, stopping only when his hand wrapped around her upper arm.

"Allie—wait."

His touch was warm and it set off a chain reaction to the rest of her body. Blood boiled. Goosebumps rippled. Stomach flipped. And her heart was about to go kaput. Allie allowed herself to meet his eyes, praying that she would leave this building with her heart unscathed.

Luke's eyes studied her, shifting back and forth. His jawline rigid as was the rest of his body. He shifted ever so slightly closer until he blocked her path all together.

“What did you need?” she rasped.

“I...” He pressed his lips together firmly then shook his head. “You have no idea how much your help and support has made this experience better.” He released her arm but didn’t pull away. “Thank you so much for stopping by. You’re just... incredible.”

Her breathing hitched in her chest and before she knew what was happening, she threw her arms around his neck, crushing the pages in her hands. Her lips captured his, stealing what little degree of happiness she knew she’d been missing all these years.

Luke was stiff at first, but before she knew it, his hands slipped around her waist and he pulled her tight against his chest. Her breathing grew more shallow, more frantic as she allowed herself to get lost in his touch—his smell.

This kiss was everything she had ever dreamed it would be. Tender and tentative while also scintillatingly passionate.

And it was wrong.

So wrong on so many levels.

Allie gasped as she tore away from him, refusing to meet his gaze as she muttered, “Sorry.” Before he had a chance to utter a single word, she’d blown through the door and out into the darkness. The cool air stung and nipped at her cheeks compared to the flames that had burst between herself and Luke while inside his office.

She wouldn’t stop running until she got to her car, and once there, she’d dive inside. It was the only place that could protect her from all the terrible decisions she’d made tonight.

Letting her heart lead her tonight had been the first downfall of the evening. Allowing it to go rogue at the last minute destroyed any shot she had at keeping things... normal between them.

Allie covered her face with both of her hands, willing the embarrassment to disappear but to no avail. The worst part was that she’d have to see him again and again. Not only

because she taught his daughter, but because she'd volunteered.

When would her heart finally get the hint? Luke wasn't interested in her. He never would be. And now he was going to treat her different all because she couldn't keep her hands to herself.

CHAPTER TEN

FROM THE MOMENT ALLIE LEFT LUKE'S OFFICE, HE WAS frozen. He stared at the closed door, unsure of what to do next.

Could he be in shock after a kiss?

Certainly no one would fault him for being in shock after a kiss like *that*.

If he was capable of having steam come from his ears, this kiss would have done it.

Only one thought came to mind. He had to go after her.

He lurched forward, stumbling, trying to catch his footing until he reached the door and yanked it open. Hopefully it wasn't too late. Depending on how fast she was, he might still have a chance.

Across the parking lot from where he sold most of his harvest, he could see her fumbling with the keys. Luke sprinted toward her, and if it was possible, his heart did the same. He couldn't breathe. His lungs burned, but all he knew was that this couldn't be the way it ended. They had to talk about this.

His palms landed hard on the hood of her car, causing her to jump and drop her keys to the ground. Allie's head snapped up and she stared at him with wide, terrified eyes. "Luke," she said breathlessly.

"Don't go," he wheezed.

"Luke, I'm sorry, I—"

“Don’t...” he gulped in some air, “go.” He moved around the front of the car and leaned down to swipe the keys from the ground before she had a chance to make her escape. “You can’t just walk away after doing something like that.”

She scowled at him and lunged for her keys. “It was a mistake.”

“Was it?” he demanded. He couldn’t tell her that Pippa had ratted her out, but maybe it was time to clear the air anyway.

“Yes.” Her voice was unyielding. “It was a mistake.”

Luke shifted his weight from one foot to the other. His eyes darted away as he tried to come up with an excuse good enough to keep her talking. Everything felt like it had been tipped on its side. He was dizzy but he couldn’t figure out if it was from the kiss, the physical exertion from chasing after her, or the whole situation all together. “Then... why?” He hated how desperate his words made him sound. But more than that, he was furious for allowing himself to be put in this position in the first place.

Allie didn’t respond except to reach for her keys again.

“Allie,” he whispered, holding the keys out of reach. “Talk to me.”

She let out a bark of laughter. “No thanks.”

“You can’t just—”

“Oh yes I can.” She motioned around them. “It’s the middle of the night, Luke. I have school in the morning and you have to work. I have to go.” This time instead of trying to grab her keys, she simply held out her hand. “Just let me go,” she pled with him.

What else could he do? He wasn’t about to throw her over his shoulder and march back into his office to force a confession out of her. And who did he have to blame but himself at this point? She’d been holding in these feelings for the better part of their friendship and he’d done nothing.

Nothing.

He dropped the keys into her hand and stepped back as she successfully put the key into the car door and unlocked it. She shot one last glance in his direction before climbing inside and starting the engine. Her lights flashed briefly when she turned the corner then disappeared into the night.

Luke was still reeling from the way her touch had made him feel and it wasn't until a good ten minutes later he realized he'd made a grave mistake in letting her go without admitting to his own growing affection for her. At some point he found himself back in his office, not knowing how he came to be there.

He stumbled over to a chair and took a seat, giving himself a chance to breathe and make sense of not only what had happened but what had led up to this moment.

Allie had been like a sister—or a friend all through their formative years. Objectively, he knew she was beautiful—inside and out. She was driven and she'd always known what she wanted. That was a trait she shared with Shellie.

Both of them had known what they wanted and just gone for it. But that was where the similarities ended. Shellie had blonde hair and blue eyes while Allie had always been a passionate red-head with green eyes that flashed whenever she was vehement about something.

Shellie was soft spoken while Allie wasn't afraid to tell people how she felt.

He squeezed his eyes shut and raked a frustrated hand through his hair. What was he doing? Comparing Allie to Shellie? There was no comparison. They weren't the same. No two people were, and it wasn't fair to Allie to do such a thing.

Luke got to his feet and got ready to lock up. Thankfully, Jackie had offered to put Molly to bed and stay with her while he'd been preparing for selling the Christmas trees. She was probably wondering where he was right about now, but knowing her, she was asleep on his couch, blissfully unaware he'd lost track of time with Allie.

Allie's face filled his thoughts, spreading like a glittery mist and leaving her mark everywhere. He paused what he was doing, his heart hammering far faster than was normal. He'd seen her every week at church. He'd waved to her from the pick-up line at school. Heaven knew he heard about how wonderful she was every single day—if not from Molly, from Pippa.

And now he hated himself even more for being so blind to her.

What was he supposed to do now?

He could climb into his truck and chase after her, but something told him that outcome would be similar to the one that had just taken place. He could call her, but confessing anything over the phone wasn't the same.

Maybe it was time to follow his instincts and just let the whole thing blow over. He could let her pretend it never happened. He could vow to never bring it up again.

But could he ever forget?

No. He'd never forget what it felt like to hold Allie in such an intimate way. She'd lit a fire of longing within him.

His realizations only got worse after that. He wasn't in the right headspace to start a relationship right now. He didn't need the drama and he didn't need the distraction. The complications alone with attempting to date Allie would continue to pile up.

Luke stepped outside into the cool evening air and leaned against the door to his office space. He glanced up at the stars overhead wishing the answer was easier to figure out.

He couldn't just let her go on thinking that he didn't care about her, either.

He *did* care.

She was a friend. She might even have the potential to be more than that, but he knew better than to put either of them in that kind of position.

Once again, he found himself reeling from the pure and utter disappointment that Allie couldn't be his. At least not yet. He

had to figure out what was going on in his head and his heart first.



OVER THE NEXT few days Luke probably picked up his phone to call or text Allie a thousand times. But each time, he simply couldn't do it. What was he supposed to say to her at this point?

He wanted to kiss her again?

That sounded worse every time he said it out loud.

There was no way to explain why he hadn't asked her out before now. She'd been friendly enough. And yes, the more he thought about it, the more he noticed the little things she'd do around him that he didn't see when she spoke to other people.

If their kiss made anything more clear, it was that he was an absolute idiot. Four days of this realization and he still didn't have any answers.

"Okay, I'm an idiot," he muttered when he picked Molly up from Pippa's place on Saturday.

"Yeah, I know."

He shot her an incredulous look. "Excuse me?"

"I know you're an idiot." She said it with a matter-of-fact tone as she rested her forearms on the kitchen counter. A few yards away his daughter sat at the table with a sketch book. He hoped if he kept his voice low enough, she wouldn't hear a word he was about to say.

"You were right about everything."

She curled her fingers several times and laughed. "Keep it coming. I'm smart, amazing, beautiful... what is this about anyway?"

Luke glanced at Molly then inched closer to his sister. "Allie likes me."

Pippa's expression flattened. "Luke... you *didn't*."

“Can you keep it down?” He shook his head. “What am I supposed to do?”

“What does that even mean? What are you supposed to do.” She palmed her forehead. “You’re an adult. You either have feelings for her or you don’t. That means you either go for it or you leave her alone. There isn’t anything else you can do.”

He sighed.

“Is there something else?” Pippa tilted her head. At least she didn’t look like she was judging him now. Instead, she almost looked concerned. “What’s the matter?”

Luke blew out a heavy breath and straightened. “Even if it wasn’t... *her*... What if I’m not ready.”

Pippa mirrored his body language, standing tall again. “Like... you’re not over Shellie?”

“No, that’s not what I’m saying. It’s been long enough. I’ve grieved and I know she will always hold a special place in my heart. I will never forget her. But what if I’m not ready to fall in love again? What if I start comparing the next person with Shellie?”

“Oh,” she murmured.

“Yeah.”

“Well, I guess you’re never going to know if you don’t try. When you think about...” she glanced at Molly. “*Her*. Do you *feel* anything? Meaning do you feel anything similar to Shellie?”

He grimaced. “I’m trying really hard not to compare the two of them.”

“Right. That’s actually really sweet.”

Luke scowled at his sister. “Oh, so now you want to be supportive.”

“Well, in my defense, I’ve known she’s had a crush on you since the dawn of time. And I’ve also seen you ignore her when she’s practically thrown herself at you.”

His scowl deepened. “That’s exactly my point. You knew and you didn’t say anything.”

She gasped and lunged forward to smack his arm. “You had to be blind not to see it. I still don’t know if I believe that you *didn’t* know.”

“Like I said, I’m an idiot.”

They stared at one another for a few moments and then Pippa’s face broke into a smile and so did his.

“Well, then, I guess I’m just up a creek, aren’t I?”

“Not necessarily.” Pippa shifted until she leaned against the counter. “You think you’re not ready to fall in love. I think that’s a sign you are.”

“That doesn’t make a lick of sense,” Luke muttered.

“Think about it. If you’re worried that you’re doing something wrong, that’s an indication that you’re aware. I’d be more worried if you weren’t hesitating at all. If you think that you’re ready to find love again, then go for it. But do it for the right reasons. From the sound of it, you’re not jumping into something just because you can. You’ve thought this out and you’re standing in your own way.”

Luke gaped at his sister. Was she actually suggesting what he thought she was suggesting? “You’re not telling me to go for it, are you?”

“Maybe I am. Maybe I’m not. All I know is that Allie... she’s in deep. And if you’re not serious, then stay away. But if you are...” Pippa sighed again. “Then I think you two would make each other happy.”

He peered at her, unable or unwilling to hope she was right. So much good could come out of him taking this chance. He could find happiness and fulfillment again. Molly would have someone to look up to who would help him raise her the way it should have been done in the beginning.

But allowing himself to hand over his heart would also open himself up to more pain. Nothing in this life was for certain. It was easier just to hold tight to the ones he loved and the ones

he had rather than allow for the opportunity to get hurt again. He'd lost Shellie. Their life together had been too short.

His gaze shifted to his daughter. In this situation, the pros would outweigh the cons. If he could muster the courage to give his heart over to someone new, he might just come out on top.

"So..." Pippa murmured. "Whatcha gonna do?"

"I don't know."

A slow smile spread across her face. "Yeah, you do."

"No, I don't," he countered. "There are too many things to think about."

"There's only one that matters."

He didn't have to ask her what she was referring to. Before he had a chance to say it himself, Pippa continued.

"Do you think she's worth the risk?"

There was no denying he had the answer without even thinking about it.

Yes.

