

BECCA WILHITE

CHRISTMAS AT CHAMBERLAIN



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To all of you who want to fall in love at Christmas

OLIVER

She's maddening.

My son's principal, Dr. Patrice Moreau, is standing me up. Not like for a date—heaven forbid. For a parent meeting. And I was planning to make this simple for her.

I'm easy to talk to. I'm delightful in a crowd. I make conversation flow. I mean, it's what I get paid for. It's my brand. I orchestrate critical discussions in businesses, and I have the award-winning trainings to prove it. Oliver Kline, at your service. But this woman seems determined to make our scheduled and rescheduled conversation—not to mention my life—not only unpleasant but completely miserable.

“And did she say when she'd be available?” I ask, using my stage-moderator voice, the one I employ when the discussion is not about me. The one that gives the spotlight to the other person. I'm holding my face in a mild smile, but this won't last too much longer. Not if the guy behind this desk keeps trying to get rid of me.

It's an indication how freaked out this whole thing has me that I can't remember if this guy's name is Matt or Mark or Mike. I know I asked. I always ask. And it's in that neighborhood, but there's no way I'm going to fake it and risk calling him by the wrong name. I scan his desk again for anything with his name written on it. Nothing.

His eyes move from his computer monitor to the door in the corner of the room and back to me. He doesn't look shifty. He looks busy. And like he'd very much appreciate it if I left.

But I can't leave. Not until Dr. Moreau agrees to see me.

And I'm not being unreasonable; it's not like we didn't have an appointment. We did. And she postponed it. Twice. And if she postpones any longer, the Chamberlain Academy campus will close for Christmas and my kid will be expelled. Officially.

I mean, I guess he's officially expelled already, but until I sign the form stating that I understand the punishment, it's still legally up in the air. And I definitely do not understand the punishment.

Maybe this is a power play. It wouldn't be the first time I've been "rescheduled" so someone else felt in control. Is Dr. Moreau that kind of person? Does she strike out at those who annoy her? Is she contemptuous of the parents of the students at her school? Is she the kind of person who leads through intimidation?

I'd know that's her game if I had a minute in the room with her. This is what I do. I read people. And then I create synergy. But the thing about synergy is you can't make it alone.

Or with an unwilling assistant-slash-gatekeeper standing between you and your goal. Today, Dr. Patrice Moreau is my goal.

The guy at the desk heaves a sigh, the kind that comes at the end of everything you can possibly try. The sigh of exhausted effort. Give me a break. He's been sitting in this office as long as I have—hours. He's not exhausting anything except for possibly my patience.

"Mr. Kline, you need to understand. The end of a semester is an incredibly busy time for the chancellor. At a school like Chamberlain Academy, nothing can be left unfinished. And unexpected difficulties arise. The cancellation of your meeting is regrettable, but so is your son's recent and past behavior."

If he says anything else about Hayes and his prank, I might lose my chill. I interrupt, and I never interrupt. I place my hand on the edge of his desk and lean just a little forward. Not

in any kind of threatening way. I don't threaten. The kind of lean that shows him he has all my attention.

The guy opens his mouth, but before he says more than "We regret the inconvenience," I give an understanding nod and talk over him.

"I hear what you're saying, and that is exactly why I'm here. There is a concern about some action she's taking in reference to my son, and I need to clear up the misunderstanding before the semester ends." I add my most winning smile. Literally, the one that won Best Smile at the Interactive Online Learning Academy's annual awards ceremony. You can find me wearing it in all my promotional materials.

Not that my work can be distilled to a smile. I know I have plenty more to offer than charm. But I'm not going to lie—the smile is kind of famous for helping break down walls.

Not like Mark-Mike-Matt's smile. It's not breaking down anything but my will to be polite.

Is that a smirk? Is he smirking at me?

"Like I said, Mr. Kline, Dr. Moreau is very busy as we send off the last of the students for their holiday. You have our apologies about the need to cancel. Perhaps you can sign the form and this meeting could be replaced with an email."

No way. I did not drive all the way up a mountain in the middle of Nowhere, Vermont to beg for a meeting that could be an email. I feel a wave of annoyance crest in my gut. If the chancellor would have taken any of the half-dozen phone calls I attempted in the last twenty-four hours, I wouldn't have driven here three days before Christmas to meet with her. I'd have picked up Hayes at his dorm and driven him home for the holiday, just like I have for the past two years. If she'd been more responsive to my messages, I wouldn't be standing here, watching the assistant who is very carefully staring at his computer monitor. I take my own professional advice and let all the negative feelings move through me and past me.

“I appreciate your diligent efforts.” I turn away from the desk and hear his sigh. This one sounds like relief. He thinks he’s rid of me.

I take off my coat and sit on a chair not directly in front of him, but where he can’t ignore me. I pull out my tablet and prepare to answer a few of the dozens of emails I’ve received since I arrived on campus while I wait for Dr. Moreau’s door to open.

“Would you mind sharing the guest Wi-Fi password?” There’s nothing but politeness in my voice. Politeness and the undeniable fact that I’m not leaving.

He looks like he wants to say no, but he knows—at least until the expulsion process is complete—I’m a tuition-paying parent, and there are probably rules against defying a direct request for basic services like internet access.

He gives me the code and I get to work, filling the time while I wait for the return of the chancellor.

I read over the latest details for my scheduled conferences in Dallas, Orlando, and Denver, including flight information and hotel accommodations. That’s January settled. Two more requests my team sent up the line for my approval. And then the personal messages. My team calls it fan mail, but that feels wrong. I’m not a celebrity, really. I’m a consultant. I facilitate corporate mental wellness workshops, and when people attend, they feel connected to me.

I connect with them in return, and I get called back for repeat visits. I give the people in my conferences hope; they give me gratitude. I give them keys for functional workplace environments; they give me amazing online ratings and reviews. I give them solutions; they give me money. Synergy.

So I answer most of the personal messages myself, at least anything more personal than “thanks for coming to keynote our conference.” Those go to the team.

I have to finesse the ones that come with offers, either for return events or more personal, um, *proposals*.

I'm not at all comfortable with the frequency of the proposals. And I don't mean marriage proposals, although there have been a number of those. I mean more like *invitations*. Ahem. I'm embarrassed even thinking about it. Propositions. From women. They're terrifying. And I need to be beyond clear when I answer them. Leaving no room for misunderstandings. A solid, unbending *No*. Every time.

I get it. I'm a single man with something of a following. I have a recognizable name and face, and I work out. And my single-ness is part of my story, so every conference attendee knows my status.

Being widowed is part of the script—working through unexpected tragedy, through grief, through loneliness. And occasionally (almost always), a few of the women in the audience will reach out in personal ways.

Often, way too personal.

I've got a few standard responses for those horrifying invitations, and I know how to shut down inappropriate conversations quickly, kindly, and unquestioningly. In general, those women seem to understand that I can't possibly accept their generous offers because I'm committed to helping my son heal. If Hayes minds being my excuse for dodging questionable propositions, he's never said so. And he knows he's my excuse. That's not a secret. There are very few secrets between us. I'm grateful he doesn't seem to mind, because I rely on him as my justification.

Mostly, though, the personal emails are less scary. Just a lot of normal people thanking me for helping them see their experiences and their possibilities in new ways.

I get through a good portion of my messages before the outer office door opens and a woman enters. She's in a perfectly tailored suit, her hair pulled back in some kind of formal twist. The guy behind the desk springs to his feet at an eager sort of attention, and I assume this is Dr. Moreau. I stand too, but with less anxiety and more dignity than Mike-Mark-Matt.

I glance at her while she's looking away, and her confidence is immediately apparent from her posture. Attractive confidence to match her style and her position of authority at the school. Not to mention a pair of beautiful, golden-brown eyes.

The two of them have a moment of silent communication, and it ends with a nod from the woman.

"Mr. Kline?" she asks, holding her hand out to me.

I step forward and shake her hand, giving her my gracious smile. The smile that assures her I'm happy to wait for our meeting—the one she postponed twice—as long as we can be on such good terms.

She doesn't return the smile. Not even a hint.

"I believe Michael told you my schedule no longer permits a meeting today."

Not an apology, not an excuse. And a lingering French accent (hello, very sexy) does nothing to soften her words.

I turn up the wattage on my smile and keep her hand in mine. "I believe we can take care of our little misunderstanding in only a few minutes."

"I doubt it."

With the slightest indication of a grin, that statement could have suggested flirting. The kind that demands a few extra minutes together. Or hours. Oh, make no mistake. There is no flirting. Not a hint of a smile.

With more speed than graciousness, she withdraws her hand from mine and checks her watch. Still without any softening of her expression, she says, "But I can give you five minutes."

She turns to her office door and I follow, grabbing my tablet, coat, and messenger bag.

At the open door, she indicates a chair, and I take it. She closes the door and moves behind her desk. She does not sit.

She's not tall, but as I sit in this low leather chair and she stands behind her imposing desk, she seems to be looming over me. It's a psychological trick, but it's not going to work on me. I know these tricks.

I wait for her to speak first. Another trick.

She might have meant the part about only giving me five minutes, because she speaks right away.

"Mr. Kline, I fail to see why you insisted on this meeting."

A fragment of a laugh escapes me. Just a single "Ha." But I'm not amused.

I lean forward in my chair, careful to keep elbows on my knees. No crossed arms. No waving hands. I will continue to project calm and reason as long as this meeting lasts. I decide to treat her statement as the joke it must be. "Really? When you're trying to expel my son from school in the middle of his junior year? You think I wouldn't have a few questions?"

My attempt to keep my tone light is at war with my need to defend Hayes and let him finish his high school education at Chamberlain.

"I hope you have many questions. For your son. Such as why did he think it would be a good idea to break into this building and vandalize the bell tower."

I chuckle. "Break in and vandalize are both very leading assertions. He didn't break in. If a door is unlocked, there is no breaking. And vandalism, really? Is that what you call it? Dr. Moreau, it was a Christmas decoration."

She makes an elegant sound that, from any other person, would have been a snort. I would bet a lot of money that this woman has never snorted.

"Christmas decoration? Is that what you call it?" She shakes her head as if the whole idea is ridiculous.

That's what Hayes called it.

And it suddenly occurs to me that I didn't actually see the decoration. Hayes told me what he did, and I believe him. End

of story. Except, is it the end? Is it possible he didn't tell me everything?

I can't back off now, though. So I stand up from my seat and say, "Maybe you ought to show me some proof. Or perhaps you'd rather speak to my lawyers." It's a grimy stunt, the kind I rarely stoop to pulling, and I regret it as soon as I say it. I don't want to be the guy who stomps around threatening people with legal action. But I also don't want to be the guy who watches his son lose his chances for a quality university acceptance. Or worse.

Dr. Moreau moves her desk chair aside and wakes her computer. With a few deft clicks, she pulls up whatever evidence she's got and spins her monitor to face me.

For a minute, I can't tell what I'm seeing. Then I recognize the Chamberlain Academy bell tower, the one that tops the building I'm standing in. This tower's image appears in the school logo. You can see it photographed on almost every page of the school's website. It's an elegant, modern tower in an elegant, modern building that somehow recalls the best of traditional New England boarding schools. And in this photo, it's smeared with what has to be spray paint. Streaks of blood red and neon green with splotches of white and silver. It looks like someone set a toddler loose with a few cans of paint and a blindfold.

This is what Hayes called a Christmas decoration?

I have questions.

Then I look closer at the picture.

Dangling from the clapper of the brass bell is one of those blow-up yard decorations of the Grinch. It's a little hard to tell that's what it is, since it's not attached to its fan, so it's flat. But the color and the facial expression is unmistakable. It hangs there, suspended, like a Grinch skin. Oh, that's bad. I stand up to look more closely.

Dr. Moreau clicks to the next photo, and a picture from a slightly different angle fills her monitor's screen. I can see the figure clearly in this shot, and it's wearing a skirt and suit

jacket. Not to mention a blond wig pulled back into a French twist. In case anyone still wondered who the Grinch might represent, a jaunty red beret sits on its head. The French Grinch.

“Okay,” I say, my hands held out in front of me in a placating gesture. “That’s not as bad as it could be.”

“Mr. Kline,” the chancellor says, her voice sharp as a shard of ice. “He has hung an effigy of me by the neck from my own office building’s tower. How exactly could this be worse?”

I shake my head. I can fix this. I can find the right words to help her see this as silly teenage behavior. She’s the head of a high school; it’s not like she hasn’t seen kids being dumb kids before.

“Some of the kids who go to school here probably don’t even celebrate Christmas. They might have no idea who you’re supposed to be. I mean, it doesn’t look *that* much like you.” I glance from the monitor to her face and see her expression. Steely. This is not going well.

PATRICE

This is the most infuriating man I have ever had the displeasure to speak with. And it's not enough that he stakes out my office after I cancel our appointment, waiting for me to return from actual school business, now he insults me. To my face.

The way he said, "*that* much"? of course I'm incensed.

Seldom do my concerns with student behaviors go this far. We have procedures in place. Student's misbehavior is handled by their advisors. In general, if a student's rule breaking gets to the point where it comes all the way to my office, I make a phone call, the parent assures me nothing like this misbehavior will happen again, and that's the end of it. Nothing happens again. These students are conditioned to obey the rules. To honor their places in the system. To keep moving forward to the planned and expected futures their families are providing for them.

Only occasionally will a parent defend the wrongdoings of their child, and I take those exceptions to the board. But I can't do that this time, not after the board has left for the holiday. This student planned his vandalism carefully so it would happen when the fewest adults were available. I phoned Mr. Kline last night and informed his answering service that his son is expelled. Then I refused to engage in a conversation about it. It's not how we generally work, but the board will understand my decision. They must.

I was unprepared to discuss this prank. I am still unprepared to discuss it, because as much as I'd like to believe I am above being affected by the insults of a teenager, Hayes Kline's little holiday decoration devastates me. I might be considered to not have a heart, but I definitely have one, because it's broken.

I know the students see me as unapproachable and distant. This is fine. I have plenty of people on my faculty who can be friendly and warm if that is what a student requires. But this joke suggests I'm unfeeling. The enemy of student happiness. And it hurts.

And now Mr. Kline stands in my office not only defending his son, but making his behavior a joke. As if it didn't matter how often this student breaks the rules of my school. As if there have not been repeated telephone calls about his misbehavior over the two and a half years of his enrollment here. As if punishments ought not apply to him.

Mr. Kline runs a hand across his jaw. If he's preparing another remark, I'd rather not give him time to finesse it. And for that matter, I'm not interested in looking at this man any longer. His charm cannot affect me, but I feel uncomfortably drawn to his face. Especially when he drops his stage-presence façade and shows a bit of vulnerability. Attraction to a student's father is not going to help me now. Best to get him out of here.

It doesn't look that much like you?

"After a statement like that, you cannot have more to say to me," I tell him. It's half command, half plea. I certainly do not want to hear more insults from him. I can't bear it. "Please gather your son's belongings and remove him from my campus. There is nothing else for us to discuss as far as I'm concerned."

He stands there shaking his head. "No, please. You don't understand. Hayes needs Chamberlain."

I can think of one or two things this student needs. I snap back at him. "Chamberlain does not need glitter balloons in the bell tower, nor any of the other contributions your son has

made.” The very idea brings an unpleasant wave of heat to the back of my neck.

“Oh. Dr. Moreau, I’m so sorry about that. But he needs to be here.”

There is sincere pleading in his voice. I understand that he believes only Chamberlain Academy can provide what his son requires. As much as I honor our school’s reputation, I know there are many other institutions that can make a man of this boy. Like the military. Or one of those programs where delinquents live in the desert with scorpions and rattlesnakes for months at a time.

It might be best if I don’t mention scorpions. “Perhaps he should have thought of his scholastic needs before he committed his latest act of terror.”

The sound he makes is half laugh and half contemptuous scoff. “Don’t be hysterical.”

In his defense, not that I feel strongly that he needs any defense, Mr. Kline looks immediately sorry he said that. And a good thing, too. If he thinks he’s seen my wrath at the acts of his felonious son, just wait until he throws in some good old-fashioned American misogyny into the mix.

I don’t dignify his terrible comment with a response. If my face is settled into the look I reserve for people who disappoint me in their debate skills, so be it.

He stands there looking at his hands for a few seconds before he says, softer than before, “Dr. Moreau, please. He’s not a terrorist. He’s a child.”

If he thinks he’s going to appeal to my soft side, he can think again. After ten years in the private school system, I no longer have a soft side. “This *child* has led several students into danger this year alone. But his punishment is not only about this year. He is a serial offender, and I have records of his advisor’s calls and messages to you about his misbehavior. He has damaged school property. He regularly waves aside school rules, and for what? To enlarge his image in the minds of fellow students. It’s a dangerous cult of personality, and I

have seen enough. Hayes is finished at Chamberlain, and the two of you are invited to leave campus immediately. If not sooner.”

There are details he will need to deal with, papers to sign; those things will take only seconds, and that’s a relief. I’m finished here. “When you’ve organized his next academic situation, you may request his transcripts from my office and we will have them forwarded to any school that chooses to accept him.”

That was cruel. I know I’ve gone too far, but I’m exhausted, and he baited me. This man is infuriating. And his son is ten times worse. It’s the end of a very long semester, I still have several dozen students on my hands as they await the last of the airport shuttles, and the barometer suggests we’re in for a strong stormfront. I just want to go to my house, light a fire in the stone fireplace, and not emerge until January. I could sleep for two days straight after the bustle of this semester. Not to mention I spent the hours between midnight and four in the morning standing on the tiny platform of the bell tower with my arms raised above my head scrubbing spray paint off the Hall’s bell.

Could I have called someone in from town to take care of it? I suppose I could. Could I have left the boy’s vandalism until the facilities staff returns in January? Honestly, no. I didn’t want anyone else to see it. I can’t even think of the images without feeling physically sick, and to let anyone else see the blatant disrespect? Even those who are employed to keep the campus clean and beautiful? Inconceivable.

My position here is only as strong as my reputation. If Chamberlain Academy’s teachers and students don’t respect me, I hold no authority at all. I don’t require them to like me. Not the faculty, and certainly not the students. It might be nice to have friends among the teachers, but friendship is not going to keep this school at the top of the academic lists. And students are definitely not going to be my friends. I run a top-tier bearding school for those who can compete in this academic realm; I’m not in the business of being pals with our students. I need to keep a solid emotional distance between me

and all of the students. Otherwise, how can I continue to manage the business of this place?

If I were to be seen as fun and friendly (as unlikely as that is), students would take advantage. They'd run wild. And Hayes Kline is the perfect example. By the time his misbehavior comes to me, I have to put my foot down. His pranks and jokes have been brushed aside by others in our system because he inherited his dreadful father's charm. Nobody ought to get away with playing the kind of tricks this boy gets up to and not paying a price.

This is the price.

Expulsion.

As much as I hate the thought of kicking out a student, I have to stand by the decision. It's the only way to maintain order.

Hayes Kline is no longer a student here at Chamberlain. In the least forgiving part of my mind, I wish I had a large rubber "Expelled" stamp and an official piece of paper to affix it to. I can practically feel the satisfaction that would come from slamming such a stamp into red ink and pounding it into his transcript. Vivid. Final. Unfortunately, the reality is less dramatic. A box to check in his record. A descriptive but not impassioned file to attach. The digital age does have some drawbacks.

Mr. Kline takes a step closer to my desk. I've never appreciated how wonderful a barrier such a large desk can be. I take a step back myself. I am comfortable with the space between us, and I don't want him to close any of the distance.

He looks at me in precisely the way his son looked at me when he begged me not to expel him for breaking into the locked tunnels beneath the campus this fall. Same tilt of the head. Same overt blinking of the eyes. It's definitely a practiced move. Not a bit of which I find sincere.

I know it's not sincere. Because after repeated apologies, Hayes Kline continues to make trouble for me. The same kind of trouble I imagine he learned by watching his father.

“Please. Patricia. Have a heart.”

Patricia? If he’s going to be condescending and much too personal, he might expend the effort of getting my name correct.

“It’s Dr. Moreau. Mr. Kline, I was not appointed chancellor of Chamberlain Academy because of my heart. The entire reputation of this institution depends on my objective decision-making abilities, and I have made my decision.”

How much clearer can I make this? It’s time for him to leave. But he’s not leaving. I cross my arms in front of my chest and stare him down, noticing that his carefully tousled hair has not shifted since he entered my office, not even in the extremity of his concern. He’s not one who’s likely to ruffle his perfectly coiffed locks. Too much rides on his reputation as a personality guru.

Most of my students’ parents are successful in their business endeavors, and I know a thing or two about the power of a pleasant face speaking the company’s message. But I also know a practiced approach when I see it. And I see it now.

The man is slick as spilled oil.

I knew when I watched one of his keynote speeches on the internet that he’d be precisely this insincere. How could he help it? It’s his whole professional image. Perfect teeth, perfect quips, perfect presentation. He’s paid a great deal of money to walk into corporations and tell them how to reach peak productivity—and it has nothing to do with work. It’s a blip in the culture of organizational leadership. Pushing employees to focus on interpersonal relationships. How to be friends. Maximizing collaborative opportunity. Building character—the kind that makes people *like* you.

Do people really believe that’s the answer to corporate motivation? Sitting around a campfire holding hands and singing songs? This emphasis on these soft skills? It’s a ridiculous trend.

Success follows careful study and hard work.

And this man knows nothing of either. He makes his fortune grinning into cameras and wearing perfectly tailored suits with fitted T-shirts. How could I expect him to come in here and show any sense of natural humanity or humility?

However, not even that approach would work on me. My mind is made up.

He's still not leaving. He's watching me. Perhaps waiting to see a crack in my resolve, something he can exploit. If he thinks he can life-coach me out of my decision, he is fooling himself.

And I want him gone. Now. I'm not interested in bending my determination.

“Mr. Kline. I have important work to do. I understand you are upset and disappointed. I assure you, you're no more so than I am. When any student crosses line after line, I feel quite as saddened as any parent could feel. Your student has repeatedly ignored rules and flouted expectations. He's used up all of his chances, and it's time for you to pack him up and take him away. Perhaps you can think of the mercy I've extended by not involving the police or having him charged with vandalism.”

He moves his hand across his chest and up his shoulder as if spending these few futile minutes with me has made him tired and aching. With a long sigh, he says, “This can't be how we end this conversation. Let him come in and apologize. There's room here for a change of heart, Patty.”

Patty? *Patty?* The back of my neck heats with frustration. What is his game plan? And why is he speaking to me this way? Does he think I might change my mind if he smiles and speaks of hearts and leans over my desk like this? My heart does not stand in need of any changes. These American parents are far too convinced of their own power to change policy. My father would never have argued with a school authority figure on my behalf. And if the boy was going to offer any kind of sincere apology, he would have done it already. No.

“Again, sir, it’s Dr. Moreau. You will kindly refrain from giving me any ridiculous American nicknames, and you will kindly remove yourself from my office now. Your five minutes are long past. I have no more time to waste discussing a decision that is final.”

He doesn’t even shift. He stands staring at me. If I reach for the phone, will he realize I’m serious? Will the action prompt him to give this up and walk away? Or will he require an actual security officer to enter my office and escort him off the premises? If he does, that’s no good for me. Security staff is gone for the holiday. All I have is an hourly employee from town who is being paid to make a circuit of campus three times a day while the students are away.

I could pick up the phone and pretend. But if he calls my bluff, I have nothing left.

Michael would come if I asked for him, but what do I expect Michael to do if a much larger man requires intimidation? Michael is a valuable administrative assistant, but he is not physically intimidating.

Now Mr. Kline moves his feet, widening his stance. His arms come across his chest and fold there. Another practiced move. He looks like a bodyguard. This is not helpful in the least.

When he speaks, though, it’s not in a voice roughened by anger. He’s quiet. Pleading. Gentle. “Please, Patty. It’s Christmas.”

For half a second, I wonder why I’m fighting so hard. I can simply wait until January, wait for Hayes Kline to perform one more horrible prank, and expel him then.

But I don’t want him coming back here. I don’t need a student taking enrollment space away from someone who would use his opportunities here wisely. Someone who would appreciate the privilege of a place here at this school. I don’t need the tension of wondering if this next prank is the one that will truly hurt someone. I don’t mention the fear that overwhelmed me about what could have happened. The

student could have fallen from the tower. Might have enlisted the help of other students who could have been badly injured.

The whole idea exhausts and saddens me, and I'm finished trying so hard to be polite.

"It is Christmas indeed. And if you recall, I'm the Grinch. And I've been hanged, so there's no chance for my heart to grow this season. Your son is finished at Chamberlain, and I am through talking with you about it. You know the way out. If you don't leave, I will call security."

He drops his shoulders. Hands at his sides, he seems to sag as he sighs. Not a single bit of that is going to work on me. Nothing will change my mind. I couldn't be happier that this is the last I'll ever see of Oliver Kline. He picks up a pen and signs the paper on my desk.

"Merry Christmas, Dr. Moreau," he says, his voice soft and sad.

I don't answer. I don't need to. He turns and leaves the room, and I am grateful that I will never see the man or his spoiled son again.

OLIVER

Why am I fighting so hard to keep Hayes enrolled in school here when the place is run by a woman like that? Dr. Moreau has no sense of fun, no sense of fairness, and no sense of humor. All of which are needed to create a happy life. Ask anyone.

Well, almost anyone. Maybe not her.

She might not agree, since she's clearly failing at all of it—fun, fairness, humor, and life.

I'm not saying she's not a good chancellor. She runs the school with precision, and there's a record of successful student enrollment in the Ivies. That's a big draw for a lot of the families who send their kids here. It was certainly part of the enticement for me to choose Chamberlain for Hayes.

Dr. Moreau does a very good job. She hires excellent faculty. She allows for incredible student opportunities. She's *effective*.

Why does that sound like an insult in my head? Maybe because there's a whole lot more to life than effectiveness.

We've had a few interactions over the past couple of years. She's informed me of some blots on Hayes's record. But today was the first time I was in the room, face to face with her, and I was unprepared for how intimidating she is.

Her French accent wasn't a surprise, but it does add to her back-off attitude. No, there was something extra alarming today. It's hard to explain it, but I guess I didn't expect her to

be so classy. Okay, I'll admit it—I didn't expect her to be beautiful. Not that it makes any difference. She was still grouchy as a badger. But I'm man enough to admit that I'm a bit unsettled by beautiful women in positions of power. At least, I can admit it to myself. It's not something I'm planning to bring up on stage. Or to my son.

After our first phone encounter when Hayes was a freshman, I did a little research on Dr. Moreau. She didn't come into administration the way most people do. She was never a teacher. Instead, she was one of the sharpest business consultants under thirty, according to *New Entrepreneur* magazine, and that's an impressive list to be on. She earned a PhD in organizational leadership, and—again—impressive. She's got skills. She just seems to be missing a soul.

Hayes has a soul, but he's missing some of the more nuanced parts of the brain, apparently. When he told me about his latest prank, he neglected to mention spray paint. Or the glitter balloon that exploded when the bell rang, sending showers of silver that remain forever all over the main quad. And he definitely didn't tell me about the effigy of Dr. Moreau. Hanging. From the school's bell tower.

He crossed the line with that one.

And maybe waiting until the last minute to pull the prank was a good thing, since most of the students had left campus by last night. Many of them were probably gone by the time the sun rose on the tower. But my quick internet search on the way to my car to intercept this expulsion shows it's no secret. Everyone with even the smallest connection to Chamberlain is going to see this. Everyone probably already has.

All his timing achieved was to test Dr. Moreau's patience. Which she apparently doesn't have. At all.

I make my way across the sidewalks from the Hall to the dorm where Hayes has a room. Most of the campus buildings are dark. I see a few kids dragging carryon bags across the icy sidewalks, heading for the airport shuttle buses. The last to leave, these kids either had late finals like Hayes, or are meeting their families on connecting flights to some holiday

destination—at least that’s how it’s been for the past two Christmas breaks.