Allie was worth the risk. Now all he needed to do was convince her that he was worth the risk, too.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

SUNDAYS WERE STILL ALLIE'S FAVORITE DAY OF THE WEEK. Beyond her ability to feel closer to God, she had always enjoyed seeing a certain someone. It had used to be the highlight of her week.

Until today.

After what had happened a few days ago, she wasn't sure she wanted to see Luke again. At least not for a week. Thankfully, he didn't have a tendency to sit beside Pippa, which was who she was looking for.

She entered the church sanctuary and glanced around. People were already quickly filling in the pews, taking their seats before the service started. Teenagers were gathering in the balcony at the back to sit together away from their parents.

She used to spend her Sunday mornings up there—with Pippa and Luke.

Her stomach twisted, knotting like a tattered ball of yarn. She'd taken the whole weekend to figure out what she was going to do, and she hadn't come up with a single solution. She needed to tell Pippa and get her advice.

Pippa was the only one who would be able to tell her what to do.

Allie's gaze swept through the sanctuary, finally landing on the back of a familiar head. She took a quick step forward just as another adult took a seat beside her.

Luke.

What in the world was he doing sitting by Pippa? He never sat with his sister. Usually, he took a seat in the back with Molly. Something was up. Her whole body froze up. What if he'd told Pippa already? He could have spun it in any way that would make her look like she'd kissed him intentionally.

Pippa would be so mad if she found out that Allie had kept this from her. Either that or she'd be throwing Allie to the wolves—meaning right into Luke's arms.

Would that be so bad?

This was what she'd always wanted. She'd dreamed of Luke finally taking notice of her. And yet she was terrified.

Luke and Pippa hadn't seen her yet. She could just leave and stop by Pippa's place to chat. Or she could shoot her a text message with just enough detail to get her friend to come to her.

Allie knew better than to try either of those options. She wasn't about to leave church just because Luke might see her. It wasn't like he would make a scene here. He was better than that. She straightened her shoulders and charged forward, heading down the aisle until she made it to Pippa's row.

Pippa smiled and patted the seat beside her, but it was Luke's shocked expression that nearly made Allie laugh out loud. If she wasn't so scared out of her mind, she would have done just that. Instead, she waved at both of them and settled beside her friend.

Molly leaned forward to wave at her. "Hi Miss Patrick."

Allie flashed her a smile. "Hey sweetie." She could feel Luke's gaze on her. He wasn't even trying to hide it from anyone! Pippa nudged her shoulder against Allie's and gave her a knowing smile.

That could mean anything. It didn't prove Luke had told his sister about their kiss.

Who was she kidding? Based on that smile alone, Allie could almost guarantee that Pippa knew *something*. She gave her friend a wan smile and faced forward. If she looked toward

Luke she knew she wouldn't be able to keep a cool head and it was imperative she did so while in front of his sister.

"How was your week?" Pippa murmured.

Allie froze, glancing in her direction out of the corner of her eye. "You know. It's getting busy with the holidays coming up. And then I'm helping Luke with that Christmas tree thing."

Pippa whirled around to face her brother. "What Christmas tree thing?"

This time Allie couldn't help but meet Luke's gaze. His surprise turned to something more sheepish. "Didn't Brent tell you?"

She whacked his leg. "No, Brent didn't tell me. I swear, the second I moved out of that house all of you have been treating me like I don't even exist. What would Mom think if she knew you guys were leaving me out?"

Luke let out an exasperated sigh, but the ghost of a smile still graced his lips. "We're not leaving you out, Pippa. We're doing our thing and you're doing yours. I haven't even told Mom about the Christmas tree thing either."

"Well, what is it?"

Allie bit her lips to keep herself from smiling too widely. She kept her eyes trained ahead but her ears pricked to the conversation.

"Wow. That's going to be amazing if it works out. But I still don't understand why you didn't just tell me." She elbowed Allie in the ribs. "That goes for you too. I thought we were friends."

"Hey," Allie squawked, rubbing her side. "We *are* friends. I'm telling you now, aren't I?"

Pippa huffed. "Well, if you don't bring some flyers out to the restaurant, then I'm going to throw a fit. What am I if not supportive of my family?"

Allie glanced toward Luke once more and then tore her gaze away. They had to be one of the best little families she knew which was another reason why she'd wanted to be part of it.

Pippa leaned into Allie, resting her head on Allie's shoulder. "I'm glad you're helping him. He could use as much as he can get."

Luke made a disgruntled noise which only stirred some quiet laughter from Allie.

"I think it's a wonderful cause. I knew I wanted to volunteer the second he told me about it." At least she hadn't kept that tidbit from her friend. Now, if only she could get her alone for a moment to tell her about that kiss before she burst from holding onto that doozy of a secret.

Pippa lurched forward, causing Allie to jump and stare at her with rounded eyes.

"What's the matter?"

Her friend gestured vaguely toward some folks standing in the aisle. "I need to talk to someone. One of those who just came in."

"But the service is gonna start in like five minutes."

"I'll be fast. Save my seat." Pippa climbed over Allie and headed out into the aisle, leaving a small space between herself and Luke. That space could have been a car length's wide and Allie still would have felt too close to Luke. The tension from their kiss still hung in the air, the unanswered questions hot and burning up the oxygen.

She took a deep breath as if it would be her last then released it.

Speak. You have the words, just say something so he doesn't bring it up again.

Allie placed her hand on the seat beside her and faced him. "I'm done with the edits you wanted on your flyer. And actually, I sent them to the printers already. They said that they'd be done with them next week by Wednesday which is a relief because if we wait until after Thanksgiving, then we're missing out on valuable space for the Black Friday deals." She was rambling.

Oh, why was she allowing herself to do that?

“Anyway, I thought I could—”

Luke’s hand landed beside hers, his fingertips brushing along her skin.

Allie snapped her mouth shut, momentarily distracted by his touch.

“I need to speak to you,” he whispered. “It’s really important.”

“I don’t think we have anything to say,” Allie hissed back, placing her hand in her lap. “Everything that needed to be said has been aired out.”

Luke stared at her hard, his jaw unmoving. His eyes narrowed and he inched a little closer to her. “There is a lot that has yet to be said. I was planning on stopping by later today to talk to you, but Pippa wouldn’t give me your address.”

Good for her.

No, not good. Allie was blowing her chance to have her own happily ever after and for what? Because she was scared? There were far scarier things than having a discussion to define the relationship.

What relationship, a voice in her head seemed to sneer. She didn’t have a relationship with anyone.

But she *wanted* one.

Allie studied Luke’s features from his eyes to his mouth, along his jawline and all the way back to the hair she itched to run her fingers through. She already knew she’d give him a chance to talk about whatever it was that he wanted her to. There would be no fighting it.

When she arrived at the conclusion that there would be no hiding from him, Allie nodded and opened her mouth but was immediately cut off when Pippa returned.

Her friend nodded toward that small space between herself and Luke. “Go on, scoot down so I don’t have to cross over everyone’s laps.”

An objection was on her lips when the organ music started to play. Pippa practically shoved Allie into Luke as she took her

seat and set her focus on the front of the chapel.

Luke's leg brushed against hers, sending off all kinds of sensational alarm bells. If Allie was quiet enough, she was certain she could hear both her heart and Luke's beat to the sound of the choir as they sang their opening song.

It was official. She'd lost this battle. The part of her that wanted to keep her distance was lying in a puddle of defeat. It was near impossible for her to focus on the sermon at all. Every nerve ending she had was electrified and her thoughts seemed to have created a mind of their own.

Every time she closed her eyes, she saw Luke's face, she felt his touch, and she craved more. If anything told her she was out of her element it was that fact alone. Pippa would be pushing her to just tell Luke everything if she knew what had happened.

Time to suck it up and brave the conversation she knew she couldn't avoid forever.

She exhaled, a tiny amount of relief flooding her tight chest.

But then Luke chose that exact moment to lean close and whisper in her ear. "Can you pass me that Bible?"

Allie sucked in sharply and it took every bit of her strength not to rocket out of her seat like a lunatic. With trembling hands, she shoved the Bible toward him. There was no space between herself and Pippa to scoot away from him.

She was stuck.

Stuck until the end of the service.

Until they had their little conversation that she both craved and wanted to flee from.

The sermon seemed to last for an eternity. Pastor Petrie was on a roll and he had much to say today. Each painstaking second stretched into minutes. The worst part was that she knew no one else felt this shift in time. She was alone in her anticipation.

Then the final song started and the churchgoers got to their feet. Luke's hand wrapped around her wrist, preventing her

from making an escape. He ducked his head and whispered, “I need to see you. Alone. Not here. I’d like to come over, but I need your address.”

His request hung in the air. This was her final defense if she truly wanted to keep him at arm’s length.

“I’ll text it to you,” she murmured back.

Luke released her. His eyes remained serious until they shifted to over her shoulder. “See you later, Pippa.” He herded his daughter out of the row and the second he was out of hearing range, Pippa’s hands spun Allie around.

She gaped at Allie, eyes bright. “See? I told you. Whatever you did, you hooked him. I mean I played it cool. I didn’t let on that I wanted you guys together—not really. But man, when he came by my place last night, I could tell. He’s got feelings for you.”

The blood drained from Allie’s face, giving her away.

Pippa’s glee faded and her hold on Allie’s upper arms tightened. “You *did* do something, didn’t you? You asked him out or confessed that you liked him, right?”

Allie swallowed hard. “I didn’t tell him anything,” she wheezed. Face flushing deeply, Allie closed her eyes. “It’s worse than that.”

“That doesn’t make sense. What’s worse than telling him you’ve had a crush on him for ages?”

Her eyes opened and she gave Pippa a pleading look. “I kissed him.”

Pippa gasped and if possible, her eyes widened. “No wonder he was acting funny.” She blew out a low whistle. “I thought you said you weren’t going to ask him out.”

“I didn’t.” Allie covered her face with her hand. “It should have never happened. We were just talking and he kept looking at me weird. Like he already knew I liked him. It was so... different from how he’s treated me in the past. It’s like he finally saw me for *me*.” Her eyes flitted up to meet Pippa’s. “I’ve never felt that way around him... or anyone for that

matter. I don't know what came over me. I just..." She sighed. "I think I messed up."

"No!" Pippa's word burst from her like an explosion, one that caused those nearby to glance in their direction.

Allie's eyes rounded and she giggled as Pippa grabbed her and dragged her toward the exit. They didn't stop until they were several feet from anyone else.

"You didn't mess up. You did exactly what you were supposed to do. You were honest and you were brave. You showed him that you were here. I think he needed that more than you know."

Allie let out a shuddering breath. Was Pippa right? It was possible that Luke had been in a fog since losing his wife and he needed something—or someone to jumpstart his life again. A warm sensation curled and coiled within her, easing the trepidation that had once resided in her stomach. "Do you really think so?"

"I *know* so. Luke came over the other night. He was..." She nibbled on her lower lip. "Well, I've never seen him so worked up over someone before. He's got feelings for you, too. He's just trying to make sense of it all. It's probably because you're Molly's teacher and you're my friend. There's a lot to unload here and right when he's doing that tree thing? Of course it's going to get bumpy. But you have to get out of your own way sometimes." Pippa pulled her in for a tight hug. "You got this."
“

A nervous laugh bubbled up from Allie's chest. "Thanks for the pep talk."

"It's what I'm here for."

CHAPTER TWELVE

LUKE GAZED UP AT THE CUTE LITTLE HOUSE ON THE CORNER OF the street. It was probably about the size of the cottage he had on his property. It definitely seemed to suit a teacher lifestyle. There was a porch with a swing that hung from the awning. It was painted a powder blue and there were planters beneath the windows filled with bluebonnets. The grass was trimmed neatly. Everything about this place screamed white-picket-fence life.

He couldn't fight the smile that stretched across his face as he wandered up the stone pathway to her house. He'd left Molly with her cousins so she could go riding. It was getting late and the sky was already turning an orange color which made the house pop even more.

For the past few days, all he could think about was seeing her again and what he might say. There was so much he wanted to tell her and so much he thought would turn her away from him. He had to do this right.

Before his knuckles made contact with the door, it swung inward, revealing Allie, now clad in jeans and a blouse. Her red hair was down in waves around her shoulders and her cheeks were flushed.

She was absolutely breathtaking.

Allie tilted her head, peering at him as if something was wrong. "Are you okay?"