When I pull open the dorm door, I’m grateful someone has kept the heat on. The glass in the door’s window is steamed up. The only thing that might make this bad day worse is cleaning out my son’s dorm room in the freezing cold.

I follow the sound of very loud music down the hall to my kid’s open doorway and find Hayes lying on his bed, his legs up on the wall and one arm thrown over his face. Maybe he’s asleep. He’s got a poster of Einstein, the one with his tongue sticking out, on the ceiling above his bed. Nothing is packed.

My son has no intention of moving out of Chamberlain Academy today. He was sure I’d save him from this. Of course he was. I always do.

I rap my knuckles against the door, not that he can hear me, and walk in. I press the stop button on his phone to kill the music. Sitting on the edge of the other bed, I say, “You awake?”

He shifts his arm and peeks at me with one eye. Grinning, he says, “Thanks for helping me out of this dumb misunderstanding.”

I shake my head. “Nope. The misunderstanding was mine. Hayes, you told me you put up a Christmas decoration. I pictured tinsel on a campus tree.”

He winces as he laughs, an effort to look both guilty and adorable. I’m very familiar with this look. I’ve seen it many, many times over the years. The arm goes back over his face. I stand up and tug it off again. “Get up, bud. We have packing to do.”

“Meh,” he says. “I don’t need anything from here for the break. I’ll just grab a new toothbrush from your cupboard. I’ve got a couple of hoodies and pajamas at home. Our social calendar won’t require more than that, will it?” I watch his grin fade as he sees I’m not smiling or laughing.

He sits up, then stands and spins around, his face a mask of disbelief. Like he’s searching the room for hidden cameras.

“Seriously? I’m kicked out?”

I nod. “Looks that way.”

“But, Dad, it was nothing. It was a joke.” He stops talking when I shake my head.

“Too far,” I tell him.

Now he looks embarrassed. “She showed you pictures?”

I answer with a single nod.

He doesn’t argue anymore. His sigh is the sound of a much older person.

I wrestle between wanting to wrap him up in a hug and wishing I was the kind of person to administer a well-earned slap (which I’m not), but I can’t stand staying here any longer than necessary, and there’s time for both sympathy and reprimands later. Now I have to pretend I’m okay with this expulsion, with the end of his stay at this school he loves so much.

Of course I’m on his side.

Of course I want him to stay.

But I’m not naive enough to believe that he doesn’t deserve this punishment. Not after what I saw. Besides, I don’t want him here if the environment is negative, and Dr. Moreau definitely does not give nurturing vibes.

I pat him on the shoulder, the best sign of solidarity I feel like I can manage right now. Then I open the closet and pull his suitcase off of the top shelf. I don’t trust myself to say anything else, because I really don’t want to talk myself into agreeing with Dr. Moreau. And I actually might get to that point, because she’s not wrong. She’s not forgiving, and she’s not fun, but she’s not wrong.

I send Hayes out to find a few big trash bags we can dump his things into. It’s not like I prepared for this by bringing moving boxes with me. And I have no doubt that Hayes knows where to find everything that has a shelf or closet in this building. I imagine he’s been in every room, cupboard, and duct in the place.

It's the work of only a few minutes to clear out the things he wants to keep. We toss clothes and books into suitcase and trash bags, and he lays his school-issued laptop on the desk with his room key and school ID on top.

He doesn't say a word as we heft the bags over our shoulders, but he runs a hand across the desk in a way that proves to me that he'll miss it. Not the room, necessarily, but his whole life here.

The poor kid. At only sixteen, he's lost so much, and it looks like the hits will just keep coming. Part of me knows it's not fair. The rest of me realizes that nobody's life is fair.

We make the move in one trip, and I ask him if he wants to grab something to eat before we hit the road.

Shaking his head, he says, "Not hungry."

Just as well. The café on campus is probably closed up anyway. And I really don't want to risk running in to Dr. Moreau again.

We shove the bags into the trunk and I dangle the keys. "Want to drive?" I ask.

He pulls open the passenger door. "Nah." He pulls the lever to slide the seat back as far as it will go, then puts on his seatbelt and slumps low in the chair, legs stretched out in front of him.

It's perfectly okay with me if Hayes needs to sulk for a few hours. The sky's getting dark, and the air smells like snow. If he wants to stare out the window, I'll be good to focus on traffic.

As we pull away from campus, I see him crane his neck to take one last look.

There's a stark beauty to these Vermont hills in winter. Acres of forests stretch on both sides of the road, the only color coming from a few towering pines sprinkled here and there across the mountains.

We're only a mile out of town on the winding road when we pass one of the airport shuttles branded with Chamberlain's

logo. I glance inside. There are maybe a dozen kids in there.

I'm glad I could come pick up Hayes. That I live close enough that I always get to bring him to school and pick him up for breaks.

"Does that shuttle sit in a garage somewhere when it's not time to move kids in and out of here?" I ask. Not that I think he'll know the answer, but it's a nonthreatening conversation if he feels like talking. "Seems like a waste of transit."

He keeps his head turned toward his window, but he says, "The Chamberlain logo on the bus is a magnet. It pulls off when the shuttle is being used for something else."

"You know this how?" I ask him, only a little nervous to hear his answer.

He peeks over at me, sees I'm not angry, and grins. "We made a brochure for graphic design class. Sales and marketing unit. Chamberlain-branded toilets, for the discerning alumni."

"Gross."

"Come on, Dad. Give me a little credit. We didn't put the logo inside. Just on the tank. It was a perfect fit."

"Nice one."

Not that I believe for a second that the joke stopped there. But I'm not going to press for more. I want to be involved, but that doesn't mean I need to know everything. At least not all at once.

The sky darkens fast, and cars coming up the road toward us start flashing their lights. Within another mile, I see police lights ahead, and the first of the flakes start falling. Before too many minutes pass, we're stopped on the road, cars filling the lanes in front of and behind us, and snow coming down hard and fast.

A trooper walks through the snow and motions for me to turn the car around and go back. I open my window. "We need to go on," I say, giving him a convincing smile. "Got to get home for Christmas."

He's not smiling back. "This storm isn't going anywhere, and neither are we. Head back where you came from and find some shelter. The roads ahead are impassible."

"Already?" I ask. "The snow just started."

"This is how winter happens around here," he says, weary patience in his voice. "There's a pileup a couple of miles down the highway, and with the speed of this snow, the storm's bound to get worse before we can clean it up."

I latch on to his patience and run with it.

"I really can't turn back." I don't want to explain, and I don't want to complain. But there is no way I'm going to be able find a hotel room between here and the school. There's nothing but tiny towns and forested hills, and it's Christmas time.

"Where are you coming from?"

I point behind us. "Chamberlain Academy."

The officer nods. "Good. They're a shelter-in-place approved location. Head back there now."

"I really can't do that."

He makes a point of checking out my electric Mustang. "You have chains?"

I shake my head.

"Then you're not going any farther. If you have to stop, and you will, you'll run out of charge and be stranded."

I hate that he's right.

He looks over his shoulder at the mass of dark clouds behind him and makes a U-turn motion. "Get moving and stay ahead of the storm. Be safe out there."

"You, too, officer."

I roll up my window and sigh. "Looks like we're not through with Chamberlain yet," I say.

Hayes slides a little deeper into the passenger seat. His sigh and grumble prove he's no happier than I am about this.

“Great. No place I’d rather be.”

PATRICE

They're very nearly all gone when the storm arrives.

Standing in the open doorway of the Hall, I watch the snow come down. Thick and heavy, it looks like a fairy tale. But this one won't end sweetly.

I know before the town's alarm system starts shrieking both through the emergency-alert sirens and on my phone that the last group of students won't be able to leave. Nor will I. Not that I was planning to go to the airport. Only a few weeks of blessed solitude in my house in town. No students anywhere.

These New England storms can move in quickly, but they're not likely to move out as fast.

The roads will be closed for safety. It happens fairly regularly. Not every winter, but now and then—the school has shelter-in-place approval, so it's not unheard of for us to, as the American phrase goes, lock down. Every other time, it's been within the calendar dates of a semester. Snowed in for a night. No problem. We simply carry on with business as usual. However, keeping students on campus during a holiday break is definitely not usual. I can feel my muscles tightening at the very thought. Each of these remaining students is going to miss a flight. I have no teachers on campus to keep the students in line.

It looks like I'll be spending at least another night here. And so will whomever is left on campus. I'm relieved that

most of the students have gone. Only one more shuttle is expected. No more than fifteen students could be on it.

Fifteen students, even ten, seems like a very large number when considering I'm the adult in charge.

The alert-siren system suggests roads are closing, so it's not as if students will be sent back here from the airport. They'll be uncomfortable sleeping in chairs and on the floor, but they'll be warm and safe until their flights can be rescheduled.

I'm not ready to face the students who await the last shuttle. But they'll be here any moment. Policy states that students meet here in the administration building at the sound of the sirens. I make my way up the large main staircase of the Hall.

Upstairs in my office suite, Michael is at his desk, copying and pasting something over and over.

He looks up, and I don't even have to ask. He'll tell. He always lets me know what he's busy doing.

He points to his monitor. "Parent messages. They want to know our plan for taking care of their kids."

I exhale a long sigh. "The sirens went off ninety seconds ago. How do parents across the globe even know there's a weather emergency happening in rural Vermont?"

My hand goes to the side of my neck, that tangle of nerves and knots where all my tension settles.

"Their kids must have texted them. Information in an instant. How can I help?"

Michael is the most concerned of any assistant I've ever had. He's always asking what he can do, and he's always already doing it.

"Keep responding to parents. What are you telling them?"

He looks at his monitor. "I pulled up the emergency plan for getting snowed in. After the meeting with the board where you presented the shelter-in-place plan, I wrote up a letter to parents detailing the parts they were most likely to be

concerned about. Sleeping arrangements, food, keeping warm.”

I nod. “Very good. Thank you.”

Michael beams. He’s thoroughly capable, and I regularly tell him so, but he lights up at a bit of gratitude.

I’m happy to pass out thanks where they’re deserved, but I don’t even remember the board meeting he referred to. Or its outcome. “And that plan is what? Where are we sheltering them? And what will they eat? And how exactly do we heat all of campus?”

Michael pulls up a page in his digital notebook. “The plan calls for housing any remaining students in Rowan Hall, since it’s the dorm closest to the cafeteria building. I’ve emailed a request to maintenance for the heat to be kept at full for the dorm and the cafeteria.”

“Is anyone from maintenance still on site?”

Michael looks sheepish. “No one has yet answered my emails, but I’m confident everything will be handled. And the temperature controls are digital, so they can be handled offsite.”

He’s confident. I wish I felt the same. I’m considerably less confident about this whole situation. It’s a holiday break. No one should feel the need to answer their work messages. No one but me—and Michael. Business as usual for the chancellor’s office.

And he’s doing all he can.

“Who is left on campus?”

He clicks to another screen and says, “There was one more shuttle scheduled. Eleven kids were supposed to be on it.” He swivels his monitor so I can see the list, but I don’t read it now.

“Anyone remaining from food service? Janitorial? Security?”

I already know the answer, but there’s a tiny ray of hope that Michael will give me good news.

He shakes his head. “Steven from maintenance lives in town, so he’s as available as the roads permit. Other than that? You and me. And these eleven remaining students.”

I rub at the side of my neck again. “Very well. Thank you for responding to the parents. Please make sure all battery powered electronics are plugged in and charging, just in case we lose power. I’ll go downstairs and interface with the students.”

Can he hear the dread in my voice?

Interfacing with the students is not my best job skill. And that’s usually fine. It’s not what I was hired for. Administration is outward-facing work. I deal with parents, with donors, and with the public. Not to mention the board.

Teenagers are not my job. Teachers are the ones who get to know the students. Who foster personal relationships with them.

The teachers and Wanda.

Somehow, even though she must be nearly eighty, Wanda Chamberlain remembers the names of every student, teacher, staff member, and special guest at Chamberlain Academy. She’s a marvel.

I know my talents and strengths. I administer this organization like the business it needs to be. I keep records. I address necessary changes based on data-driven policy recommendations. I seek out and implement best practices according the latest educational research and its correlation with traditional success. I maintain professional relationships with admissions teams at the most important universities. I keep everything running smoothly here. And Wanda watches over the school as if it’s her family.

When I first came to work at Chamberlain, I was skeptical about the organization’s emphasis on the so-called *soft skills*, such as collaboration, leadership, communication, or time management. For me, these have always been secondary to the more necessary requirements for making things happen—certifications, portfolios, and test scores. I assumed it couldn’t

hurt to humor this elderly woman who runs the Chamberlain Trust. She couldn't stay on the board long. Little did I know that ten years later, she'd still be here, as soft as ever, and I'd be convinced her methodology is completely valid.

As long as someone else is here to manage administrative duties. That important work is left to me. If there's a part of me that wishes I could balance what I do and what she does, it's a piece of me that resides far, far from the surface.

Maybe someday I'll have a position that allows me to connect with people in a more emotional way. As I watch Wanda in her daily interactions with students and faculty, I see how much such connection fills her. I believe it could fill me, too. But not now.

Now Wanda and I work together in tandem, each of us focusing on our chosen angle of approach, and the school is all the better for our teamwork. Successful students. Consistent donations. Proven business model. Great acceptance rates at the best universities. Positive outcomes.

And today, Wanda is safely in her home in town. And I am here with the students. So many students.

Of course, eleven isn't *so* many. And I have very little worry about them misbehaving, especially since Hayes Kline is gone. For good.

But what will these students expect from me now? Even if they only need to stay one additional night, their holiday plans are disrupted. They were all expecting to be gone within the hour. To be headed home, or traveling somewhere with their families. I am a poor excuse for anyone's family. I know I'm not warm and welcoming. I do not entertain. I do not chat. I am nothing like a mother figure, an auntie, or a friend. Hayes Kline wasn't wrong when he made a sign for my office door stating, "There will be no fun here."

There are places for fun. My office is not one of them.

I did not get involved in the discussions between him and his advisement teacher. I trusted her to capably deal with his misbehavior. But now I wonder if I should have put a bit more

fear into him at every possible point so his pranks didn't end the way this last one did. Of course, I am not disappointed to be rid of him, so I can't regret all of my choice in regards to this particular student, but if I had given the previous incidents more attention, might he have made different choices? It's too late to wonder about that now.

I walk down the many stairs of the Hall to find eleven students and their luggage in front of the large fireplace in the lounge area on the main floor.

I clap twice. "*Alors.*"

This immediately gets their attention. Those who were sprawled onto couches leap to their feet. Almost as if they were planning to salute. I'm relieved that their show of respect is not diminished by the unexpected events of the day.

"Thank you for gathering here at the sound of the alarm sirens. Well done."

I stay at the edge of the lounge space, leaving the students standing together facing me. I have no need to be part of the group. They stand in a sloppy semicircle, staring at me. Waiting for me to fix this.

"I assume you are in touch with your families," I begin, but someone interrupts me.

"What's going on?" The speaker is a girl who might be a senior. She looks old enough to pass for twenty-five, her golden hair spilling over the shoulders of her ski parka. Her hands are on her hips in an attitude of frustrated impatience.

I try not to bristle at her question, but can she not hear that I'm explaining exactly that?

"As you communicate with them—" I am cut off again. The girl's question seems to set off an avalanche of student commentary.

"When can I go home?"

"If I miss my flight to Biarritz, my mother is going to lose it. And you and I do not want to be at the receiving end of that, I promise."

“You’re getting us out of here, right?”

“My dad offered to send in a helicopter.”

“How are you planning to get us to the airport?”

“I should have left yesterday.”

“Is it seriously getting darker outside? It’s three in the afternoon.”

“I can’t stand one more day on this campus.”

I put my fingers to my lips and whistle sharply.

The sound cuts through the whining and has its effect. The room goes silent. How do I tell them I wish I could magically transport them all to where they wish to be?

“I do not control the weather,” I say.

This may not be helpful, but it reminds these children that they are not being kept here by my sinister desires.

With a short sigh, I go on. “But as it happens, the weather might control us, at least for some time. Generally, in a winter storm, the town’s sirens signal the roads are closing. This can be cleared up in as little as a few hours, depending on the severity of the snowfall.” I don’t say that closures can also last for several days.

Before I lose control of the conversation again, I go on. “This storm may be unexpected, but it is not unprecedented. Within a decent time period of the storm’s end, we will receive snowplow services and we can get you all to the airport and on to your holiday destinations.”

I don’t believe any of them hear the end of the sentence. The muttering, the displeasure, it all overpowers my voice.

I carry on regardless. “In the meantime, we will operate according to the school’s set arrangements for emergency procedure.”

“Emergency?” I don’t see who echoes the word, but the voice is high with panic.

“What are those arrangements, exactly?” the adult-looking girl asks, still with hands on hips, still looking like a model for a ski resort’s advertising.

There are so many questions I can’t answer, and this is at the top of the list.

I’m saved from the need to pretend I know precisely how I’m going to proceed by the sound of the Hall’s main door banging open. A massive gust of wind ushers in a laughing horde of teenagers followed by a woman in a stocking cap. Thick flakes of snow blow in on the wind and melt on the warm wood floor.

Students rush together from both directions, some running to welcome these newcomers, others hurrying toward the fire burning against the lounge’s wall. There must already be more snow than I thought, because clumps are falling from boots and shoes.

I walk toward the woman who accompanied the students and recognize the logo on her jacket. She’s the driver from the shuttle that left an hour ago.

“Roads closed,” she says, an embarrassed grin on her face. “Sorry. They told us to come back.”

“Nothing to be sorry for,” I say. Women are entirely too likely to apologize for things over which they have no control.

“Right. But you weren’t counting on our return. I wish I could have delivered these kids to the airport and gotten them off your hands.”

I wish it as well, but it will be no use saying so.

Instead of answering directly, I nod. “Of course. Thank you for getting the students back here safely.”

She’s wincing. Like something pains her. “I’m afraid I’ll have to stay here, too. There doesn’t seem to be a better option.”

I certainly hope the highway patrol isn’t sending any other cars in my direction, but I’m sure we can find room for this woman.

This woman who certainly has a name.

I hold out my hand. "I'm Dr. Patrice Moreau. Chancellor."

She smiles. "Millie White. Driver. Pleasure to meet you."

We shake hands. "You're very welcome here," I say, hoping it sounds like I'm channeling Wanda. As foreign as it is to behave like she does, I'm giving it my best try.

"I'll go unload the shuttle. The kids' bags are in the hold."

This is part of her job, and I'm impressed by her dedication. That doesn't change the dismay I feel at the extra dozen students we need to accommodate.

I watch the driver walk back out into the growing storm. Just as the door closes behind her, it slams open again.

I turn to see Hayes Kline strut into the Hall.

There is no sunlight through the dark, swirling clouds outside, but somehow this boy seems lit by a glow.

He calls out, "Hey, Chamberlain. Look who's back."

A few of the students cheer and rush him.

No.

Absolutely not.

This is not possible.

The boy is expelled. Gone. I watched his father's silly sports car drive out of the parking lot. And there was no sense of regret. Only a vast feeling of relief that this chapter of my tenure here was ended.

No more Hayes Kline means no more dangerous pranks. No more careful manipulation of stories so I can continue to make the school look its best. No more worry about other students imitating his games.

And here he stands in the doorway of the Hall, grinning and laughing with some of his entourage.

At least the other students haven't raised him onto their shoulders. Yet.

This is a terrible addition to a terrible afternoon.

I resent his return, his golden glow of health and cheer, and most especially, his father. If Oliver Kline had not insisted on meeting with me, he and his son would have been long gone when the storm began. Far away from our campus, never to return.

If Hayes is in the room, Mr. Kline must be around here somewhere.

As the thought crosses my mind, the door blows open again, and Oliver Kline enters the hall burdened with half a dozen bags and suitcases.

“Come and get it, people,” he calls, and the students who just returned from the shuttle run to gather their luggage.

I’m irritated. It grates that the students respond so quickly to him. Why are they listening to this man when they only want to argue with me?

“All right. Listen up.” He isn’t going to stop. He’s just going to talk to these students as if he’s in charge. As if he belongs here.

“If you’re still wearing a coat and shoes, come help me bring in the rest of the bags.” He says it as if it’s the most natural thing in the world to ask these people to carry suitcases.

And maybe it is, because most of the students follow him out the door. Within a couple of minutes, they’re back, arms laden with luggage and hair dusted with snow.

Millie White is the last to return inside, and she pulls the door closed gently behind her.

I’m walking over to the door to invite her all the way inside and close to the fireplace when I hear a loud voice.

“Okay, then,” Oliver Kline says, clapping his hands and then throwing an arm over his son’s shoulder. “Let’s get warmed up and then we can figure out how to make this work.” He steps toward the huge fireplace, and several of the kids follow him. Stand near him. Is he working some kind of

life-coach voodoo on my students? Because I refuse to be delighted about that.

Two of the younger-looking students are standing near me, watching me. They must be waiting for instructions. I wish there was someone here who could instruct me. I should have asked Michael for a copy of the shelter-in-place plan.

I gesture for Millie to take a seat on a couch, then I turn away from the gathering and phone Wanda Chamberlain.

“Dr. Moreau,” she says as she picks up. “Isn’t it the loveliest snow? I was thinking about checking in with you, dear. Did you get off campus all right?”

I wish I could say yes. I want to remove all concern, to prove myself able to deal with this or any situation. But I won’t lie to Wanda. And she needs to know students are stuck here.

She will know it’s not my fault. She will not blame me for a freak storm. I can tell her.

“No. And neither did two dozen of our students. Roads are closed, and I intend to move forward with the emergency plan as designated and approved by the board.”

“You are a very capable woman,” she says. “I have every confidence in you.”

This is nice to hear, but I was hoping for a bit more constructive feedback. Such as what she’d like to see me doing with these people. How she’d entertain them if she were here.

But she isn’t here. This is all on me.

OLIVER

I watch from the corner of my eye as Dr. Moreau stares at the screen of her phone. Maybe that was her lifeline, and whoever's on the other end just cut her off. In any case, she looks like she's not feeling so in control.

For a few seconds, I'm glad. She's out of her depth here, and I get to watch the floundering struggle. Then I remember I'm not a monster. I can help. I'm already helping by bringing positive energy to the room. By giving the kids a way to contribute. I can make this easier for her, for the kids, for everyone.

"What's the food situation?" I ask a girl standing near Hayes, knowing that Dr. Moreau must at least have a plan for how they'll be fed tonight.

The girl shrugs. "How am I supposed to know?" It only takes a few seconds for her expression to change to one of worry and concern. "Am I supposed to know? Does someone have a plan?"

I appear to have randomly chosen an anxious kid to ask. Not ideal. Okay. I can go to the source on this one.

I whisper to Hayes to talk to the girl about anything stress-free and walk over to Dr. Moreau. It takes all the distance between us for me to put my sincere and friendly face on.

"Hello again," I say. My smile feels a little forced, but it's there.

She gives a short single nod.

“I really hate to intrude, but I’m going to have to impose on your hospitality until this storm blows over.”

Another single nod. She’s not wasting any words on me.

“Hayes and I would go somewhere else to wait out the storm if there were any options,” I say.

No response at all this time.

“And while we’re here, we’ll do whatever we can to help things run smoothly. Be on our best behavior. Practically invisible. You won’t even know we’re around.”

To this she makes a little sound of air between her lips. *Pft.*

I follow her gaze to the group of kids who are now all standing in a circle around Hayes, who I can’t really see except for his feet. He’s walking across the floor on his hands. The kids are chanting. Cheering. And Hayes is singing the Chamberlain Academy anthem, a terrible holdover from the civil war era filled with antiquated words like *valiant* and *behooves* and *vigor*.

It’s not like people sing this song anymore. Hayes discovered it when he was doing a research project for a class last year, and when he found how—not to sugar coat it—stupid the lyrics are, he made it his duty to educate the entire student population about the old school song.

There are at least seven different videos online showing him singing the song, teaching it to the guys in his dorm, getting the student body to join him in singing it at a whole-school assembly. It may have started as a mid-nineteenth century pseudo-hymn, but it’s Hayes Kline’s song now. And everyone in this room knows it. Including Dr. Moreau.

“Mm. Invisible.” If she was going to crack a smile, this would be the moment to do it.

The moment passes, smile-free.

“Okay. Well. How can I be helpful?”

She almost looks at me, but not quite. “Difficult to say. What are your skills?”

Ouch.

And what do I even say to that? I'm excellent at enhancing synergistic team energy while validating differing points of view in a corporate context? Great on the business resume. Not so much in the snowstorm.

And she's probably not interested in my excellent volleyball serve. Or my good taste in shoes.

"I can shovel the sidewalks between where the kids are sleeping and where they're eating. Is that helpful?"

Have you ever seen someone nod grudgingly? It's surprisingly satisfying.

"And I can help with entertainment."

Satisfaction evaporates with her withering glare. Okay. No entertainment.

"I can chop and slice. What's the dinner plan?"

She turns to face me. "Do I look like a person who has a dinner plan?" she snaps.

I take a step backward and put my hands up in front of me. It's a reflex. I don't actually think she's going to hit me. But she looks like she'd really enjoy hitting someone right now, and I happen to be the one standing closest to her.

My reaction must surprise her, because she immediately softens. Not in her tone, but in her body language.

Or maybe she sags. Whatever the case, she no longer looks like she's prepared to spring from the ground and sink claws into my neck.

She takes a visible breath. "Pardon. If I may, I'd like to try that again. I have no idea about the food stores. I imagine everything fresh is gone from the cafeteria refrigerators because of the holiday break. Perhaps I can get some groceries delivered before the storm becomes too drastic."

We both look outside. It's difficult to see out the window on account of the sideways-blowing snow. And it's getting

very dark. Much darker than it would be at this hour without the storm.

“We might have missed that window already.” As soon as I say it, I regret it. It doesn’t help, and it might sound critical.

Maybe I can salvage something from this conversation, though. “Would you let me borrow the keys to the cafeteria? Maybe I can figure out the systems at play. There has to be something I can whack together so nobody goes hungry.”

“Mr. Kline, I am not handing over any keys to you.”

Is it fair that she refuses to trust me? No. Do I understand where she’s coming from after the prank my son pulled yesterday? Maybe a little.

“Is there someone left on campus that you trust? You could send them to check the refrigerators and the freezers and the pantry. Take pictures. I can make a meal plan from there.”

She sighs. “That sounds like a lot more work than it needs to be.”

Well, yeah. That’s why I asked for the keys, so I could do it myself. She’s really not going to make it easy for me to be helpful.

Is this about Hayes? Or about how badly I handled our meeting earlier? If it is either of those, I can try to start us over. Begin again.

I glance around to make sure there aren’t kids listening and lean close to keep it that way.

“Maybe you’ve pulled the school through experiences like this a hundred times, but I’ve never been in a situation that even comes close. I’m way out of my depth here, Dr. Moreau, and I’m not the one in charge. I know you’d prefer it if I wasn’t on campus, but there’s no place else for me to go. We’re stuck here, at least for a little while, and I’m trying to help you. If you can think of a way you’d like that to happen, I’m ready and willing to do whatever you ask me to do.”

She stands there, her phone still in her hands, and watches me. Is she waiting for me to burst out laughing? To say I’m

only joking, and that I can't wait to watch her mess this up? Or, worse, is she formulating a way to tell me to take my kid and brave the elements? Is she plotting how to turn me away?

Finally, she points to the ceiling, soaring at least three stories above us.

I look up. No idea what I'm supposed to be seeing there.

When I glance back at her, she's holding her phone to her ear and tapping her foot against the wood floor. She's still in her suit and high heels, and I wonder if she wishes she was wearing jeans and a hoodie. But maybe she's not a jeans and sweatshirt woman. Maybe she only wears suits. All the time. Every day.