Luke blinked then turned away from her, caught staring. "Yeah. I'm fine. I just wasn't expecting..." He cleared his

throat. "I'm glad you let me come over." He glanced at her once more relieved she wasn't studying him as much as before.

She opened the door wider and gestured for him to come inside. His eyes darted toward the interior of the house, uncertain if that was a good idea. The last time they were confined to a space it had turned heated.

His chest clenched at the memory, and he took a step backward then nodded toward the porch swing. "How about we sit out here. It's a little chilly but with the right jacket, it's nice."

Allie leaned out of the house to glance at the porch swing then at Luke. "I guess that would work. Let me get my jacket and I'll be right out."

Luke moved toward the swing but couldn't bring himself to sit down on it. Instead, he paced back and forth, going over what he wanted to tell her. This shouldn't be as difficult as he was making it out to be. He should be able to just lay it all out. "I think I have feelings for you." He uttered the words aloud.

It wasn't until he heard her voice that he realized his mistake.

"Excuse me?"

He whirled around and found Allie standing by the door, her hand still on the doorknob. She stared at him like he'd just confessed to murder. Luke took several steps in her direction then stopped himself short. "I'm sorry. That came out wrong."

Her eyes narrowed. "It did?"

"No, I mean I meant what I said, but I wanted to build up to it." Heat spread across the back of his neck inching its way into his face. "I just... can we..." he gestured toward the porch swing. "Please sit down with me."

Allie released the doorknob, a tentative smile on her lips. She moved past him, giving him a wide berth. He couldn't really blame her. He'd gone about this all backwards. His gaze followed her until she took her seat. She scooted all the way to one side then motioned for him to sit beside her.

“I don’t know if I should.”

She gave him a funny face but if she knew what he was dealing with in his heart then she wouldn’t be so confused.

Instead, he took his position across from her on the porch, leaning against the railing. His hands gripped the rail behind him, if only to prevent him from losing his nerve. “About the other night.” He wasn’t surprised to see the way she stiffened. She didn’t appear ready to have this conversation with him right now.

“Yeah?”

“Why...” He frowned but kept his eyes trained on her. “Why did you run?”

She was the first to break eye-contact. Her feet pushed against the wooden porch and the swing creaked with the movement. Her lips pulled between her teeth as she gnawed on them. Then she stopped and glanced back up at him. “I was embarrassed.”

“Embarrassed?” If anyone should have been embarrassed, it was him. The way he’d reacted to her touch was nothing if not carnal. His feelings were just barely reaching the surface of discoverability. At least she knew what she wanted.

She always knew what she wanted.

Allie nodded. “And maybe a little scared.”

That statement got him. He took a step forward, releasing the railing. “Scared? Why were you scared?”

She heaved a heavy sigh as she settled back against the swing. “Come on, Luke. You can’t tell me you didn’t know at least a little.”

He schooled his features. The last thing he needed was for her to believe that he had any prior knowledge of what he predicted she was about to say. It was best for her to get out everything first and then he could let the rest come to light later—or maybe not at all.

Allie let out a short laugh that sounded sharper than it should have. “I’ve had a crush on you since before I can remember.

You must have known.”

Luke didn't answer. Pippa had mentioned as much but it was still strange to hear the confession come directly from the source.

She leaned forward, resting her elbows on her knees. “I was always just your sister's best friend. So it didn't matter how many times I tagged along, you only ever saw me that way.”

“Well, to be fair I let you tag along because you were better company than Pippa. At least you knew how to make me laugh.”

A small smile returned to her lips at that compliment then it faded just as fast. “Why do you think I chose the same college as you? Why do you think I was there so often? I thought if we had just a little more time together that you would finally see me.” Her cheeks turned pink and she looked away. “Wow. That makes me sound like a creepy stalker. Ick.”

In spite of the tightness in his chest that intensified, he had to smile at her admission. And then once again his heart was in a vise, and he was finding it hard to breathe. He knew what came next in her story.

“I used to wish I had never introduced you to Shellie. But I know if I hadn't then you wouldn't have Molly and how could I ever wish that she wasn't here?” She flushed, looking down at her hands. Allie opened and closed her fingers then sighed again. “After Shellie died, there was no chance of us ever getting together. No matter how many ways I looked at it, I could never see a way it would work out. I was the one who introduced you. How could you look at me and not remember her?” Allie's voice cracked and she tore her gaze away from him. “And she was my friend. I missed her, too.”

As much as Luke wanted to reach out to her and tell her she didn't have to be scared, he knew he couldn't. There were no absolutes. There were no guarantees.

He'd learned that the hard way when Shellie died.

Still, he had to say something. That's what he'd come here for, after all.

Luke took the remaining steps toward her and settled on the porch swing. He braced his legs with his hands on either side and pushed off the floor so the swing's creaking sound filled the quiet evening air. "You know, I think you dodged a bullet."

She shot him a sharp look.

"What I mean to say is that I think some part of me knew you had a crush on me in high school, but I was far too immature to have done anything about that."

"I didn't think so," she murmured.

He chuckled. "If you only knew." Luke peeked at her out of the corner of his eye. "You were too good for me then. Heck, you're probably too good for me now."

"That doesn't make me feel any better."

A smile tugged at his lips. "I get that."

They swung for a few more minutes and he glanced toward her. "I don't regret anything about my marriage."

"I wouldn't expect you to."

"I loved Shellie. Molly is my whole world. But I've come to accept that my life has been irrevocably changed and I have to start on a new path." This was when he had wanted to tell her he had feelings for her. To say them now seemed so trite. "Can I ask you something?"

She turned her face toward him, her chin resting on her shoulder.

"Why didn't you ever get married? I'm sure you had plenty of opportunities."

Allie blushed a deep red color and looked away. "Geez, Luke. Don't you think that's a little below the belt?"

"It's an honest question." And it was one he didn't think she'd need to avoid.

She lifted her gaze to the sky, clearly doing her best to avoid looking directly at him. Then she sighed. "Because I never found anyone who could compare to you."

Her words knocked the wind right out of his lungs. He'd been working so hard not to compare her to Shellie and here she was doing the opposite. Granted, it was a different kind of comparison, but it still grated against that part of him that knew he needed to keep his feelings for the two women he cared for separate. Moving forward, it would probably be best not to ever talk about Shellie with her.

Luke cleared his throat, looking down to find her hands at her sides as well. He inched his hand toward hers and their pinkies grazed against each other. She looked down at his hand then lifted her eyes to meet his.

Allie pulled her lower lip between her teeth again and her lashes fluttered as she let out a shuddering exhale. "Why did you come here, Luke? Was it just to ask me to bare my soul to you? Because if all you wanted was a confession, then you could have called and saved yourself the trip. I'd have spilled the beans over Zoom."

"I wanted to tell you that... I wanted to say that I think I'm ready to date again."

"Oh?"

He nodded. "But I don't want to date just anyone." He placed his pinky over hers and they intertwined. "There's only one person who has managed to make me truly feel something since..." He was about to say Shellie's name again but thought better of it. "Since I've been single." So many words to say something so simple. He needed to just come right out and say it. How much easier could it get? She was right here. He just had to ask.

"Would you go out with me?" She blurted before he had the chance.

He stiffened, his face swiveling toward her. His eyes took her in, all of her. Somehow her beauty was even more pronounced. Her smile could make his insides light on fire. And the simplest touch of her skin against his could send his skin humming with electricity. "Yeah, I think I'd like that very much."

She smiled, and the light from it lifted to her eyes. “Are you sure?”

This time he took her hand in his and laced his fingers between hers. Luke traced lines on the back of her hand and his own smile spread slowly across his face. “I couldn’t be surer of anything in my life.” His eyes flitted up to meet hers. “I only have one request if that’s okay.”

Allie peeked at him, a half-smile touching her lips. “Oh?”

“Yeah. With everything that has happened from the beginning of all of this, I think it would be a good idea if we try to avoid going to The Local Table.”

Her brows creased. “Why?”

Luke scooted closer to her so their shoulders brushed against one another. “I don’t know about you, but the last thing I want is for Pippa to have a front row seat to our official first date.”

She ducked her head and laughed. “I guess you’re right. Pippa would probably make a big show of it. She always has a tendency to overdo things like this.”

“Exactly. And she’s a buttinsky.”

Allie rested her head against his shoulder and not for the first time was he surprised at just how right it felt to be with her like this. “Well, that’s definitely true. Hey, does she know you were coming over to talk to me tonight?”

“I think she suspects something’s up, but I didn’t say anything.”

“Me neither,” Allie murmured. “I did tell her we kissed though.”

His laughter sent a squirrel scurrying for cover. “You did? Hilarious. How did that go?”

“Honestly? I think... she’s okay with it.” Allie craned her neck around so she could see his eyes. “It’s like she’s been rooting for us to get together all along.”

“I would wager it’s because she has always wanted a sister.” Luke brushed his lips against her temple.

“But she’s got Jackie.”

It wasn’t lost on him that she left out Shellie in that statement. It was as if the two of them had come to an unspoken agreement that Shellie be left out of things for the time being. “Yeah, well Jackie has always been more friendly with me than Pippa. I don’t know why they never really clicked.” He lifted a shoulder and pushed the swing once more. “That’s my only guess, other than that, I have nothing.”

Allie snuggled against him. “I’m glad she’s on our side. It will make things a lot easier.”

“You’re definitely right about that.” He rested his cheek against the top of her head. Now all he had to worry about was easing his daughter into all of this. He had a feeling Molly would be just as excited as Pippa. Even still, they had to tread carefully so no one ended up getting hurt.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THANKSGIVING WAS ONLY SIX DAYS AWAY AND THERE WAS still so much to do. Allie didn't know how Luke was managing. Between the final harvest and getting the trees ready for sale, he was always busy. They barely had time to spend together on their own.

Instead of selfishly demanding he spend more time with her, Allie threw herself into helping. She baked cookies and prepped the hot chocolate stand. She'd even asked the parents of her class if any of them would like to supervise and have their children learn a little bit about commerce. So far, she would be free to help Luke where needed since the hot chocolate stand was covered for the first week of their little market.

Everything was coming together. This weekend would be a soft opening before Thanksgiving weekend. She stopped and surveyed her surroundings. It was a nice day for November. The high today would be about seventy degrees and the sun was out.

Hands wrapped around her waist, and she squealed before spinning around to face Luke. Without warning, he placed a firm, toe-curling kiss on her lips before releasing her.

His face was bright with excitement as he took in the sight. "Isn't this great? I can't believe it's come together so seamlessly."

Allie nodded, loving the way his hand rested at her waist so he could keep her close. "It's definitely amazing. You did a

wonderful job.”

He pulled her tighter against him. “We did a wonderful job. Together.”

She warmed, partly from his compliment, and part from being so close to him. Allie rested her hand on his chest and gazed up at him. Their eyes locked for a moment and she thought he might kiss her again, but instead he peered up at the sun. “It’s beginning to look a lot like Christmas, don’t you think?”

Allie snorted. “What were you expecting? Snow? I don’t think you’re special enough for that.”

He gasped, mock hurt in his eyes. “How dare you say I’m not special.”

She snickered. They both knew that in Sweet Bloom, Texas, the only snow they ever got was a dusting—like the angels spilled some powdered sugar all over the town then cleaned it up just as quickly. “Well, if we’re lucky, we’ll get a little bit closer to the actual holiday.”

“Eh, I could take it or leave it. This year, I already got what I wanted for Christmas.”

Goosebumps lifted on her arms when she glanced at him and noted his meaningful expression. Out of instinct, she lifted her hand to his face, caressing him. “I can’t believe this is happening,” she whispered.

“You can’t believe what is happening?”

“This. You and me. I can’t believe we’ve finally reached this point. I couldn’t imagine my life being any more perfect than it is right now.” The words seemed silly, but they were as close to the truth as she could get. She stood on her toes and wrapped both hands around his neck, brushing a kiss to his lips.

Luke reacted immediately, his hands tightening at her waist and pulling her whole body against his. Their kiss deepened, becoming more passionate, more desperate. Stars danced behind her eyes and the heat that had built inside her made her itch to remove the cardigan she wore. Being with Luke was like being in a dream.

It didn't feel real. None of what she experienced with him could possibly be in a reality where she existed, and yet she was willing to go along with it if only to make the dream last longer.