She certainly looks beautiful though.

I don't know where that thought comes from. I am very uncomfortable thinking about Dr. Patrice Moreau as a woman, not to mention a beautiful one, but now that I've considered it again, I can't unsee it. She has a very nice face, when she's not actively scowling at me. And her figure is elegant in this suit. I bet when she lets her hair down it curls over her shoulders ...

Nope.

Not going there.

I return my attention to the actual version of the woman and let the fantasy version recede into the darker corners of my mind, never to resurface.

I try not to listen as she speaks into the phone, asking someone to come downstairs.

Looks like she's going to send her trusty assistant into the kitchens. Fine. He can freeze himself walking around campus.

I want to walk away from her, to go over to the groups of kids standing around the fire. To joke around with them and put them at ease. To hang out with my son. But I worry about leaving her here alone.

Not that she wants my help, or that she necessarily needs it. Maybe there's a full staff somewhere nearby, people who could take care of everything. But I doubt it. If she had all her

usual help, she wouldn't look so distressed. Dr. Moreau didn't ask for this situation. And since we're both here in the middle of a mess, I'd like to be a useful adult.

When she clicks off her call, she slides the phone into the pocket of her suit jacket. She makes eye contact with me and then gives a barely perceptible nod toward the kids.

I don't know what that means until she walks away from me, shoes tapping on the floor boards. After she's gone a few steps, I realize she must have been motioning for me to follow her. There appears to be a language of gestures I'm going to need to learn if I'm going to keep up with this woman.

I wander after her, jogging a couple of steps to catch up.

The kids who see her coming go immediately silent, and the quiet unfolds around the circle. I wonder if she knows they're afraid of her.

"Have you all contacted your adults?" Dr. Moreau asks.

There are murmurs and nods, but I see a few kids are silent.

There's a better question, and so I ask it. "Who has not yet been able to reach their parents?"

Two of the girls and a boy who looks way too young for high school raise their hands. I wave them over to me and walk to the side of the couches.

"I'm Oliver," I say. "Hayes's dad." I point at him over my shoulder. One of the girls looks impressed. The other looks like she's never been impressed by anything in her life.

The boy looks nervous. I decide to start with him. I give him the smile my team (and dozens of market tests) determined totally nonthreatening and non-creepy.

"How about you tell me your name and what you think is going on with your folks."

He steps just a bit closer. "I'm Fletcher. My parents are flying to meet me in New York. So they're in the air."

I nod. “Nice. Spending Christmas in the city?” I ask, hoping to help him feel calmer.

He shakes his head. “Layover. Then Toronto for two weeks.”

Not if this storm keeps heading in the direction it’s going. But I don’t tell him that.

“Great,” I say. “Keep checking your phone, and I’ll make sure we also try to get in touch with them as soon as possible. You let me know if you feel worried, and I’ll take care of you, okay?”

I can tell he’s trying to make himself look taller. Older. But he doesn’t reject my offer outright, so maybe it’s comforting to him.

I turn to the girl with black hair. And thick black eyeliner, black fingernails, and all black clothes. In a flat, toneless voice that basically matches her whole vibe, she says, “I’m Jenna Porter. Neither of my parents responded to my texts or answered when I called. I’m supposed to go to my dad’s tonight and spend three days with him, then fly to LA and spend the rest of the break with my mom. If this storm lasts, I might miss my time with my dad.”

She looks at her shoes, and I think she might be trying not to cry. Maybe she’s not so tough after all. Then she looks up again, her grinning face curtained by her hair. “Imagine the rate of increase in my gift haul if I don’t even get to see him. I’m going to get such good stuff this year.”

She’s delighted. The little monster. I don’t let myself laugh, but I want to. I’m impressed with her ability to turn her situation into a positive. I’ll keep my eyes on this one. She’s a good one to have on my side. Not that we’re choosing sides.

The other girl introduces herself as Andie. I see her glance over at Hayes once or twice. I wonder if she knows he has a girlfriend. When I ask where she’s supposed to be flying, she shrugs. “Bali. And I’m happy if that doesn’t happen. The storm’s great for me. It’s an exhausting flight just to get there

and lie on a beach while my mom goes to the spa and my dad plays golf at the resort.”

That’s a strange thing to complain about, especially after a couple of record cold months here in New England. But I can get her chatting, and maybe she’ll admit she really wants to be with her parents.

“You flying Singapore air? Is there a direct flight from Burlington to Bali?” I ask. Of course, I know there’s not, but I grin like I’m in on the joke.

She scoffs in contempt. “Yeah, no.”

“Where are you connecting? La Guardia? JFK?”

“There’s a family plane waiting for me in Burlington.”

Sometimes you hear a sentence at Chamberlain that you’d never hear at a traditional high school.

“And your parents will meet you there? They’re already in the air?”

She shakes her head and offers nothing more.

But I’m not buying that she hates the idea of this vacation just because she’s annoyed how long it takes to fly around the world.

“Andie? Do you know your parents’ flight plan?”

She makes that annoyed sound again. “They’re already there. Have been for months.” She inspects her fingernails.

I nod. There’s a lot of money in Chamberlain Academy families, and sometimes I forget what a lot of money can get you. Like a private jet for your teenager’s use. Your ungrateful teenager who would rather stay alone in an empty dorm on a frozen campus than sleep thirty thousand feet above the ocean and wake up in paradise.

This girl can be on Moreau’s team.

Not that we’re choosing teams.

Yeah, obviously we are. I just haven’t told Moreau about it yet. I’ve got to gather my intel first.

I turn back to Fletcher. “I’m going to give you my number. Will you text it to your parents and tell them I’m available to talk at any hour if they have questions about the arrangements?”

“Wait.” Jenna Porter holds out her hand to me, like I’m going to pass her something. “Do you *have* information about the arrangements? Can I go back to my room?”

“No.”

“No you don’t know what’s going on? Or no I can’t go to my room?”

“Both. Neither. Everyone stays here until the chancellor calls the play.”

She squints at me. “Was that like a sports metaphor?”

“Only by the very loosest definition. I’m literally just waiting for her to make a decision.”

Jenna shakes her head. “So you really have no idea what’s going on?”

“Oh, no. I know all kinds of things. It’s snowing. And we’re hanging out here in this beautiful building with that warm fire and all these nice people for the time being.”

Jenna bumps my arm with her elbow. “And if we have to resort to eating each other, we start with Fletcher, here. He’s the sweetest.”

I really like this girl. She’s funny and complicated (if a little scary), and I hope she and Hayes are friends. Probably. Hayes is friends with everyone. I smile at her. “You are a deeply disturbed child, aren’t you?”

She grins at me again before putting her hand to her mouth and chewing on the edge of her thumbnail.

“You’ll all keep me posted when you hear from your parents?”

I make eye contact with each of them, waiting for a nod of confirmation before I wave them back to the group of kids gathered in front of the fireplace.

When I return to Dr. Moreau, her assistant is standing with her, nodding and taking notes on his phone.

“And if that doesn’t work?” he says as I come up to his side.

Moreau gives him a stare that might turn him to stone, but he looks unafraid.

“Try to remember what teenagers enjoy,” she says. “All I’m asking is that you entertain them for half an hour.”

She turns to me. “Michael will stay here with the students. You may come with me to the cafeteria, and we can explore the kitchens.”

Okay. This is an improvement. She’s not only allowing me to be helpful, but she’s choosing to spend time with me. Good. I can win her over.

“Explore, huh?” I say with a grin. “That sounds like an adventure.”

She glares at me. I’m certain I’ll turn to stone. I am not as brave a man as Michael is.

“This is not a party, Mr. Kline. We simply must discover what is useable to feed the students.”

She says students a lot. But the term is over. If they’re not in school, they’re really just kids. I wonder if she’s ever used the word *kids*. Sadly, I wouldn’t be surprised if she hasn’t. Doesn’t quite fit her vibe.

Michael is holding out her coat, and she slips her arms inside. He must have brought it from her office when he came downstairs.

As she’s getting buttoned in, a kid tugs on my arm. “Mr. Kline?”

He’s visibly upset. I put my arm around him and lead him to what is going to have to pass for a private space.

“What’s up?”

He shakes his head. “I just really don’t want to stay here any longer. I want to go home.”

I tighten my arm over his shoulder. “I get it, man. I feel the same way.”

People might think that boarding-school kids don't get homesick, but I'm seeing homesickness written all over this kid's face.

“I've been counting down the days since September. I don't know if I can stand it one more night.” There's a hiccup in his voice. He's going to cry, and I'm pretty sure he doesn't want that. Not here. Not now.

I look right into his eyes. “I hear what you're saying. And I understand. But we can do this. We can handle another day here. Maybe we can even help make it better for someone else.”

He looks at me like he really doubts it. I understand his hesitancy. I kind of doubt it, too.

“What's one thing you're looking forward to doing at home?” I ask.

He rubs the back of his neck. “My little brother loves making up his own designs with Legos. I want to let him boss me around for a few hours.”

I nod. “That's an excellent few hours to look forward to. How about you call him and tell him you can't wait for him to be your foreman? See if that helps.”

He doesn't look convinced, but I hope talking to his brother will make him feel better. Finally he nods and pulls his phone from his pocket. When he's pressing a contact, I turn and see Dr. Moreau.

Her eyebrows raise in a silent, long-distance question. I assume the question is “Are you coming?”

I touch the kid's shoulder one more time, and he nods and smiles at me, talking to his brother on the phone.

I re-establish eye contact with the chancellor and jog over to where she stands waiting.

Should I say something about the homesick kid? Would it help?

Probably not.

She points to the door at the other end of the large vestibule and I follow her, staying just half a step behind. I don't want to appear like I'm trying to take charge.

She doesn't speak at all as we move through the building, and when we push open the door, the wind takes it and presses it against the outside wall, a blast of frigid air shoving us back inside.

"Wow. This storm isn't kidding around," I say.

She says nothing. So I guess we're not going to chat on our way to the cafeteria. Fine with me. The wind is shrieking so loud, it would be hard to hear her anyway. And so far today, she hasn't said much worth listening to. Mainly insults and silent glares.

We push against the wind, and I walk close behind her. The sidewalks are nearly covered with drifts of snow, piling up in triangles against the wind. The carefully groomed grounds are being buried under this barrage. The sun isn't set, but not much light is leaking through these clouds.

At one section of sidewalk, Dr. Moreau's high-heeled shoe slips, and I grab her arm to steady her against a fall. She rights herself and shakes off my hand without speaking. No smile of relief. No thank-you. Nothing. It would serve her right if she fell over those impractical shoes and broke her leg.

Okay, no it wouldn't. Not at all. That's a terrible image, and I silently apologize for even thinking it.

As we move across campus, I stay close but refrain from reaching out to her again. When we get to the cafeteria building, she runs a card over a key pad. The light turns green and she pulls the door open, holding it for me. I'm not going to walk inside while she's still in the storm, so I shake my head and put my hand on the door, gesturing for her to go in first.

"After you," I say, but my voice is ripped away from me in the wind.

She points at the open door, silently instructing me to enter, but I am not the kind of man who walks into shelter

while a person smaller than me, no matter how scary they are, stays out in the storm.

Of course, if she refuses my chivalry, we might both freeze to death in the next five minutes.

I move one step closer, putting my arm across the top of the door, making a bridge for her to enter under.

She doesn't move, just looks from me to the dry interior of the building which is going to fill up with snow if we don't stop this stubborn game.

Fine. I take a step inside and then pull the door so she has to step in with me. It's a tie. If I thought there was any chance she'd laugh, or even smile, I'd make a joke about it. But I've only known this woman a couple of hours, and I am fairly convinced she's never laughed in her life.

Wiping my feet on the mat at the door, I wait for her to lead the way to the kitchen.

We wind through a hallway, past a dining hall with booths and tables, and into a huge chrome kitchen. Sensor lights turn on as we move through the space. Everything in the kitchen shines as if it's brand new. It's a beautiful facility, and it clearly gets great care. Ovens and warmers stand against one wall, and several rows of triple sinks gleam in the half-light. Long prep surfaces fill the center of the room, and crates and boxes stand on metal shelves.

"Mind if I poke around?" I ask.

She doesn't say yes, but she doesn't say no, either, so I figure I'm granted permission. I find a couple of burlap bags of potatoes. I never met a potato I didn't like, so I'm sure I can do something edible with them. The next shelf holds a crate of yellow onions, then white, then red. Everything tastes better with onions. Okay, maybe not everything. But for sure potatoes do.

A pull-out drawer is full of white flour, and the next one is whole wheat. Across the room are identical drawers, probably filled with gluten-free alternatives.

Sugar. Salt. Rice. Beans.

It's a great set-up, with plenty of space for quite a few people to be working on different kitchen projects. There are more shelves in the corner.

Bottled pickles. Olives. A few cases of plastic water bottles, which surprises me. Doesn't every kid walk around with a refillable? But maybe the kitchen staff prepares for emergencies. I hate to even think the water might stop flowing.

Behind me are boxes of garlic bulbs. A great cupboard of spices. And then we hit the refrigerators. There's not much produce left in here, but some of the longer-lasting fruits (mostly apples) and vegetables (carrots and beets and sweet potatoes) are filling the shelves. There's a huge selection of cheeses which I catalog in my head. A few sad stalks of celery that probably none of the employees wanted to take home for the break lie wilting on a shelf. Butter. Lots of butter.

The freezer is through the refrigerator's back wall. There are loaves of bread and rows of frozen meats in packages big enough to serve hundreds at a time. But no cellophane bag full of chicken nuggets. Too bad. I bet some of these kids would be delighted with that.

I read labels until I realize I'm shivering in here, then move from the freezer through the refrigerator and back into the main kitchen.

Dr. Moreau blows a breath through her lips. "This is not encouraging." She looks worried, frustrated, and something else. Nervous?

"I'll have dinner ready in an hour," I say.