She kept expecting to wake up, to have the cold harsh reality wash over her like a bucket of ice water.

But that moment never came.

She continued to wake up each morning refreshed and falling in love with Luke Duncan.

Allie pulled away from their kiss first, catching her breath as she lifted her face to the sky. Luke's lips roved along her jaw and down her neck to her collarbone. She gasped, reveling in the emotions he could stir within her. Gently extracting herself, she let her hand slide down his arm until it locked with his.

Luke's eyes, still clouded over with desire, drank her in and sent a shiver down her spine. This was how it had been since that night on the porch. They couldn't get enough of each other. And if they weren't careful, she was fully aware of just how dangerous their passion could become.

She tugged on him, pulling him out of his haze. "Let's double check the wreaths and garland before people start arriving. I want to make sure they don't have any chance at falling apart.

Luke nodded as he led her toward a table where all the wreaths and garland that were ready for the market had been displayed. Allie let her fingers graze the needles and foliage, marveling at the simple beauty that nature had given them.

Each time she picked up a wreath and gave it a gentle shake, she could feel Luke's gaze on her. What probably should have unnerved her only made her affection for him stronger. She glanced up at him as he picked up the final wreath. This one had various berries and pinecones woven into the boughs.

"I bet Shellie would have loved this one. She always had a thing for bright colors," Allie murmured. "Christmas was her favorite holiday." Allie couldn't pinpoint where that memory

came from, but it stuck with her. It was as if her subconscious wanted to remind her that she wasn't Luke's first love.

She would always be second.

Allie swallowed back that thought and forced her gaze up to Luke, finding his stare had hardened. She stilled, suddenly uneasy. Seeking a way out of this strange feeling, she placed the wreath back on the table. "I think Shellie would have been really proud of what you've accomplished."

"Why do you keep bringing her up?" Luke muttered.

"What do you mean?"

"Shellie. You keep talking about her." He put his hands on his hips as he scowled at her. He didn't look mad, just a bit annoyed. "It's like you want me to say something. Whatever it is, just tell me to say it and we can get it over with."

She blinked, taking a step back from him. His words did sound angry, even though his tone of voice was even. "Excuse me? I'm not trying to make you say anything. I just thought—"

"You just thought... let me guess, you just thought that you could say her name and remind me that she's not here. Why?" She still didn't see the anger on his face she expected and she had no idea if he was holding his emotion in check or if he really was just dealing with his own feelings.

Her face flushed. Why *had* she brought up Shellie? Things had been going so well between them. They were closer than ever. And then it was like Allie had hit a wall.

"I'm sorry, Luke. I didn't mean to upset you." It was the only thing she could think of to say.

He stood there unsmiling as he narrowed his eyes clearly waiting on her to continue to dig the hole she'd started.

Something told her that admitting she was feeling insecure wouldn't go over very well. At least not right now. "This relationship... you... Um..." That was definitely not an answer to his question and she knew it. He could very likely point that out and she'd have to come up with something else.

Thankfully, he didn't force her to give him an answer.

When she met his gaze again, fully embarrassed, she found nothing but the soft, kind eyes of the man she was in love with. He reached for her hand and tugged her to him. “Are you worried?” His voice was husky, deeper, soft.

Her feet refused to work at first, shuffling toward him until they finally released and she collided with his body.

Luke hooked his finger under her chin and tilted it upward. His eyes roved over her face and he shook his head. “I need you to know that you don’t have to be worried. I love you, Allie.”

Her heart exploded in that moment sending sparks of electricity to every nerve of her body. Allie’s lips parted in surprise. That was the first time he’d ever said it out loud. This was a definite turning point.

All too easily, she allowed herself to forgive his frustration over bringing Shellie into a conversation where she had no right to be. Allie inched closer to Luke and pushed her fingers into his hair. “I love you, too.”

Luke smiled, half his lips quirking upward. “You do?”

“Of course I do. Why is that even a question? Even when we were younger, I knew my heart belonged to you.”

He released her hand, wrapping his arms around her and crushing her to his body. His chin rested on her head and he murmured. “You’re too good for me.”

“No, I’m not,” she whispered against his chest.

“Yes, you are.”

Her thoughts immediately shifted to what had spurred this little argument. Luke had been so defensive at the mere mention of Shellie’s name. The only thing that made sense was that he wasn’t over her. Like she’d worried before, she couldn’t shake the feeling that he was comparing her to his late wife. He couldn’t forget Shellie, and Allie would always be a reminder of how they met.

Her stomach knotted and roiled, angry with her for the rollercoaster ride she was putting it through. As much as she’d

tried to avoid it, she couldn't deny one small problem.

She was still competing with a dead woman.

The evidence was everywhere. His refusal to talk about Shellie. His constant statements that she was too good for him. It was so clear now. He didn't feel like he deserved her because he still had feelings for the love of his life. Luke knew deep in his soul that it wasn't fair to bring another woman into his life when he was unable to give his whole heart to someone else.

Emotion burned behind her eyes and she blinked it away.

Was this her lot in life? To forever be second best? Could she find happiness with that knowledge?

The part of her that knew she'd never stop loving him was content to get as much as he was willing to give. But the jealous side wanted all of him. Every *last* bit.

That would never be possible and now she knew it without a single doubt in her mind.

Luke pressed one more kiss to her forehead as if to say this conversation was over. They'd covered everything they needed to. Then he wandered off toward a car that arrived. One of the parents from her class got out and Molly launched toward Sarah.

They gave each other a hug and Molly practically dragged her best friend toward the hot chocolate stand.

Allie remained where she was beside the garland, watching Luke interact with Sarah's mother. He was smiley and bright—just like he always was. Clearly this little argument didn't bother him as much as it did her.

Perhaps she was making this out to be a bigger deal than it was. She was internalizing something that simply didn't exist.

Would she want to discuss her dead spouse with someone she'd just started dating? Probably not. Luke was within his right to get frustrated about such a topic.

Doing her best to push aside her concerns, she forced a smile and headed toward Sarah's mother and Luke as they hovered

near the stand. Another car arrived, and Kate climbed out with her teenager in tow. Without prompting, she headed toward them. Thankfully the other fourth grade teacher was on board with this project, too. They needed all the help they could get.

Luke was speaking to Sarah's mother when Kate reached them. "We don't need to make it too difficult. We'll break even if we get a quarter for each cup but since we're trying to build up a donation for the hospital, I've set the price at fifty cents." Luke gestured toward the small lockbox. "I've already put a ton of quarters in there. I don't think you'll need much else for making change. All I need you to do is relay the information to the next parent who takes a shift." He glanced toward Allie and she smiled with encouragement.

She wasn't about to make tonight a tough one. Her concerns would wait.

Sarah's mother waved at Allie. "Hey, Allie. This is wonderful. I'm so glad you asked us to help out."

Luke slipped his hand into hers and tugged her closer. "She's a good one."

Kate noted their connection and only mildly reacted. Her brows lifted and her smile widened. Allie made a face and waved her friend off with a shake of her head. She didn't need more attention paid to her budding relationship just yet. It was still too new.

The second Luke escorted Sarah's mother toward the supply trailer, Kate dragged Allie aside. "You didn't tell me you finally snagged the guy! You've been holding out on me!"

Allie released a laugh, glancing toward Luke and finding his gaze on them. "It's still new. Who knows how long it will last."

Kate shook her head. "The way he's looking at you? There's zero chance this won't work out exactly the way you've wanted it to since you were younger." Her quiet squeal made Allie laugh again.

"Thanks for the vote of confidence. But do me a favor and don't jinx us."

Kate snickered. “There’s no jinxing true love, and girl? You guys have it.” She released Allie and headed toward the trailer.

Despite Kate’s words and Luke’s grin, Allie couldn’t shake the feeling that something might still go wrong. She’d just have to work extra hard to talk herself out of the dismal thoughts. It was like they all said—everything would turn out. She just needed to enjoy it.

Allie returned Luke’s smile, flutters exploding in her chest when he winked at her like she was the only important thing in the world.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THE WHOLE HOUSE WAS DECORATED JUST LIKE LUKE remembered from his childhood. When they were kids, his mother had gone all out with table centerpieces, place settings, and special glasses.

He picked up one of the wine glasses and smirked at Pippa who had entered the dining room just to put the bowl of mashed potatoes on the table. “I can’t believe they still have these. I would have thought Mom sold it all when she gave Brent the house.”

Pippa shrugged. “I guess Brent is more of a sap than we thought he was.”

She flitted out of the room but then materialized again just as quickly. “Allie’s coming tonight.”

He gave her a funny look. “I know.”

“I don’t want you to make anything weird.”

“Why would I do that?”

Pippa glanced over her shoulder as if she were keeping a big secret. “I know what happened between you.”

Luke wasn’t sure what she was referring to, but there was one thing he knew this wasn’t about. They hadn’t told anyone they were officially dating. The only people who might have noticed were at the farmer’s market when they were setting up. He was planning on giving his family a head’s up before Allie showed up.

His sister moved closer toward him and her voice lowered. “She told me she kissed you.”

He bit back a smile. The way his sister was talking she was making it sound so much more scandalous than it really was. “What did she say?” He asked in a whisper. There wasn’t any harm playing along.

Pippa shot him an annoyed look. “After what I told you, I figured you’d play it cool. I don’t want this to become something weird when she gets here. She’s my friend and I invited her. If you’re not interested just make sure—”

“You know, that’s kinda funny.”

She clamped her mouth shut but only for a moment. “What’s funny?”

“I invited her, too.”

Now the confusion nearly made him break character. It took everything in him to keep a straight face. “As my girlfriend.”

For a second, Pippa looked as though she’d been put on pause. She didn’t move, didn’t even blink. Then she sucked in a deep breath and her eyes widened. “Your... what? Luke! Why didn’t you tell me? You know I was sorta the one pushing you together.”

He chuckled this time. “I guess I figured she’d be the one to tell you first.”

“She hasn’t told me anything.” The accusation in her tone almost made him worry he’d spilled the beans too soon. But he shook it off.

“I wanted to tell you because I don’t want you making a big deal about it when she shows up. I fully intend on sitting by her and holding her hand. Is that going to be a problem?”

Pippa laughed and jumped. “What? Of course not! I can’t believe you are finally giving her a chance. She’s perfect for you.”

Inside he felt the same. There were always kinks in the beginning to have to be worked out, but he had faith that would happen without too many problems. It wasn’t like they

were complete strangers. They knew each other and he loved her.

A twinge of guilt seemed to slip through the cracks and penetrate his heart, but he reminded himself he was allowed to find love again. Shellie would always be a part of him, but she would have wanted him to be happy.

There was a knock at the door and Pippa's head whipped around in that direction. "Have you told Brent yet? Jackie?"

"No. I should probably do so, though, right?"

The door opened and he could hear his brother's voice welcoming Allie into their home.

Pippa's pinched expression told all. "It might be too late for that. I'd just make sure to pull him aside and tell him not to be dumb."

Luke shook his head. "I think if I say that, he's going to do everything in his power to be just that. You know what he was like when I brought Shellie home."

"But this is Allie," Pippa insisted. "He should be cool."

Luke didn't have much faith in Brent. He was still his brother and as such, felt entitled to provide just enough embarrassment to keep Luke humble. He moved out of the dining room and headed toward the front of the house, coming across Allie all by herself. He glanced over her shoulder, expecting Brent to be close behind but saw no one. "They're just letting you wander the premises unchaperoned, are they?"

She grinned at him but before she could utter a word, he tugged her into the hall closet. Luke pulled her close, kissing her and melting from her touch. His whole body reacted to her nearness, to her scent.

"I've missed you," he murmured against her neck.

Allie exhaled, her face lifting upward. "I saw you yesterday."

"I know, and it's been too long." He pulled back and gazed at her. "You're so beautiful." Luke brushed a strand of hair from her face, tucking it behind her ear.

She tilted her head, her eyes shining. The way she looked at him made his heart do several flips in succession. It had been far too long since he'd felt this way.

"You don't have any idea what you do to me."

Her smile widened and she placed her hand against his cheek. "I think I do a little bit."

Luke leaned into her palm then turned his face to kiss it in the center. "I told Pippa about us," he whispered. Allie didn't react quite like he was expecting her to. There wasn't even a degree of shock in her eyes. He lifted his brows. "That doesn't seem to surprise you."

"I can't expect you to keep your relationships secret from your family."

"And I didn't expect you to keep it from your friend, but I've never seen Pippa so excited about something. Clearly you hadn't told her yet." Luke chuckled. "I figured it was time to let them all know."

That was the one thing that did stir up some astonishment. Allie pulled back and even in the dim lighting he could see she was unsure about something. "You're going to tell Molly?"

"I don't see why not. She's old enough. And she's already attached to you. I don't think we'd be doing any additional damage, do you?"

She shook her head slowly. "I guess you're right." Her eyes drifted away from his face and he had to take ahold of her chin to get her to look at him directly.

"Is everything okay?"

Allie's smile materialized once more at her lips. "Of course. Everything is wonderful. This is just the next step."

"Yeah," he murmured. "And I'm glad I'm taking it with you." He brushed a kiss to her temple, pulling her in for one more hug. "We should probably get out there. Pippa's gonna want to see you, I'm certain of it."

"You mean we can't hide in this closet forever?"

He chuckled. "If only."

Luke pushed the door open all the way, the crack of light growing wider. They slipped out into the hallway, fortunately not getting caught by anyone. Allie headed for the kitchen, and he released her hand as he made his way toward the living room where a game of football was blaring on the television.

Before he even entered the room, he heard his sister's squeals in the kitchen. Luke shook his head even as the joy filled his entire body. Allie belonged with his family. That much was certain. Something told him she'd always belonged here and he had simply been wasting his time until he'd realized it.

Brent shot up from where he was seated on the couch and let out a groan. "Come on, coach! Take Carter out!" He raked his hands through his hair then threw them in the air with another groan.

"Not playing so hot today?" Luke muttered as he moved farther into the living room.

Brent shot a look over his shoulder. "They were doing great until half-time and now they're dropping the ball."

"Literally?"

Brent gave him a flat look, not appreciating Luke's statement. "Is dinner ready?"

"No clue." Luke settled beside his brother. "But I wanted to tell you something." His brother grunted. "It's about Allie." Another grunt while Brent kept his gaze trained on the screen. "We're dating now."

This time his brother glanced at him. "I know."

"You... do?"

"Yeah, Quinne told Jackie."

Luke settled back on the couch with a huff. "Quinne?"

Brent shot out of his seat again with an angry shout then settled back on the couch. He glanced over toward Luke. "I think her daughter is in Allie's class at school. I don't know. Either way most of the town knows."

“Pippa didn’t.”

Brent froze then turned to face his brother fully. “I can guarantee she knew. She’s just humoring you.”

Luke snorted, but the more he thought about it, the more what his brother said made sense.

“Dinner!” Pippa’s voice called. “Get it while it’s hot!”

He got to his feet and took a few steps before realizing his brother was still glued to the screen. “You better shut that off before Jackie comes in here and hides the remote like last year.”

Brent all but dragged his feet, then a smile split his face and he threw a fist in the air. “Yeah! That’s what I’m talking about!” He grabbed the remote and turned off the television. He draped an arm around Luke’s shoulders and chuckled. “Congrats, by the way. It’s been a long time coming. We all thought you should have snagged her a long time ago.”

“I’m beginning to realize that,” Luke murmured.

Dinner went off without a hitch. Molly demanded to sit between Luke and Allie. Every so often he’d catch Allie glancing toward him and smiling. This is what it would have felt like for his family to be whole.

That thought alone made his stomach knot, but he pushed aside the sour feelings and focused on the moment. Laughter, good food, and family. That was what this time of year was all about. And he couldn’t wait to spend all of it with Allie by his side.

After dinner, they played a few card games at the table. No one batted an eye when he grabbed Allie’s hand and held it. Even Molly noticed but her only reaction was a smile.

Tonight was perfection. His doubts were easily brushed aside and he could look forward to his future.

When it got late, Luke walked Allie to her car. She leaned against it and pulled him closer to her. He rested his hand against the window at her shoulder. “Thank you for coming,”

he murmured. "I can honestly say that has been one of the best Thanksgivings I've had in years."

"Me, too," she whispered. "It was almost too easy."

"But that's the way it should be. No more needing to complicate things, right?" He wasn't sure but he thought he'd seen a flicker of something in her eyes. Unfortunately, it was dark and it could have just been the reflection of the night sky in her eyes. He hooked his finger beneath her chin and tilted it upward.

Luke brushed a whisper of a kiss across her lips, then another along her jawline. "I love you, Allie."

"I love you, too," she crooned.

The hairs on the back of his neck stood on end. Saying those simple words seemed to solidify everything about their relationship. This was real, now. They were on a new path—a path to happiness. Luke pulled back, grazing her jaw with his knuckle. "I'll see you tomorrow at the market."

She nodded. "Goodnight."

"Goodnight."

He backed away, watching her get into her car and then disappear into the darkness. Taking a deep breath, he let it out in a huff but it didn't settle his stomach. He trudged up the steps toward the house. Once inside, he moved past the living room where Brent was watching highlights of tonight's game. Jackie was in the kitchen, washing and putting dishes away. The kids were all settled or getting settled into one room for the traditional sleepover.

The door to that room was cracked and quiet voices stopped him short.

Molly was speaking to someone. "I'm glad Allie came today."

"Me too," Pippa said quietly. "Allie is pretty special."

Through the crack in the door, he could see Pippa covering Molly with a blanket where she was lying on the floor.

"Do you think she's going to marry my dad?"

There was a pause and the air seemed to grow heavy. “I don’t know, sweetie.”

“I hope they do.” Molly’s wistful voice tore at his heart.

Pippa didn’t seem to know what to say to that and he couldn’t blame her because he had no idea what he would have said either.

“Can I tell you a secret?”

“Sure,” Pippa whispered.

“I wish Allie was my mom.”

More silence. Luke tore away from the open door and headed back down the hall. He leaned against the wall and shut his eyes tight. His head pounded along with his heart. His chest ached, weighing him down to the point he didn’t think he could stand on his own two legs.

He’d been prepared for this, at least that was what he’d told himself. He knew this was the next step, but hearing those words come from his daughter did something to him. Shellie had missed all of Molly’s life. And his daughter would never truly know who her mother was. He could tell her story after story, but that’s all they were.

Bedtime stories.

He couldn’t help but worry that he was bringing Allie into his life too soon. What if she took the place of those stories and erased Molly’s mother completely? She was still young. Her memories were being rewritten every single day.

Maybe he was moving too fast.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

WAS THERE SUCH A THING AS SOMETHING BEING TOO PERFECT?

That was a silly thought.

Of course there was. Didn't people say all the time that if something was too good to be true, it usually was?

Well, Allie refused to become the cautionary tale. Everything was going exactly the way she thought it should. Thanksgiving was amazing. It wasn't awkward or tense. The Duncan family seemed to be welcoming her in with open arms. Luke's mother was the only one who couldn't make it, but she'd always loved Allie since she'd become friends with Pippa.

The weeks were bleeding into each other as Christmas quickly approached. The shop windows were decked out with Christmas themes. The annual window decorations competition was in full swing and some of the businesses were going all out this year. The music that played in the town square was as cheery as the twinkling lights that had been strung up on the trees that lined the streets. Everywhere she looked, all she could see was Christmas. The only thing they needed now was a dusting layer of snow.

She stopped in front of a small shop window. A white porcelain horse with red ribbons caught her eye. It stood on its hind legs with red ribbons dangling from the bit in its mouth. It was stunning and simple all at once.

Allie touched the glass with her fingertips. Molly would love that. Every one of her papers was about how much she loved a

certain white horse at her uncle's ranch. On a whim, Allie entered the store and purchased the horse.

Christmas was in two weeks and she hadn't figured out what she was going to get Molly. This figurine would be perfect. She'd gotten a little closer to Molly mainly because she was seeing her so much more with how much time she was spending with Luke at their place.

Were there still moments where she was unsure how everything would work out? Yes. But she'd finally gotten to the point where she knew what she wanted and that was Luke.

Luke and Molly.

Her insecurities were but a passing moment in the grand scheme of things. Every extra second she had, she spent with him. While he was busy with tree sales, she made sure to keep tabs on the students and their hot chocolate stand.

Her volunteer shift was actually supposed to start soon and she wasn't going to risk being late.

Allie picked up her pace as she headed toward her car.

The drive to the little market was quick. She passed a lot of folks as she turned onto the road that led to where the Christmas trees were being sold, impressed that it was still just as busy as ever.

The second she got out of her car, Molly collided with her, wrapping her arms tight around her waist. "Allie! I didn't know you were going to be here. My dad didn't tell me."

Allie laughed, her hands pulling Molly closer for a hug. "Well, I don't think your father has a propensity to keep tabs on the volunteer schedule. That's more my thing."

Molly grabbed Allie's hand and tugged her forward. "Do you want to talk to him? He's down this way." She tugged harder and harder, her smile wide. "I was talking to Sarah today."

"Yeah? What were you talking about?"

Molly slowed. "I told her you might become my mom. And she said..."

The blood in Allie's ears whooshed, roaring louder than any jet plane. Why had Molly said that? Had she heard something from her father? Or was this just wishful thinking? She couldn't imagine that Luke would spill this kind of information to his daughter, and yet there was a part of her that really wanted it to come from him.

If the flutters that accosted her were any indication, Allie knew she was on a path to finally having what she'd always dreamed.

"...but I told her she was wrong. My dad loves you and you love my dad, right?"

Allie blinked and focused on Molly again. "Um, yes. Right." As soon as she agreed with the girl she knew she'd probably made a minor issue into a problem.

"See? I knew it. She doesn't know what she's talking about. You're going to be my mom."

"Well, Molly, it might be—"

"I knew it was going to happen when I wished for it at the wishing well. I was down there with Aunt Jackie and we stopped and made a wish." Molly was excited to tell the story of her wish and this was big news to Allie. She was pretty sure Luke didn't know about it, either.

"Sweetie, not every wish comes true." Allie was trying to do damage control even if it might hurt Molly's feelings.

"The ones from the wishing well do."

As much as Allie wanted to agree with Molly and tell her she was right about everything, she couldn't do it. She'd probably already agreed to too much. Sometimes relationships didn't work out the way they wanted them to. And while she had a good feeling about Luke, she still couldn't bring herself to lie to the girl she'd grown to love just as much. "Well, sweetie—"

"There he is." Molly quickened her steps and hurried toward her father, her grip on Allie's hand stronger than expected. "Dad!"

Stooped over something at the wreath table, Luke stretched and straightened. He turned around and his eyes immediately found Allie's. A small smile hinted at his lips and he moved toward them. "There are my favorite girls."

Molly released Allie's hand only so she could give her father a hug. When she pulled back, Luke's gaze locked with Allie's.

She should tell him. He should know that his daughter was expecting the two of them to end up together—if for no other reason than for him not to be blindsided by his daughter when she admitted it to him.

Only, she couldn't do it. Molly was present and spilling that information seemed like she was breaking some kind of cardinal rule. So instead of telling him, she smiled warmly and placed a soft kiss to his cheek. Then she motioned around them. "This place is hopping with energy!"

Luke gazed around them, pride pouring from his face. "Yeah, it really worked out well this year. I wasn't sure the whole time, but I'm glad I stuck with it."

She moved closer, slipping her arms around his waist. "I never doubted you for a moment." Before she had a chance to kiss him again, he pulled back. "Sorry, I have to go check on something."

Despite the motion being more impatient than she had expected, Allie was able to brush it off. Luke was busy. This little market for his trees was something he'd put a lot of effort into. She'd let him have his fun and then she'd get to spend some time with him just one on one.

Molly headed off somewhere, too. There were several kids standing in a circle a couple yards away and she joined their group.

After their little conversation, she couldn't help but wonder what it would be like to step into the role of mother to her. The girl had definitely missed out on a lot in her life since she'd been raised by a single father. And she'd never want to replace what Shellie might have been to her.

The unease returned with a vengeance no matter how hard she tried to shove it aside. Stepping into the role of motherhood would never be easy when the child wasn't her own to begin with. There was only one good thing that seemed to bring Allie some semblance of peace. Molly seemed excited with the prospect.

So why couldn't Allie share the same outlook?

There was something holding her back. That was why.

And it had to do with Shellie.

The ghost of the woman Luke would never stop loving.