Her eyebrows go up and she stands still, her fingers on the handle of a huge whisk. "You can cook something from this?"

"You mean ingredients? Yeah. It's how we eat."

I mean this is how we eat in our family, but as soon as I say the words, I realize how they might sound to someone ready to be offended. I don't want her to think I'm condescending and rude, but it's not like I expected to find a case of frozen pizzas. I can work with this.

PATRICE

I leave the man alone in the cafeteria kitchen. He seems confident enough that he can feed the students, and I have no desire to stand in the room and watch him flail around with knives and bowls and mixers. I know nothing about cooking. I'd only make things worse.

Speaking of worse: The storm is intensifying as I duck my head against the wind and try to stay in our rapidly filling footprints as I make my way back to the Hall. Its light is a beacon in the gray clouds.

I'm so cold. These shoes, the ones I wear in one of three colors almost every day, are failing me for the first time. Usually, pumps give me a sense of confidence. Help me feel in control. But usually, I can feel my toes.

Not sure what I'll find when I get back to the lounge, I hope mainly for containment. If Michael was able to keep all the students in the Hall, I'll consider it a success.

When I open the door, I hear screaming, and for half a second I picture the worst—a vision of some American horror film. But the screaming immediately turns to screeching and then laughter, and I come around the fireplace wall to see Hayes Kline performing a hands-free back flip from the coffee table.

The kids cheer.

"I was sure you were going to crack your head open on that last jump," someone says.

Another student says, “I bet you can’t do it again.”

Hayes moves to the other side of the lounge space, makes a motion for everyone to clear away, and performs a flawless routine that includes a vault onto the table, a double front flip, and the same back tuck I saw a moment ago. I’m impressed in spite of myself.

The surrounding students are impressed as well.

“Who knew you were a gymnast? How long did you take lessons?” asks a girl holding a phone out to film the routine and this post-routine interview.

Hayes shakes his head in the least convincing display of false modesty I’ve seen in a long time. “I’m no gymnast. It wasn’t as formal as that. I just wanted to learn to do some tricks, so my dad and I watched a bunch of online tutorials. I practiced. I got good at that sequence. But do you want to know a secret?” He leans close to the girl with the camera facing him. Clearly he’s not interested in keeping whatever this is quiet. The whole population of the school will know his secret thirty seconds after she posts this video.

“The skill I really wanted to learn was the ribbon dancing, but I was no good at it.”

All the kids laugh as Hayes tilts his chin to the ceiling and makes a fluttering motion with his arm.

I’ve been gone from this room for thirty minutes at the most, and it seems like it’s been the Hayes Kline show for every second of it. What an arrogant show-off. At least he kept them entertained as well as contained.

I need to check in with Michael and make sure everyone is accounted for, but before I move, Hayes claps his hands twice and says, “*Alors.*”

Me? He’s pretending to be me? My face heats and my head throbs. How dare he?

Everyone laughs.

The Kline boy is a menace. I can almost not believe he dares to mock me here. After being expelled from school and

then being welcomed back in to shelter from the storm. And then he goes on. “Who’s next? Cam, is that your guitar case?”

Another student nods.

Hayes stands from his perch on the coffee table. He begins to chant, “Concert. Concert!” until all the students are clapping and cheering. Hayes pulls the other boy out of his seat on a couch and gently directs him over to the coffee table. The boy picks up his guitar and pulls it out of the case. With no shame and very little explanation, he begins to play.

If I expect a terrible rendition of an unbearable pop song, I’m surprised at the music that actually comes from his instrument. This is classical guitar, with intricate fingering and layered notes. Not a teenage crowd pleaser. Truly accomplished playing. And he plays unapologetically, bent over his instrument, as the students lean toward him. He perches on the edge of the table, and they are a silent audience as he coaxes beautiful sounds from his guitar.

When he ends the piece, there’s a momentary hush and then a cheer, the sound of twenty-five people applauding and roaring for more. I clap along with them, wondering what is going on here and what will happen next. Not to mention how I managed to stand still for such a long stretch. I need to speak with Michael, to find out if parents are responding.

If I let the students continue entertaining each other, maybe Michael and I can get some administrative work done.

A loud whoop rises above the rest of the cheering. I look back at the students.

I should have known. Hayes Kline stands up again. Grabs hold of all the students’ attention.

“All right, Gillian. You’re up.” He points to a girl holding a remote control and pointing it at the wall.

The screen above the fireplace flashes on, and it takes a moment to recognize what we’re seeing. The girl Hayes called Gillian explains this is video footage of a robot she built. She points out how the metal hands hold a Rubik’s cube. “It’s programmed to solve the puzzle in less than thirty seconds.”

She allows the video to play, and then students clamor for her to run to her dorm and get it. They want to see it in action right here in front of them.

Gillian tells them that's not going to happen. "I sent it to MIT with my application."

Hayes Kline leads another round of applause. I check my telephone for weather updates and travel alerts.

"Bethany, did you get it?" he asks, motioning to a girl with auburn hair in two thick braids.

The video of the robot disappears, and the screen fills with an image of a starry night sky. She clicks a button on her laptop and another photograph appears on the large screen.

"Hold on," Hayes interrupts. Of course he does. Because even someone's screen saver images must be about him. "You have to tell us about these."

He holds his hands out, and she passes her computer to him. He sits, and she stands in front of the other students and explains how she took the photo of the Milky Way from the roof of the chemistry building. What kind of lens she attached to her camera. Apertures and color timing. When she gestures toward the couch, Hayes forwards the image. She explains the next one, and the next.

They all cheer when they see their friends in the photos, and the student—Bethany—beams at their excitement.

I walk quietly behind the gathered students until I come to the couch where Michael is sitting. I place my hand on his shoulder and he turns to see me. He jumps up from his seat and hurries around the couch.

I've never seen him looking so relaxed. "They're great, right?" he asks, but with a smile that tells me he already knows the answer.

"What is happening?" I ask.

"Talent show."

I stare at him as if I don't understand the concept. "What? How?"

He guides me a couple more steps away from the couches so our voices don't interrupt Bethany's explanation of a photo collage of the same tree on campus over several different months.

Michael points in the general direction of the students. "I got all their names and had them scan their ID cards, and then he just took over."

There is no doubt who "he" is. Hayes Kline.

"Took over for what purpose?"

Michael makes a very uncharacteristic shrug. "Entertainment."

"You mean he made the lounge his stage and spent the last half hour showing off for the students and now he's giving them a few minutes of the spotlight," I say, and even I can hear the ugly disdain dripping from my voice.

Michael shakes his head. "No. He only did his flips after a couple of other students begged him to. It's been all about the other kids. He seems to know what everyone's good at, and he invited them to show their projects and talents to the rest."

This is not at all what I expect, and if I think about it much longer, I will feel terrible that I made an unkind assumption about a student—or at least a former student. But this boy has shown his true colors over and over, so I don't feel inclined to give him any more credit than this: he kept the students amused while his father and I organized dinner.

Well, while his father did all the organizing and I stared helplessly at a room full of food I don't know how to prepare.

After I watch Bethany explain a few more of her photos, I check the time. If all goes according to Mr. Kline's plan, food will be ready in about twenty minutes.

As the students clap for the photo display, I step forward. I can see them as they notice me. Their relaxed postures stiffen. They stop cheering. They remove their arms from each other's shoulders. In short, I stop all the enjoyment. No fun here, just as Hayes Kline's sign said. They look as though they are afraid of me.

I have worked hard to earn the respect of these people, and of the students who came before them, but until this moment, I didn't believe they feared me.

There is no sense of accomplishment for me in the recognition. Respect is an achievement. Fear is no such thing.

I let them know dinner will be ready soon, and they should carry on with their show. They look relieved as they turn their attention away from me. I shouldn't have interrupted them at all.

As the students continue their talent show, I keep reading traffic and storm updates. The news is not encouraging.

Finally, it's time. I put my hands behind my back to avoid the urge to clap twice. I refuse to call their attention in my usual way, by the double-clap and saying, "*Alors.*" I'll try to never do it again now that I know my attention-getting motion is a joke to the students. I step over to the coffee table that's become the makeshift stage. "Students, supper should now be ready for you in the cafeteria. Please make your way there together so we lose no one in the storm." A little jest never hurt anyone.

I think they'll laugh, but they don't. It looks like nobody expects me to be amusing.

I lead the way outside and Michael follows the crowd of students. As I walk across the icy sidewalk, I turn back to check that the students are staying close. I see Michael holding the door for the shuttle driver. Maggie? Marcie? Millie. That's it. I'm grateful for another adult in the mix.

The snow has completely covered the sidewalks now, and I attempt to keep myself from stepping off onto the lawn. I will need to remove this snow from the sidewalks before it gets too much colder, or it will ice over and become impassible, at least for me in these pumps.

My kingdom for a pair of running shoes.

When I open the cafeteria door, I first feel the warmth of the building's heat, and then smell the aroma of dinner.

Bread. Onions. Something salty.

As I hold the door for the students, I see their faces light up. One says, “I figured we’d be eating peanut butter and jam. It smells so good. Thank you, Dr. Moreau.”

I’m startled at her gratitude, and that it’s directed to me. “You’re welcome,” I say. I begin to explain that I didn’t prepare the meal, but she doesn’t wait. She hurries in to the dining room. I stay at the door until Michael and Millie come through, brushing snow from their heads and coats. There is a satisfaction in pulling the door closed behind us, a safety in this big, bright space that keeps us out of the elements. And I realize it’s been hours since I’ve eaten. I hope whatever Mr. Kline cooked tastes as good as it smells.

I follow the last of the students into the dining hall.

The long serving surface is dotted with individual soup crocks, their tops blistered with bubbling cheese. Thick slabs of bread rest in a towel-lined basket. At the end of the serving line, Mr. Kline stands directing hungry eaters to special pans of soup that are dairy free, to bread that is especially for those who don’t eat gluten. As each student picks up a tray and accepts a bowl of French onion soup, they smile at him. Thank him. Tell him it smells delicious.

I’ve never been in the cafeteria when students are present. I wonder if they treat the daily employees this graciously. I will choose to believe that they do, because seeing their behavior in the last thirty minutes, I like these people more than I have before.

People. I usually only think of them as students, which of course they are. But they’re also humans having feelings and managing expectations and dealing with disappointments—and yet, they speak kindly. They treat each other with respect. They find things to compliment.

And they devour soup and bread.

Mr. Kline asks who wants more, and heads back into the kitchen area to place more soup in crocks. When he comes back with a dozen more servings, they’re swiped up and consumed with admirable energy.

I wait until it looks like most of the students have eaten, and then I walk through the service line and present myself in front of Mr. Kline.

“Well done,” I tell him. “You have impressed the hungry masses.”

“Well, thank you, Dr. Moreau. That means a lot coming from you.”

He shines that smile my way, the one that probably dazzles most people. The smile he’s known for in a host of management-training circles. For all I know, it’s trademarked. I don’t see it as anything but a performance, but I can appreciate the performance nonetheless. It’s an empirically handsome face, made even more attractive by the smile that reaches his dark eyes.

I reach for a bowl of soup, but he puts out his hand to stop me. “I have a special one for you,” he says. “Wait just one second, please.”

He darts back toward the kitchen and returns holding an enormous mug with a handle. Like a coffee cup for a giant. “You get this one.” He turns the cup so I can see what’s printed on the side in curvy black letters: “I’m the Boss and I Get What I Want.”

He found a special container for my meal. One that suggests he recognizes my position, possibly even respects it.

After all the unexpectedness and disappointment of the day, he not only made this meal for the students, but he thought about me. He found this special, if silly, bowl to serve my meal in.

I meet his smile with a much smaller one of my own. I wish I could match his grin, but I feel my breath hitch and worry I might cry. Why is this happening? I’m not a crier. Even so, I feel an unusual tickle at the back of my eyes, and I fear if I speak, tears will flow. I haven’t cried for a very long time, and I have no intention of doing it now, in front of this man, as I hold a mug of his homemade soup. Instead, I smile at the mug as I re-read the inscription.

His grin turns up a few watts. “I hope what you want is onion soup, because that’s what I have.” He leans across the serving area as if to impart a secret. “It would taste better if I had caramelized the onions longer, but I think they’re satisfied.”

“Thank you,” I say. It comes out weak and shaky, but I mean it. I hope he hears my sincerity.

He tilts his chin, gesturing toward the booths and tables of students.

“Mind if I join you?” he asks.

There are dozens of empty tables in the room, and I planned to take a seat at one, but if Mr. Kline wants company, it’s the least I can offer after this meal he prepared. Might it not feel nice to sit with him? To share the meal?

I nod again, and he grabs a bowl of soup and about half a loaf of bread and steps around the serving counter, following me to a booth off to the side of the gathering of students.

He slides in to the seat opposite me. “Look how they all sit together. There’s not a single kid eating alone.”

I hadn’t noticed. But now that he mentions it, I feel grateful that the students are including each other. I listen to their banter for a moment, realizing how much of their chatter relates to the display of talents they shared in the Hall.

I still feel I need to resist the idea that the success of this evening has been in large part due to the return of the Kline family, but I recognize the truth. They’ve been instrumental in the success of the afternoon and evening. I wish I could express this to Mr. Kline, but it’s far easier to focus on the bowl in front of me.

Then I taste the soup.

It’s wonderful. Simple and briny and covered with delicious melted gruyere cheese. The bread must have been in the freezer, but he’s sliced it thick and toasted it and coated it with something creamy and garlicky. The perfect simple meal for a snowy night.

I hesitate to look across the table at Mr. Kline, because I don't want to raise my eyes to find him watching me eat.

He's not watching me. He has his eyes on his son, and immediately I wonder if Mr. Kline is worried about any possible coming misbehavior. This is my biggest concern when I catch sight of Hayes Kline.

But he doesn't look worried. He looks delighted, as if the sight of this boy fills him with joy.

I can't relate to the feeling, but I can't deny what I'm seeing.

"Is Hayes your only child?" I ask.