She didn't expect him to stop loving her. That was unreasonable. She just didn't want to always be reminded that Shellie had been his soulmate. There had to be a way for her to work through this. But unfortunately, the only way she could see this happening was by making Luke talk about her—something he'd already demonstrated he had no desire for.

Allie might simply have to live with this knowledge and be satisfied that Luke was with her now and that the past was the past.

A hand captured hers, and she glanced down at it. Warm fuzzy feelings spread from his touch, all the way up her arm and into her chest. She lifted her chin and gazed at the man she'd always loved.

He flashed a smile at her, and her legs went numb. All it took was that grin and she could forget her fears, her insecurities. All she needed was Luke.

His focus shifted toward the group of kids where his daughter was chatting with other girls her age. The smile he wore faded.

She brought her other hand to cover their clasped ones. "This was quite the turnout, don't you think?"

Luke's eyes flitted toward her and he nodded, though his smile was still dimmed. "Selling the trees this year couldn't have gone any better if I had been able to figure out a way to guarantee it. And I couldn't have done any of this without you."

Allie leaned into him, reveling in the way he could make her feel so loved with so few words. “I loved every minute of it. Does this mean you’ll be selling trees again next year?”

Another nod, though his gaze remained locked on his daughter. “I’m going to have to look at the logistics of it all, but I fully intend on doing this every single year from now on. The folks here and in the surrounding towns seem to love it as much as we do.”

“I think you’re right,” she murmured. Allie shifted her attention to Molly. Though he was participating in their conversation, she couldn’t help but feel like he wasn’t entirely present. She nearly asked him if he was feeling okay, but he beat her to it.

“I’ve been watching these kids with their mothers during the last few weeks.”

Allie stiffened. Had Molly told her father how she felt about Allie being part of their family?

“Molly’s missing out on so much.”

Her chest squeezed but she smiled. Perhaps they were all of one mind. This was the next step.

Luke’s voice lowered further, almost to a whisper. There was a yearning to it this time. “She’ll never know her mother like she should have, and I really hope that doesn’t make things hard for her growing up.”

All at once Allie’s heart shattered. He wasn’t talking about giving Molly a mother. He was talking about missing Shellie, about Molly being given the short end of the deal. Allie’s stomach swirled and her free hand clenched tight enough for her nails to dig into her palm.

Hadn’t Luke said he didn’t want to discuss Shellie? That was their agreement. His relationship with her was in the past. That was where he wanted it to stay.

Flushed and fuming, Allie did her best to bite her tongue. No need to start an argument right now. This wasn’t the time or the place.

“You okay?”

Her head snapped around and she glanced at Luke, the blood draining from her face momentarily. He’d probably caught her glaring. “Sure,” she muttered quietly.

“Doesn’t sound like it.”

All her resolve to keep these thoughts from destroying their happy moment flew out the window. “All right, here’s the deal. I’m not okay.” She turned her attention away from him, praying that would be enough to keep her cool.

But that prayer wasn’t meant to be answered.

Luke faced her, his expression void of any emotion. Of course that’s how he would behave after bringing up his late wife when he’d insisted on keeping her out of it. “What’s the matter?”

“There’s no point in talking about it. Clearly the rules don’t apply to both of us.” She wished she hadn’t made such a retort, but it was out there now and she’d have to deal with it.

“What are you talking about?” His frustration immediately bled through.

“You demanded we leave Shellie out of our relationship. Did you forget?”

He had the gall to look confused, which only stirred her fury.

Allie tugged her hand from his and pointed a finger at him. “When I brought up my insecurities about stepping into a role that had previously been filled, you didn’t want anything to do with that. You said you’d always love her but that she was part of your past. Well, it appears that you’re just as bad at keeping her there.”

Luke’s scowl wasn’t a surprise. She’d expected this to be an issue, which was why she’d wanted no part of this conversation. Not here. He pinched the bridge of his nose as he looked away from her. “I’m just... unsure. How am I supposed to help Molly know where she came from when I’m bringing another woman into our lives? She never knew her. All she has are my stories.”

“Well, I can’t compete with that.”

His eyes cut to hers, darkening. “What?”

“I can’t compete with a dead woman, Luke. And you’ve been holding onto her for nearly a decade.”

“I’m not asking you to *compete* with her. I just didn’t realize that we’d be... more.”

Her eyes narrowed, unsure what he was getting at.

Luke heaved a sigh. “When Pippa told me that you had feelings for me—”

Allie’s face blushed hotter than she’d ever experienced. “Pippa... said... what?” Humiliation drowned out the fears and frustrations she’d been dealing with, making it all nearly unbearable. There was only one logical thought that flooded her mind. Luke only wanted to be with her because there was no risk. He didn’t have to do anything to make her fall for him. She was already there. Her throat closed up and her stomach roiled.

He must have noted her change in demeanor. “Allie, it’s not what you think.”

“No. It’s so much worse. You’re scared of erasing *her*... and you think that’s what I want to do. It doesn’t matter that I’ve made this relationship super easy. You didn’t have to work to make me fall in love with you, and you’re still not ready to let her go.”

He shook his head. “I never said that.”

“You didn’t have to. And if you really think that I’m the type of person who wants to make either of you forget her, then we have a bigger problem than I realized.” She glanced off, her eyes burning with emotion. She couldn’t cry. Not here. Not now.

Maybe they needed to take a break or something—get their heads on straight. One thing was for certain, Luke needed to decide what he really wanted. And she needed to be okay with that outcome no matter how painful it might turn out.

Before she could make such a suggestion, Sarah's mother interrupted. "Luke, do you have any more Styrofoam cups? We're running low." She glanced from Allie to Luke with a smile and her expression faltered. "If this isn't a good time—"

Allie flashed her best smile. "It's the perfect time! The hot chocolate stand is what makes this place work. I have to get going anyway." Out of habit, she moved toward him and pressed a kiss to his cheek. "I'll see you later."

She strode away, chaos rampant within her. His eyes followed her, practically burning a hole in the back of her head. But he didn't chase after her. He didn't demand to talk or insist that he loved her.

This could be it—the moment she knew was coming.

Allie had experienced what it was like to be in Luke's arms, and she'd been burned because of it. Their next conversation would be the one to end it all.

And there was no running from it.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

SNOW FELL OUTSIDE THE WINDOW OF LUKE'S CHILDHOOD home. Sometimes it drifted down lazily and sometimes the flakes came down fast.

He could hear Molly playing with her cousins in the other room, but all he could think about was his argument with Allie. She'd brought up several things that made him realize he'd been doing everything wrong.

He'd allowed himself to get so wrapped up in his worries about Molly and how she'd remember her mother that he couldn't see what was right in front of him. It was definitely important for Molly to know how much Shellie had loved her, but two things could happen at once. He could start again with someone else. With Allie.

Allie was the perfect person for him to be with. Not only because of what she'd said but because of who she was. She'd cared about him long before he'd noticed her as more than her sister's friend, and she still did. She loved him—something he didn't doubt.

There was no need for him to ever worry that she would try to erase Shellie from their lives. She wasn't that kind of person. Not even close. But she did deserve to feel secure in their relationship at the same time. It wasn't fair or reasonable for him to expect her to accept second place.

He groaned loudly, but it did nothing to release the tension he could feel gathering in his chest. He'd made so many mistakes

over the last few weeks and it had taken that conversation for him to realize it.

How had he been so blind to what was going on right in front of him? Every thought he had of Allie was good. She'd been there for him every step of the way. There was no one to blame but himself when it came to what had happened the last time he saw her.

Luke pulled out his phone, glancing once out the window to note the snow was coming down a bit harder. The weather forecaster said this would be the storm of the century. No light dusting this year. He couldn't hold back a smirk when he thought of their history with snow in Sweet Bloom. They didn't even get a dusting every year, so thinking of annual snow fall was amusing. But this year they were expecting good bit more snow which could mean shutting everything down.

He opened his messages, even though he knew she hadn't responded since yesterday. After agreeing to snuggle up with them at Brent and Jackie's place for the storm, she hadn't said much else. The storm was probably going to last for a few days and they had plenty of food and drink at the ranch house. On top of that, they had a generator that would keep the lights on if it came to it.

Tapping his fingernail on the screen, he contemplated calling her. She should be here by now. The snow already covered the roads and it was drifting in some lower lying areas. This was basically unheard of. His thoughts immediately went to a bad place. What if she couldn't get out of her house?

Or worse, what if she could, but she'd changed her mind and she was trying to avoid him?

Didn't she realize that it would be better for them to all be in the same place? The unease continued to grow until he couldn't take it anymore.

Luke tapped her contact information and placed the call, turning toward the window as it started ringing. The snowflakes were larger, heavy-looking. His truck was already

covered in a thick layer despite the snow landing on a heated engine.

The phone rang and rang, but no one picked up.

This was *Allie*. She wouldn't just not pick up. She'd tell him she'd changed her mind.

Right?

Suddenly he couldn't be so sure. Even Luke knew better than to believe someone as good as Allie could take everything and keep taking it. She was human. There came a point in everyone's life when they weren't able to handle another piece of straw.

He stared at his phone after he shut it off. He could try again. He could call and call until she finally got the hint.

But based on the amount of snow coming down outside, he didn't think he could risk the possibility that something was wrong. She could have been on her way here and slid off the side of the road. She might have ended up in a ditch somewhere, freezing and with no way to contact him.

His whole body chilled at the thought of losing her. He'd already lost one woman he cared about. Allie had brought joy back into his life and he'd let all his doubts come between them. He'd never forgive himself if something happened to her, especially since the last thing he'd said to her hadn't been how much he loved her.

"Dad?"

Molly's soft voice came from behind him and he spun to face her. "What is it, sweetie?"

"Where's Allie?"

"I'm not sure, Sweetie."

Her eyes darted toward the window. "Aunt Jackie says there's going to be a bunch of snow. Is Allie going to be okay?"

He followed her gaze, hating that he didn't have an answer for her. "I don't know, pumpkin." The snow was going to be too much for everyone, including the folks in town if the forecast

was accurate. Nobody in Sweet Bloom could have ever prepared themselves for it.

The lights flickered overhead and Molly gasped. Additional screams from the children filtered into the living room from other parts of the house. Molly ran toward him and wrapped her arms around his waist.

Luke patted her head, knowing his decision had been made for him. He had to find Allie. It didn't matter if she was ignoring him or not. He needed to get to her to make sure she was okay. Luke pulled away from his daughter and crouched down. "I'm going to go looking for Allie. You need to stay here with your aunt and uncle."

Molly nodded.

"If I can't take the truck, I'll take Snowshoe. Tell Uncle Brent when you see if I take the truck or the horse."

His daughter nodded again, her lower lip quivering.

"Don't worry. I'll be back soon. I have my phone on me. I'll call if there's a problem." He gave her another hug then hurried toward the mudroom where he dressed in the warmest things he could find.

Each minute it took to saddle the horse felt like an eternity. The longer he took getting to her, was less time she had if she were really in trouble. Luke cinched the belt tighter, then immediately took hold of the reins and pulled Snowshoe out into the storm. Surprisingly, the horse didn't seem bothered by the flakes that fell around them. It was as if she were in her own element, made for this kind of weather.

Luke lunged into the saddle and dug his heels into her flanks, urging her to move as quickly as she could. And just like that, they were off.

Snowflakes flew into his face, stinging his cheeks and making it harder to see. The unusual cold temperatures nipped at even his leather-gloved hands. The only thing making this ride tolerable was the ability to forget about the elements and focus solely on his objective of finding Allie.

They darted through trees and along the trails that were covered in snow until they reached the road. There weren't any vehicles out, not surprising based on what he was currently experiencing. Thankfully, he'd chosen to ride rather than drive. Even he could tell the roads were hazardous from where he was on the shoulder.

The snow made it hard to see even a few feet ahead of him but then something red caught his eye. His heart leapt into his throat. Allie's car was red. He was close enough to her house that this car spun out in the ditch could possibly belong to her.

He urged Snowshoe forward, pushing her as fast as he could without putting them in additional danger, then he pulled up on the reins the second they got to the car.

It definitely was Allie's car.

Luke slid from the saddle. He dragged his legs through the foot and a half of snow that had drifted into the ditch until he reached the car. With shaking hands, he swiped at the windows and peered inside.

He couldn't tell if he was more relieved or worried when he found it empty.