I could find out this information without resorting to dinner-table small talk. I have very detailed dossiers on each student. But after all the effort this man has gone to today, I feel obligated to at least attempt to make polite conversation. It would be awkward for me to sit here silently eating soup.

He nods and tears off a chunk from a slice of bread. He doesn't eat it, but he dips it in his soup bowl and turns it over, dips and turns. He sets it down and wipes his hands on a napkin before speaking. "I always thought I'd have a whole houseful of kids, you know? A whole basketball team. A rugby lineup. An academic decathlon squad." He grins and shrugs. "But my wife got sick when Hayes was a baby, and there were no more kids in the cards for us."

This is far too personal, and no matter how curious I am, I'm not going to ask him for details. I can read the boy's student file if I decide I need to know.

Instead, I say, "It's clear he means a great deal to you."

He leans back in his seat, still looking at his son. "You mean because I drove here to beg you to keep him enrolled? So he wouldn't come back to Connecticut and live with me?"

I splutter a denial. Is that what he thinks I believe? That parents enroll their students at Chamberlain to get them out of the house? "Mr. Kline, despite what you think, I do not have a heart of stone. And I would be surprised to find any parents who send their children to Chamberlain to get rid of them. I

simply mean it's clear when you look at him that you are deeply attached."

Now he looks at me.

"Of course I am. Everyone's crazy about their kids. We all want them with us all the time."

That, I'm afraid, is not completely true. But this doesn't seem to be an auspicious time to share anecdotal data about what parents might expect from their children's educational experiences. Nor is it my personal experience. Not that I've ever been a parent, but I was a child whose parents were eager for me to make my own way in the world.

Mr. Kline looks at his soup. He clears his throat, glances up at me, and then looks down again. "I may have underestimated how difficult Hayes made things for you here. Please accept my apologies on his behalf."

I don't know what to say to that. It's what I hoped to hear earlier today, but now I feel differently. I don't want Hayes to suffer, and I no longer feel inclined to make him pay for his repeated crimes against the school (and more recently against me personally). After watching him lead the students in a celebration, and learning that it was not all about him, I believe I see him differently. More sympathetically. Maybe he's not such a monster after all. But of course, he's still expelled.

"Thank you, Mr. Kline."

He raises his eyes to mine. "You really should call me Oliver."

For what purpose, I want to ask. So you can feel like I'm your friend and I'll reenroll your son in my school for no better reason than your ability to make soup and smile nicely?

I resist the urge to make those thoughts into words. Instead, I say, "I prefer to keep my school-based associations formal."

He smiles and shakes his head. "Formal is certainly the right word."

A hot flush rushes to my face. And now he mocks me? My softened feelings immediately disappear and I feel my whole body go tight. My soup spoon hits my tray with a clang. “What is that supposed to mean? Do I not generally use the appropriate words? My English is certainly better than your son’s.”

That was unfair, and possibly untrue, but his comment stings. I have worked hard to be taken seriously.

He looks embarrassed. “Oh, no. I wasn’t suggesting anything like that. You’re just very proper. Correct.”

I scoff. “And you’d prefer it if I were improper. Incorrect.” I know I’m taking his comment out of context, and I know I’ve overstepped many boundaries of professional behavior in the past ninety seconds. But now that I’ve released the pressure valve that I worked all day to keep contained, I’m not sure how to stop or where to direct the pressure. This has been a terrible day—the kind I work hard to avoid. Nothing went according to plan, and I have no idea when this might end. I want a hot bath and a hot tea. Alone. I hardly know how to speak to this man now that I’ve behaved so poorly.

“Look, Patty,” he says, “I’m sorry we got off on the wrong foot. And I have no idea how this conversation just devolved into, well, whatever this is.” He spreads his hands between us as if he’s indicating our entire professional relationship.

I feel my mind spinning off into two divergent paths, one where I accept that I was wrong and he’s being sincere, and the other where I set the world on fire because he showed me one too many of his annoying personality traits.

I cannot choose between them, but if I say nothing, he wins.

“I’m Dr. Moreau. Do not call me Patty,” I snarl, then I stand, sweep my half-full mug of soup off the table, and turn to deliver it to ... where?

What does a person do with their dirty dishes here? And who is going to clean them tonight?

I can't stop moving now, not after that dramatic exit from the table, and luckily for me, I see a student walking toward a corner of the room with tray in hand. I follow, watch him unload silverware into one bin, bowl into another, and stack his tray on a rack.

I place my bowl where he put his, then walk to the nearest door. I use my master key to unlock the door and find myself in the dish-washing area.

I stand with my back to the door for a moment, regretting every harsh word I just spoke to Mr. Kline. Why did I allow myself to take his comments so personally? Why did I assume the worst after I've seen such decency from him today?

And why is the thought of apologizing so frightening?

I fill one of the sinks with soapy water for washing and another with hot water for rinsing. I can figure out the details for sleeping arrangements as I wash up. And I'd love to kick off these shoes, but I know I'll need to put them back on to walk back to the Hall, and the thought of shoving my feet back into them makes me cringe.

Placing clean towels from the drawer onto the counter, I step into the kitchen to gather the mess Oliver Kline left after preparing his meal. Aside from two stock pots simmering on the stove and a few loaves of bread on a cutting board, there is no mess. Not a crumb in the preparation area. No dirty measuring utensils, no empty cans or bags or boxes. Not a flake of onion skin. He cleaned up everything not currently being used to feed students.

What makes me more uncomfortable about the state of the kitchen, I wonder? Is it that he cleared up so completely as he went, or is it that I was so ready to be annoyed by the messy aftermath of his objectively delicious dinner victory?

Either way, I know I'm being unfair.

But the man—with his charming smile—is so infuriating.

OLIVER

I walk around the dining hall from table to booth, talking with the kids and asking how they're doing. I make sure to check in with the three who hadn't reached their parents before dinner. Fletcher sits next to Hayes at a large round table with attached backless stools, the kind of seat that seems like a great idea when you're a teenager but you'd never choose to sit in as an adult.

"My parents' flight was rerouted to Miami," Fletcher says. "They'll have to stay there at least tonight. I promised I'd let them know the minute I hear anything. Maybe they'll get my ticket changed so I can meet them there."

A girl across the table says, "My grandparents live outside Miami. Here, let me give you their number. Your parents can Uber to their house. They'll probably cook crazy amounts of food and beg them to stay through the holiday."

She reaches for his phone, and I watch the magic of connection happen before my eyes. This is why I do the kind of work I do. People have natural desires to link together, to form community, to exist in tandem, but somehow we talk ourselves out of taking action to make it happen. We grow out of the ease of invitation. Adulthood tries to convince us to close these doors. My work is to reignite those fires of connection in corporations and businesses and organizations.

And I get to see it happen now, naturally and simply. At the hands of teenagers, who some would try to tell you are the most selfish generation the world has ever seen. I'd like to

show this little moment to all my clients and remind them what we're aiming for.

The world gets smaller the more steps we take together.

I've made a couple of laps around the cafeteria and Dr. Moreau hasn't come back. I hope she didn't do anything crazy like walk alone back through the storm. Not that she needs my help to find her way, but I don't want anyone, adult or child, alone out there tonight.

I wander to the far side of the room and hear rattling and clanking of bowls in stainless steel tubs. I see a few kids have gone back to the dishwashing area and are wiping and scrubbing and rinsing dishes. Chances are good none of these kids has ever seen the inside of a commercial kitchen, but they're standing at the sinks together, splashing a little more than is required. A few laughing, a couple singing, standing shoulder to shoulder and getting the work done. Someone turns around and I'm surprised to see Dr. Moreau, suit coat hanging from a hook on the wall, wearing a kitchen apron and covered up to her elbows in soap bubbles. Standing at a sink not far from a few of her students, clearing up the dishes.

She's not playing with them. She isn't even laughing along, but she's not scowling. And she isn't kicking them out of the washroom. As I watch, she thanks someone for handing her a soup pot. Something seems different about her right now. Maybe she's more relaxed being with them than she was with me. Maybe she isn't an ogre who despises and resents the kids she's paid to oversee.

Maybe she's more complicated than I gave her credit for.

I have no intention of ruining the vibe she's got going on in there, so I take a couple of pictures with my phone and head back into the dining area.

I find Assistant Michael. He's at a booth with the woman in the shuttle company's jacket, and he looks like a totally different person than the man who sat in an office chair and stared at me over his monitor this morning. He's got his elbows on the table and he's leaning toward her. She's got him entranced by whatever she's saying, and I hate to interrupt.

But I can't move forward with the next part of my hastily constructed plan without him.

"Hey, you two," I say, standing far enough from them that they won't suspect I heard any of their conversation. "I would like to grab a few snow shovels and get some of these kids working on blazing a trail back to the Hall. Do you know where I might find shovels?"

Michael nods and slides out of the booth. "I'll be back. Don't go anywhere," he says to the shuttle driver. There's a rush of color to his face.

"What if I want to come with you?" she asks.

You go, girl, I think. Way to be brave.

Michael's entire face changes when he smiles. I watch them walk out the door and wonder if there's going to be a little Christmas magic at Chamberlain tonight.

I catch Hayes's eye and wave him over. "Grab a few friends and help get the snow shovels out. Let's get the sidewalks cleared," I say. I point at Michael and say, "Follow him."

I see a look of surprise flicker over his features, as if it didn't occur to him that someone needs to clean up the snow. He clears snow at home. He mows the lawn in the summer. But here, where there are crews of invisible workers repairing and maintaining the whole campus, he seems a little surprised to be asked to help.

"Oh, yeah. Sure. Okay." He goes over to the nearest table and asks, "Who's up for a snowball fight?"

All the kids jump to their feet. "Awesome. First, we shovel. Then it's war."

His voice carries far enough that kids all across the room are racing each other to get back into their coats and find the shovels.

I follow the kids and point out Michael's footprints.

"I'm sure there has to be a tool shed around here somewhere," I tell Hayes.

He nods. “There is.”

I’m both proud and a little nervous that Hayes knows where to find the storage facilities all over campus.

It only takes a minute for the kids to catch up with Michael. I watch the crew come back, led by Michael, heading across the drifts with arms full of shovels.

I help them pass around the shovels to the kids who are most eager to get to work. Some of the others trickle back inside where it’s warm and dry, and I take a turn with one of the six shovels the kids brought back. It’s fully dark now, and the kids make a mess of the snow, hurling themselves at the project with far more will than wisdom. They scrape snow off sidewalks, shovel into the grass, make mounds, crash into each other’s shovels, and laugh the whole time.

Those who aren’t holding shovels make different kinds of messes, flopping down into what’s becoming pretty deep snow, throwing snowballs, and tossing each other into drifts.

The whole arrangement is not pretty, but I’m happy to see the kids actively working to improve the situation they’re in. Hayes shouts, “Switch shovels in ten!” and the kids all shout out a ten-second countdown. When they get to one, everyone not currently shoveling runs to someone who is. A kid rushes at me and holds his hands out for my shovel. I almost resist, wishing that Dr. Moreau would come out here and see the good work I’m leading, but then I realize she’s not going to be impressed by the mess we’re making of her campus. Oh, well. At least we can find some of the sidewalks. I release my shovel and slap the kid’s back, thanking him for taking over for me.

I head inside and find Michael and the shuttle driver standing near the doors, heads bent together in conversation. He’s keeping one eye on the snow-throwing project happening out in the yard, and I really can’t keep thinking of her as “the driver.”

“Thanks for getting the shovels,” I say. “The kids seem happy to help out.”

Michael's eyes dart from my face to the woman's, and he answers me with much less stiffness than any other time he spoke with me today. "Good thing they're not looking for careers in facility management," he says.

I laugh.

"Hi," I say, turning to the driver. "I'm Oliver. Accidental refugee for the evening."

She shakes my hand. "Millie. Same, I guess. I don't mind, though. Thanks for dinner. It was delicious."

"My pleasure," I say. "The kitchen has a few more good meals in it, just in case we have to take advantage of the cafeteria management's food storage systems before we get rescued."

For the first time, I consider the possibility that we might be snowed in for a while. A few days. Until Christmas. I see Michael and Millie share a look that suggests the idea isn't a horrible one for the two of them.

I remember feeling that way. Meeting my Sarah for the first time, wishing there was some kind of excuse for us to stay together for days straight. Seeing that smitten expression on Michael's face certainly makes me like him better than I did before.

"Some of these people are going to be in desperate need of a cup of hot chocolate tonight," I say. "I'm heading back to scour the pantry. Do you think we should bring it over to the Hall? Or take it to the dorm?"

Michael looks a bit startled at the thought that we need to put these kids somewhere to sleep. That he's not leaving campus. That this storm isn't going anywhere.

Millie says, "Do you think it would be better if they all stayed together in the big main building? Wouldn't it be easier to, like, keep an eye on them?"

The fact that this campus is full of beds doesn't change the validity of her suggestion. If any of the kids were going to get up to any nonsense, it would be harder for them if there were

adults in the room. And now that I think about it, if a kid was going to get up to nonsense, it would probably be my kid.

“I think that’s a very good point. Michael, would you like to bring up the idea to Dr. Moreau?”

I hear her shoes clacking across the tile behind me before I hear her say, “Bring up what idea?” Dr. Moreau is back in her suit jacket and back in charge.

Michael looks like he’s turned to stone. His smile evaporates and he’s standing still and stiff. He clearly doesn’t want to say anything. I imagine he’s worried about throwing Millie under the bus if the boss doesn’t like the idea of all the kids staying in the Hall together, but he doesn’t seem like the guy who ever says no to Dr. Moreau.

If I speak up, will I look like I’m butting in?

Before I decide whether or not to say something, Millie takes a step toward Dr. Moreau.

“I wondered about sleeping arrangements for the students,” she says. “And of course you know these people better than I do, but when I was their age, an experience like getting snowed in would have been one giant excuse for making all kinds of trouble. I wonder if they’ll behave better if we’re all together. In one space.”

Dr. Moreau doesn’t reply to the suggestion, and I can’t read anything into her expression. Michael takes a step closer to Millie, as though he might protect her from any backlash. That little step takes away most of the resentment I’m harboring for the way he acted when I waited in the office all morning. He’s got protective instincts. Maybe that makes him good at his job.