"Allie!" He hollered, spinning around to look in all directions. "Allie, where are you?" He muttered a curse, checking the ground for any sign of what direction she might have gone. There were no footprints, the wind and additional snow had seen to that. Even the tire tracks had been covered. She could have gone anywhere.

Snowflakes clung to his lashes, and were now soaking into his coat, making him feel chilled right to the bone. Then again, that could be the fear he had for her—that he wasn't going to be able to find her.

"Allie!" He called once more, his voice hoarse. If he didn't find her soon, there was no telling what condition she might be in. He had to make a choice. Head back the way he came and pray she was bundled warm enough until he reached her, or continue forward toward her home.

The latter was closer. Allie was smart, she wouldn't try to make the whole trek to his place on foot.

Luke climbed back into the saddle and pushed forward. She had to be safe. There were no other options. Molly needed her.

He needed her.

It was about two miles to her house from where he found her car. If he didn't find her this way, then he'd turn around and circle back.

Each second that ticked by he lost more and more of himself. What if he'd picked wrong? What if he didn't look hard enough and she'd been covered up by the snow by her car? He nearly turned back but then he noticed a figure walking along the side of the road, hunched over.

Luke didn't want to hope, but it was all he had left. "Allie!"

The figure didn't stop, but the wind whipped around him, roaring so much it was possible his voice had been carried off with it.

"Allie!" he called again, this time getting closer to whoever it was.

They stopped. Then slowly turned around.

Luke was coming up on her fast, but even from this distance, he knew it was her. Allie was safe. He should yell at her for leaving her car. He could try to shake some sense into her for trying to drive her car in this weather rather than call him for help. But he was so relieved that all he wanted was to hold her close.

He launched from the saddle and yanked her into his arms, crushing her body to his. Heart thundering, like Snowshoe's hooves had the whole way here, he told himself he needed to breathe, to force himself to settle down or risk damaging his vital organs.

Holding her tight for a few moments, he allowed himself to breathe, to celebrate that she was alive and seemingly well. Her muffled voice against his chest seemed so far away and

she had to push against him for him to finally realize she was talking.

Allie peered up at him, her cheeks and nose red. “Luke? What are you doing here?”

“You had me worried sick.” As hard as he tried, he couldn’t keep the judgment from his tone. “Do you have any idea what went through my head when I found your car on the side of the road?”

Surprise filtered behind her eyes and she just stared at him.

Luke couldn’t take it anymore. He grasped her face between his hands before his lips crushed against hers. She was real. She was okay. And he wasn’t going to ever let her go.

Allie melted against him, giving herself over to him, kissing him back with the same kind of desperation he had felt moments earlier. When she pulled back, she appeared even more flushed, if not slightly embarrassed. “I got a late start. And I wasn’t ready to... talk to you quite yet.”

Guilt crashed over him, reminding him how he’d managed to mess up the one good thing going for him. But it wasn’t too late and he’d show her that. Before he could say so, she continued.

“And that made me get caught when the snow started coming down heavier. I made sure to go slow. I knew the roads were going to be icy based on the humidity last night. But my tires just weren’t ready for the drifting snow and the black ice. When I slid into the ditch, I couldn’t get out.” She grimaced and looked away. “I forgot to charge my phone last night, and when I grabbed it to call you, it was at one percent. I figured it would be better to head back to my place and call you from there.”

Luke took her chin in his thumb and forefinger, tilting her face so she looked him in the eye. “I’m just glad you’re safe. I don’t know what I would have done if something happened to you. It made me sick to my stomach, thinking I might not see you again.” His voice hitched in his chest and it took every last degree of control to prevent himself from breaking down in

front of her. He'd lost so much in his life. Shellie, his father, and to think about losing Allie would have broken him for sure.

He worked his jaw back and forth. The words he wanted to say to her weren't easy. He hadn't had to humble himself like this before. Even with Shellie, while they'd had their differences, he couldn't recall a time when he'd been so wrong about something he needed to apologize.

Luke brushed aside some of her hair from her face. It was wet, tangled and windblown, but she was still beautiful. He shook his head. "I'm so in awe of you. I want you to know that."

Her brows creased, making it clear she had no idea what he was getting at.

"I love you so much. I don't want to live a single day without you knowing that. You don't have to compete with anyone in my world. You should never have to worry about that when you're with me and I'm going to try to do better to make sure you feel heard."

"Luke—" she let out a little laugh but he held a finger to her lips.

"No, hear me out. I should have never asked you to not talk about Shellie. She's as much a part of my past as she is yours. I will always love her. She gave me Molly. She made me a father. But I need you to know that doesn't change how I feel about you. Right here. Right now. I love you, Allie. More than I will ever be able to express. This thing—between you and me—I don't think it will be easy all the time, but if you think you can be patient with me—"

This time she placed her finger over his lips. Her eyes filled with moisture, but she smiled at the same time. "I love you, too," she whispered. "I always have, and I always will."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

CHRISTMAS MORNING

Allie grinned, snuggled up in the oversized fleece throw that had been draped over the side of the couch. She watched with excitement as the three children grabbed gift after gift with their names on them and gave them a little shake.

“This one is Legos, I know it!” Casey exclaimed, shaking the box again. “You can hear ‘em.”

Molly squealed with delight when she opened the porcelain horse Allie had found for her.

Jackie perched next to the large front window with Pippa. They were smiling and chatting about how they’d never had a white Christmas before. Then Brent entered the room and interrupted them.

“You think this is bad? We should take you guys up to Montana to see the snow up there this time of year. Tell ‘em Luke. The snow came up to our chins one year when we visited the cousins in Rocky Ridge.”

“To be fair, I was three years old at the time,” Luke’s warm voice came from behind her and she glanced back in time for him to hand her a steaming cup of coffee. His smile warmed her more than the beverage ever could.

He walked around the side of the couch and took a seat beside her. She scooted closer to him, enough she could rest her head on his shoulder if she needed to. “Well, I think it’s amazing. I can’t believe some of it’s stuck around so long. The roads are clear so things aren’t still shut down which is good. When did

the weather guy say it would warm up enough to melt everything?”

“We’ve been keeping an eye on things. Mom was supposed to come visit for Christmas, but with the weather, her trip was postponed. We’re thinking she’ll be able to come for the new year instead. The temps should be back up to normal in a day or two, so you’ve got one more day of making snow angels.”

Allie smirked. “I wasn’t trying to make a snow angel. Someone made me fall and that was the only way to get up.” She gave Luke a knowing look and the others laughed.

“Dad? What’s this one?” Molly hurried to his side, holding out an envelope. “It’s got my name on it.”

Luke dragged his focus from Allie and gazed down at the envelope. His focus shifted to Brent then back to his daughter. “Well, how would I know? I’ve never seen that envelope in my whole life. Do you know anything about it, Brent?”

Brent made a show of craning his neck to get a better look. “Oh. I think I found that card out in the barn this morning when I went to feed the animals. I thought you put it there.”

Molly appeared to be utterly confused.

Allie winked at her. “How about you open it and see who it’s from?”

Molly was already halfway through tearing the paper open. When she succeeded, she pulled out a picture of a white horse. Her nose scrunched up as she showed it to her uncle. “Why is a picture of Snowshoe in here?”

“Can you read the card that came with it?” Luke gestured toward the envelope.

His daughter pulled out a small three-by-five card and squinted as she read, “Dear Molly. I’ve checked my list twice, and there’s no denying you’re on the nice list.” A grin split her face and her father motioned to the card again, so she continued. “Your uncle has agreed with me and was willing to part with a very special horse. From this day forward, Snowshoe will be yours.” Molly stared hard at the card as if she didn’t understand what she’d said out loud. Then the

realization hit her and she squealed. Her head snapped up and she stared at Brent then Jackie. “Really? Snowshoe is going to be mine?”

They both nodded but it was Luke who spoke. “Now you know what that means, don’t you? There’s a great deal of responsibility—”

“I know,” she cut him off. “I have to feed her and exercise her.”

“And continue to train her and keep her clean. She’s a living thing. She deserves respect and love. Do you think you can do that?” Luke took her hand in his, making sure she was focused on what he was saying.

Molly nodded, tears now streaming down her face.

“Good. Then you can keep her. But you need to thank your aunt and uncle and your cousins for giving her to you.”

She threw her arms around her father’s neck, rubbing her face in his shoulder. “Thank you, Daddy.”

Next Molly skipped over to Brent and Jackie with big hugs and lots of thank you’s. Her cousins made it a group hug and then there was laughter and joking about taking care of a white horse.

Luke’s eyes met Allie’s briefly and that’s when she realized she, too, had a few tears escaping down her cheeks. She brushed at them quickly and the morning gift giving resumed until every last present had been opened.

“I’m going to fix us some waffles.” Jackie announced. “Brent, will you help out?”

He’d just flipped on the television and quickly dragged his gaze from the screen. “But I want to see if there’s a game on...”

Jackie gave him a pointed look. “I could really use your help.”

Pippa yanked the remote from his hand and turned it off. “We’ll both help. I’m sure there’s plenty we can do.”

“But—” Brent argued, being dragged toward the door. “What about the—”

“There aren’t any games. The only thing on is “A Christmas Story” and you know it. I’m pretty sure it’s on every station unless the crackling fire is on a few of them.” Pippa shoved her brother toward the door.

“Well, that’s better than helping you guys in the kitchen. You’re just gonna make me cut strawberries or something.”

“Oh! That’s a great idea!” Jackie’s voice grew softer the farther she got from the living room.

Luke chuckled. “Looks like a couple someones want to give us some privacy.”

Allie snuggled closer to Luke and seemed to be humming contentedly. “I wouldn’t mind sharing the room with them. The kids are still in here.” As if her words had triggered a strange phenomenon, all three kids seemed interested in going elsewhere.

Casey and Danielle grabbed a toy they’d received and headed toward the stairs.

Molly stood up and grabbed her boots by the front door. “Can I go see Snowshoe, Dad? I want to give her a Christmas treat.”

He nodded. “Sure, sweetie. Be sure to bundle up really good. It’s still really cold.”

“I know,” she sighed. “I’ll be back in a few minutes.” She couldn’t seem to get her coat on fast enough. She tugged on one arm and was in the process of the other when she made it out the door and let it slam behind her.

Luke grimaced and Allie laughed. “I don’t think kids are ever very good at knowing how to shut doors properly. They always slam them a little too hard at school.”

He took her hand in his and traced the back of it with his thumb. “It’s probably a good thing we got some privacy. I want to talk to you about something.”

“Yeah?” Allie’s voice suddenly sounded tight. She couldn’t help but wonder if this was a continuation of their last

relationship talk. She'd felt they'd settled everything. In fact, she couldn't remember feeling more content than she did in this moment. Allie finally had a place where she belonged. When he didn't say something right away, she craned her neck around so she could find his gaze.

Luke's eyes pierced right through her, making her shiver and her heart rate accelerate. His hand tightened on hers briefly before he edged out from beside her and moved so he knelt in front of her. "I know this might feel sorta fast..."

And just like that her quick pulse went into absolute overdrive. He wasn't doing what she thought he was, right? Or had he simply dropped something he needed to find on the floor?

"But when you know... you know." Luke shoved his hand into his pocket and dug around a little before he pulled out something small that glinted. Pinched between his finger and thumb was a glittering engagement ring. "But now more than ever, I want you to know that this feels like it's meant to be. And the timing is perfect."

She dragged her focus from the ring to his face. She knew him well enough to see the fear that he tried to hide. She could hear the slight tremble in his voice. And then there was the way his hand shook just ever so slightly.

"I love you, Allie. There's nothing holding me back. And if you would agree to be my wife, it would make me the happiest man alive." His whispered words were a balm to her own anxious heart. There wasn't a doubt in her mind that he was right.

This was meant to be.

Allie nodded, her hand clasped over her mouth to prevent herself from crying. "Yes," she whispered back. "Yes, I'll marry you." She threw her arms around his neck, burying her face in his chest. "I love you, so much."

They held each other for a moment before he let out a nervous chuckle. "It's because I saved you on a white horse, isn't it?"

She pulled back quickly. "What?" she laughed.

“During the storm. I saved you. I was your knight on a white horse.”

Allie pressed her lips together to prevent another laugh then lifted a brow. “Actually, true white horses are incredibly rare. There are less than fifty of them on the planet.”

To his credit, Luke appeared surprised, his smirk fading quickly. “*What?*”

“Snowshoe would be what you’d call grey.” Allie laughed this time, loving the expression of shock that was written all over Luke’s face. “I’ve sorta been doing some research about horses lately.” She shrugged. “You know me. But if you want to go looking for a true white horse, I’m sure you could find someone who would point you in the right direction...”

His mouth hung open and he blinked a few times.

She couldn’t take the silence any longer and the rambling began. “The horse breeds you’re looking for are—”

Luke pulled on her hands, yanking her to her feet as he stood with her. Before she had a chance to react, he captured her lips with his, kissing her to prevent her from speaking. She went limp in his arms, allowing all the tingling sensations to come over her. When she was fully dizzy and felt like she’d been turned inside out, he pulled back. “Leave it to you to ruin the moment,” he murmured against her neck. “I’m going to have to kiss you a lot more often if I want to try to be romantic.”

Goosebumps trailed all over her body from head to toe. “You won’t get any complaints out of me.”

He dragged kisses along her jawline, making his way back to her mouth when the front door swung open then slammed shut once more. Luke broke away from her, though he kept one arm around her waist as he turned toward the intrusion.

Molly stood in the doorway, her mouth hanging open much like Luke’s had been a short while earlier. It wasn’t like she hadn’t seen them kiss before, but perhaps she hadn’t seen them so in the throes of a passionate kiss like this one.

Allie blushed.

Luke chuckled. “How’s your horse?”

Molly still gaped, her eyes darting from one to the other. Then her eyes narrowed. Allie wasn’t sure how she saw it, but she did. The young girl’s attention dipped briefly to Allie’s left hand then she gasped. “You asked her?” she demanded of her father.

Luke nodded.

“And?”

Allie laughed. “I said yes. I hope that’s—”

Molly squealed, kicked off her boots and darted through the room. Her arms wrapped around both Allie and Luke.

Allie blinked and met Luke’s eyes with surprise.

He shrugged, whispering, “I told her I wanted to ask you, but I wasn’t sure if you’d say yes.”

Molly tilted her face upward. “My Christmas wish came true.”

This time Luke appeared just as confused. “You mean Snowshoe?”

She shook her head. “No. That wasn’t what I wanted most of all.”

“Well what did you wish for?” Luke shot another puzzled look in Allie’s direction.

Molly glanced from him to Allie and back again. “My wish came true because Allie’s going to be my bonus mom. The wishing well came through after all. I was starting to wonder.”

Understanding filled Luke’s gaze and he nodded. The genuine smile he wore only made Allie’s stomach swirl with pure and utter joy. “Yes, she is and that wishing well is something else for sure,” he murmured. “I guess both of our Christmas wishes came true, Molly.”

Luke pulled his two favorite girls together into a big bear hug. He loved the feel of having a complete family and committing to it at Christmas seemed perfect.

“Can I be your maid of honor?” Molly blurted her question out, clearing thinking of the future.

“Hey now, Molly. That’s kind of rude. Allie gets to choose who she wants in the wedding and ask them. You’re jumping the gun a little.” Luke’s voice was firm but loving.

“I didn’t mean to be rude. I just want to wear a pretty dress and stand with you.”

“You’re not rude, sweetie. I think it would be a great idea for you to be my maid of honor. In fact, I insist on it. We’ll go shopping for dresses soon, okay?” Allie beamed at her soon to be step-daughter who was grinning from ear to ear.

EPILOGUE

THE WEDDING WAS PLANNED FOR THE SECOND WEEK OF APRIL which would be the height of the bluebonnet blooming season. There was a concern that the blooming of the Texas state flower might be stunted this year because of the Christmas snowstorm. But the hearty blooms were bolder and more beautiful than Allie had ever seen them. Her heart sang when she saw the meadow on Luke's property where the bluebonnets grew—the very spot their wedding would be held.

Today Allie was on a mission. She had three very important things to do. Her first stop was at The Local Table. She waved to the front desk hostess and then the bartender as she headed to Pippa's office.

She knocked on the door briskly then opened it wide. "So you know there's going to be a wedding in a few months. April 10th is the actual day."

Pippa smiled as she nodded looking up from her computer screen. "Yes, I've heard something about that." Tilting her head slightly she added, "It should be a lovely affair."

"That's the plan. And that's where you come in. We'd like to have the reception here. Would you consider closing for the night and helping me come up with a menu? Something really special and decadent."

Pippa jumped up from her chair and ran to hug her best friend. "I'd love to do that! You're going to be my sister so of course I'll do it!"

"Yay! Thank you so much. I'm so excited about that!"

“So let’s just get this out of the way first so there’s no misunderstanding later. This reception is all on me. I won’t take a penny from you and Luke and there will be no argument over that. This is my wedding present to you.”

Allie’s hand flew to her mouth. “Oh, but Pippa we never expected that. You really don’t—”

“I know I don’t have to do it, but I want to. And I’m going to. So that’s the end of that.”

Allie nodded and swept a tear away from her cheek. “Thank you. This means so much to us. But if you don’t mind, there’s one more thing. Will you be one of my bridesmaids?”

Pippa grinned. “Of course. I’d be honored.”

“And I would be asking you to be my maid of honor, but I already have one.”

“Hmm. That’s kind of mysterious.” Pippa’s eyebrows shot up with a slight bit of shock. “Who?”

“Molly. She asked if she could be my maid of honor. I have no idea if she knows the difference in the maid of honor and a bridesmaid but I figure it just doesn’t matter. Luke got annoyed that she asked, but I told him to chill.”

“Well I think that’s the sweetest thing ever.”

“Me, too. So it’s going to be Molly as maid of honor, and three bridesmaids. You, Jackie, and Danielle.”

“A family wedding party is the best kind. I love it. So what color are we wearing?” Allie could see the wheels turning in Pippa’s head. She hoped she didn’t have to overrule some hair-brained fashion deal but she would if she had to. She wasn’t willing to have them dressed in crazy dresses for her wedding!

“I was thinking we could go to Billings for a day of shopping. I’m thinking blue the color of bluebonnets will be the perfect choice. I hope we can find what we’re looking for.”

Pippa was beaming. “Oh Allie! It’s going to be perfect! I can hardly wait!”

“The wedding will be amazing. I know that. What I’m really looking forward to is the marriage. Your brother is the love of my life and I want to make him happy every day of our lives.”

“I hope he knows how lucky he is.” Pippa’s eyes brightened because everyone could see that Luke was walking on air since his Christmas proposal.

“I think he knows. We both do.”

Just then there was a knock on Pippa’s office door. “Hey Sis! I need to talk to you. You busy?”

“Well, looks like Luke has found us.” Pippa murmured. “Come on in!”

“Hey, I was just wondering—” His eyes grew wide when he saw his fiancé there with his sister.

Allie got up to give him a smack on the lips. “Hey there husband-to-be. Your sister just agreed to host our wedding reception. All we have to do now is figure out the menu. Cool, huh?”

“Very. Thanks, Pippa.”

“Well, I’m thinking some shopping in Billings tomorrow is in order. I’m about to invite everyone else. I’ll text you the details, Pippa. Will that work?”

“Absolutely. I can hardly wait.”

“And I’ll see you,” Allie pointed at Luke, “tonight for dinner at your place. Okay? Molly’s helping me roast a chicken. Don’t be late!”

And with that, Allie rushed out to get the rest of her plan put in place.



PIPPA LOOKED WARMLY at her brother. “So what are you here for?”

“Just wondering if you’d make a really special treat for the wedding. You know those black forest brownies they make at

the Sweet Everything Bakery in Rocky Ridge? Allie loves them. We brought some back one time when we visited the cousins and she went nuts over them.”

“Oh I remember that. And those things are the most decadent dessert I’ve ever had. I’ll call and see if I can get the recipe. Or maybe I get just get them to send some. Either way, I promise we’ll have some for your wedding reception.” Pippa couldn’t seem to stop her smile. “This is going to be so good and so much fun!”

Luke grinned. “I think it will. Thanks for your help. Seriously... thank you from the bottom of my heart.”

SECOND EPILOGUE

The dresses were purchased and altered. The young maid of honor and the three bridesmaids looked lovely in the bluebonnet inspired tea length dresses. Standing in the meadow of bluebonnets under a cloudless blue sky was inspiring and the scene tugged at Allie's heart.

But what made her heart overflow with happiness was Luke standing next to her. He looked handsome as ever. He'd traded in his Carhartt work clothes for a dark navy suit and tie, though he still wore his boots and hat. The nice boots and hat—not the dusty, dirty ones that he had to leave at the back door.

Allie wanted to remember this scene forever. The people she loved gathered around in beautiful clothes chosen just for this day. The day she'd marry the man she'd loved for just about half her life. Her dream was coming true today.

Pastor Petrie looked over the small crowd after everyone had made it to the arched trellis covered in ivy and blue ribbon and the music had stopped. "We're gathered here today in the presence of God and these witnesses to join this man and this woman in holy matrimony."

Luke squeezed Allie's hand as she got ready to say their vows to each other. They'd chosen to mix traditional and vows they wrote themselves.

Pastor Petrie directed them to turn and look into each other's eyes as they said their vows. "Luke, please say your vows to your bride."

Luke looked from the pastor to Allie and smiled. He looked a little nervous, but Allie wasn't worried he was changing his mind. She was completely certain in his love for her.

"I, Luke Carson Duncan, take you, Allison Hope Patrick, to be my wife. To have and to hold from today forward. I'll cherish you every day God gives us together. I'll have your interest first in all I do. You've been the sunshine I didn't know I needed. You've shown patience, tolerance, and love I never knew could exist. I can't imagine my life without you in it and I'm thankful I don't have to know what that looks like. I'll love you today, tomorrow, and always, Allie. Thank you for saying yes."

Allie was overflowing with emotion as she brushed an escaped tear from her cheek. She took a deep breath before she started speaking. Her voice was quiet and pensive. But it was also strong and sure.

"I, Allison Hope Patrick, take you, Luke Carson Duncan, to be my husband. To have and to hold from today forward. I'll cherish you every day that God gives us together. I'll enthusiastically support your work and ideas. I'll always be your soft place to fall if things don't go as planned. I'll be your biggest cheerleader when things are good or when they're difficult. You've given me the confidence to expand my horizons and I'm looking forward to what comes next for us. But most importantly you've shared your precious daughter, Molly, with me. I don't think I could love her more if I'd given birth to her." Allie turned to Molly and reached for her hand. Molly took her hand and was pulled into their embrace. "Molly, I promise to love and cherish you, too. Every single day. I'll love you like you're my own—because you are my own. You and your dad are a package deal and I'm the luckiest woman in the world to get both of you. I'll love you forever, too." She leaned over and kissed Molly on the cheek and the girl remained at the side of her father and her soon to be stepmom.

She looked at her dad and then back at Allie. "It's the wishing well. It works. I threw in a quarter and now here we are." Luke smiled and Allie covered a giggle with her hand.

And then after they exchanged rings, Pastor Petrie pronounced that Luke and Allie were husband and wife and that they were now a family. Luke and Allie kissed and then there were celebratory hugs and kisses all around.

Allie was fully present in the moment today. She was where she belonged. There was no doubt and there was no ghost. She would make sure Molly never forgot the mother she never met, but she would happily stand in as the bonus mom the girl needed and wanted.

And after almost wasting her life wishing for a man she didn't have, the wait was finally worth it. She wasn't Luke's first love, but she'd be his last. And she was good with that.



Find out what else happens in Sweet Bloom, Texas! Don't miss the rest of this sweet holiday romance series!



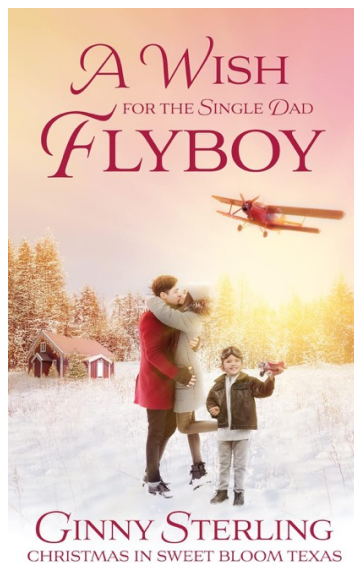
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