Dr. Moreau looks from Michael to Millie to me. Her eyes stay on me and her stare burns into my brain. I feel an irrational fear. Maybe fear is too strong a word. Nervousness? I mean, I’m pretty sure she’s not an actual superhero mutant who can read my mind or blast me with laser-beam eyes. Not that I’m suggesting any limits to her capabilities. But maybe I don’t need to be worried as she looks at me.

No. I definitely do. She's terrifying. "What?" I finally ask.

"What do you think?"

About mutant superheroes? What were we even talking about? Oh. Right. Kids sleeping in the Hall.

"If we're looking at a single night, I can't see any harm in the kids all bunking in on the floor in the main lobby. By the fireplace. I mean, nobody's going to get a great sleep, but it's not like they have to perform intricate tasks in the morning. Best-case scenario, they all get into buses and sleep all the way to Burlington."

"And worst-case scenario?" Dr. Moreau asks.

The storm continues to dump snow, we lose power and water supply, we run out of food, someone gets lost in the storm ...

I don't think she really wants to hear about the worst case.

But I give her an answer, even if it's not the whole answer. "Maybe it's more than one night." I don't know the bathroom situation in the main building, but I assume they'll need to be let into their dorms for showers if they have to stay longer than tonight.

She's still looking right at me, and I try not to shrink or step backward. Why is she so intimidating?

"And you're willing to stay nearby? Watch over the students through the night?" she asks.

Oh. Is this about her privacy? Does she object to staying the night in the same room as the kids? Is she working a deal—me staying with the kids so she doesn't need to? Have I just become the nanny? Great.

But honestly, it *is* kind of great. I get to keep an eye on Hayes while he's in his school world. I never get this chance. There are opportunities for parents to come to Chamberlain, but the events that we're invited to attend are organized to highlight programs or activities. Now I can sit in the same room with my son and watch from a carefully chosen distance so I can see what he's like. The kind of man he's growing into.

And I can imagine my Sarah here, watching him, too. She would be amazed at the young man he's become. She worried so much that her illness would impact him in ways he'd never recover from. That he'd be stunted somehow by losing his mom while he was young. But he's great. Happy. Smart. Generous with his kindness. And yeah, he does dumb kid stuff. Some of it dumber than I wish it was. But sometimes I imagine getting a chance to sit down with Sarah one more time and just tell her how well he's doing. How much of her goodness I see in him. How he wears her smile.

"I am definitely prepared to stay with the kids," I tell Dr. Moreau. "I'll make sure they behave. You won't have to worry about a thing."

She looks like she's worried about a whole lot of things, and obviously she is. But I guess I can help with this.

She turns to Michael. "And you? You're fine to stay?"

She asks this as if he has the choice to leave. And maybe he does. He might have a place on campus.

"Absolutely," he says. "I'm with you."

Millie says, "Me, too. Sleepover. Bring it on."

Dr. Moreau gives Millie a painful-looking attempt at a smile. "Very well. Shall we tell the students?" She looks around and her smile evaporates. "Where are the students?"

"Some are in the dining hall," Michael says.

"A few are shoveling the sidewalks," I add.

She nods. "Let's get a head count before we take them all back to the Hall. Be sure no one is missing."

I think she's trying hard to avoid looking at me when she says this.

"I'll be right behind you," I say, and walk back through the dining hall and into the kitchen.

The huge stock pots I made soup in are clean and returned to the shelves. I find a few giant food-service cans of evaporated milk, then I locate sugar, cocoa, vanilla, and salt. I

pick up a huge whisk, the biggest I've ever seen. And a ladle with a handle as long as my arm. I make another search of the fridges and cupboards, but I find no spray cans of whipped cream. No marshmallows. It's fine. This will do.

In a back room, there are stacks and stacks of plates and bowls and serving dishes of all kinds. I find crates of mugs and grab one of those.

It's not like I'm some trained chef, or even a great cook. I just learned to make meals for the three of us when Sarah was sick. Her doctors let her know that eating prepared and ready-made foods was less healthy for her than eating meals made from ingredients. So we cooked. And baked. And figured out how to make her sickness less awful by doing it all together. Hayes had a little apron and chef's hat that he wore even years later when it was much too small. We figured out a few things cooking for groups over the years—retreats, Hayes's neighborhood friends, family reunions—and I learned that cooking for a crowd isn't as overwhelming as people expect. It just takes more ingredients, a bit of extra time, and bigger pans.

I really love using the bigger pans.

It is clear to me after tonight that I much prefer making meals for other people than cooking for myself. Not only because it's nice to hear the kids saying thanks, but that's not bad at all. Also because I know that what I've just banged together helped some of these people feel less frightened. Less worried. Less hungry, obviously. Food is kind of magic that way.

I might have to make a few trips to get all of these cocoa supplies over to the main building once it's ready, but if there's somewhere other than this kitchen to cook it, I don't know about it. So I open the cans, pour in the milk, add water, and stir in the other ingredients. I leave it simmering and make sure the crate of mugs doesn't rattle. I'll carry them over to where the kids are, and when the cocoa is hot, I'll make another trip. Hopefully Dr. Moreau can handle the kids at least that long.

She's definitely not comfortable with them, but she seems to be trying. And I want to support her effort. Like the way she did dishes with the kids. Or at least let them do dishes with her. I pull my phone out and look at the pictures I took earlier. The chancellor, standing at the sink with her silky shirt sleeves rolled up to her elbows. With that fitted suit skirt. Her elegant profile as she turned to answer a kid's question.

She is trying. I can see it. And I'm glad to have photographic proof.

Slipping my phone into my pocket, I pull on my coat and grab the mug crate. All the kids are gone from the cafeteria building, and I leave most of the lights shining since I'm coming right back. Outside, there's total darkness. The snow is still coming down heavily, but the wind has slowed, so the flakes fall straight down instead of horizontally. The raggedy shoveling job is softening in all this new snow, and it looks like we'll need to come back out hourly if we're going to keep a path open between the cafeteria and the main building.

I take a second to enjoy the snow, looking up into the clouds and the tree branches. This place really is amazing. I'm so glad Hayes gets to live and learn here—or at least that he got two and a half years here. Before he was kicked out. For doing something that was definitely stupid.

It's hard to keep putting all the blame on Dr. Moreau. Not that I don't think she should change her mind. She should definitely change it. Reverse her decision. Keep my kid around, because despite his occasional dumb behavior, he's terrific. And he's got a great future ahead of him. A future with a few doors now definitely closed to him. Colleges—especially the Ivy League ones—aren't going to look too kindly on an expulsion.

I sigh and watch where I'm walking. Basic vigilance seems like a good idea in a storm like this. But in reality, it does no good, because within a second of looking back toward the sidewalk, I'm suddenly staring up at the sky again, on my back this time, plastic crate at my side and ceramic mugs in shards around me.

I don't remember falling, but I can feel the fall now. I feel it in my left leg. In my back. In my neck and the back of my head. Every part of me that just landed on the sidewalk is screaming.

Luckily, I'm not actually yelling. I may have hollered something when I went down, but if I did, nobody seems to have heard me. At least nobody is coming out here to rescue me. I take a second to scan myself. All right. I blink, and my eyes work. I can see, because this is a crazy angle to watch the storm. The thick, heavy snowflakes are falling in a perspective that makes every flake look the size of a baseball by the time it lands on my face. I shift my arms. Okay. Sore, but mobile. I turn my head. Ow. Seriously. If this is what being forty feels like, I'm over it. When I was in my twenties, I could take a hit like this and jump back up. Not so much today.

I bend my right knee and get my foot onto the concrete. It slips away from its place immediately. But the leg works. I try to do the same with my left leg, but it's not cooperating. The knee doesn't want to bend. This is not awesome.

It will make driving tricky, not to mention getting up off the sidewalk and making my way inside.

I shift until I can get my hand into my back pocket and pull out my phone. The glass is cracked but I have power and a signal. I text Hayes.

'Hey—what are you doing?'

He doesn't respond, and my back is beginning to freeze to the sidewalk.

I attempt to sit up again. It goes badly, which is frustrating. It's not like I fell on my abs. But they don't want to function, and without them, sitting up is not happening.

I try Hayes again.

'There's an old man outside.'

Me. It's me.

I stare at the screen waiting to see the message turn from *delivered* to *read*. Whatever he's doing in there, it's not on his

phone.

Maybe I'm being too subtle.

'Come outside. Walk toward the cafeteria. I need help.'

This one works. He responds with 'K' and within half a minute, I can hear him crunching through the icy snow on the sidewalk. He practically steps on me. "Dad?"

"I'm not sure who else you might have been expecting," I say, trying to keep the conversation light. "Or why it took you quite so long to get here."

"I was on the phone with Tessie," he says, the sound of honey in his voice. Tessie. The girlfriend. Then he leans over and pokes at my shoe with his finger.

"Are you hurt?" he asks. He sounds more stunned than worried, like he can't actually believe this lump at his feet is his father.

"Little bit. I'm going to need some help getting up."

"Are you, like, broken? Maybe we shouldn't move you."

"Look at my face," I tell him. This is a holdover from when he was a little kid and I needed to make sure he was giving me his full attention. "We should definitely move me. I don't want to live on the sidewalk."

"But if you hurt your back, you shouldn't be moved," he starts.

"Hayes. I promise I will not sue you if my injuries get worse once I'm moved inside. But I would rather not freeze to death a hundred yards from the fireplace."

"Yup," he says. Message received.

He leans over and takes my forearms in his hands. I grip him the same way and he pulls. My left knee immediately makes its presence known, and I lean on my right and manage to make it shakily to my feet. Or at least to my right foot. We stagger a bit before we find our balance.

He wraps his arm around my waist and I lean on his shoulders. Every step, every hop comes with a puff of breath. I

don't want to scare him, and I definitely don't want to sound like a complainer, so I don't say anything. I concentrate on moving forward, but man. This hurts. And it feels wrong to walk away from a huge mess on the sidewalk, a whole case of mugs shattered.

And then there's the cocoa, which I've left unattended, and cooking on much too high a heat. Someone is going to have to go back to the kitchen and clean it all up for me. Maybe the broken dishes can wait, but the cocoa can't.

Hayes manages to get me to the door of the main building before anyone else sees us lurching around, but once we get inside, my injury is the only thing anyone wants to talk about. All the kids surround us and "help" me get to the couch.

Someone suggests calling Dr. Mercer, and someone else reminds her the doctor is off campus for the holiday.

I just want them all to take a step back, put my leg up on the couch, and send someone over to the kitchen to rescue the cocoa.

Then I see Dr. Moreau's face, and she looks furious. Like I've not only ruined Christmas, but also somehow made this terrible day worse. For her.

And she's not wrong, but it would be nice if I could just suffer my injury in peace without the lecture I can see brewing behind those brown eyes. It's not like my leg is a joy for me, either. And I really don't need anyone adding guilt to my plate right now.

PATRICE

There are four adults on this campus, and now one of them can do nothing but recline on a couch. I am very sorry that Mr. Kline is hurt, and feel guilty that his pain is so inconvenient to me. I don't like the way I am reacting to this situation at all.

I take a breath and try to shake off the worry about being down one adult.

Students flutter around Mr. Kline, offering to help him get more comfortable. I have no idea what they intend to do for him. Mostly I wish I could wrap up in a blanket to get warm, and these people would simply lie down on the floor and go to sleep.

But that isn't going to happen anytime soon.

I clap for the students' attention once more. "I want to say it once again, so there are no misunderstandings: the plan is that no one leaves the Hall tonight. We all stay here. Close to the fire. No exceptions. Once we are down for the night, we are all here together."

A few students nod, and a few hide their comments to their friends behind their hands.

I've stated my expectation for the night. That helps me feel a bit better.

Students rush back toward Mr. Kline.

I make my way through the press of concerned students and stand at the head of the couch.

Without my needing to ask, the students step away and quiet down.

“Is it broken?” I ask.

Mr. Kline has to crane his neck back to make eye contact.

“Can you come around?” he asks, pointing to a spot by the low table. “It’s hard to see you.”

Why does he want to see me?

For that matter, why am I trying to avoid looking directly at him?

“You don’t need to see me to answer my question,” I say, but I move closer to his line of sight. Standing in front of him, I can better see his pallor. All the ruddy, outdoorsy color has drained from his handsome face, leaving him looking like someone who works in an office and hasn’t seen the sun for months. This is far from his usual sporty image, and it’s this more than the hovering students or the way his son had to practically carry him inside that proves to me he’s actually hurt.

For reasons I’m not completely comfortable exploring, I notice he still looks quite attractive, and there’s something appealing about a man who needs to give in to vulnerability. But of course, I don’t know how to help him, and that frightens me.

“Do you think your leg is broken?” I ask again.

He watches me for a moment, as if he’s waiting for me to rethink my question. But I need to know what I’m dealing with.

“I’m not a doctor,” he says. I wait for the rest of his statement, the charming, chuckling punch-line.

He says nothing else.

How does he think we’re going to move forward in this disaster of a day if he refuses to engage in a basic transmission of information? He looks past me. I believe he’s in a great deal of pain.

I can't fix this. And I don't have a great gift for sympathy. But maybe I can learn to speak this man's language. He has shown himself to be playful and full of laughs. That is, until now, when he cannot seem to find his smile.

I fold my arms in front of me.

"As it happens, I am a doctor, but I can't tell you if your leg is broken."

He raises his eyes to mine. After staring at me for far too long, he says, "Patty, are you making a joke?"

Patty again. If my efforts are to be met with mockery and impertinence, I have better things to do with my time. With a huff of frustration, I turn and begin to walk away. He reaches an arm out toward me, but I didn't stand near enough for him to grab at me. However, I do stop.

"Okay, wait. It was a pretty good joke. I think it just took me by surprise. I wasn't expecting it from you, Patty."

Will every student at Chamberlain begin to call me Patty now? He's impossible.

The frustration and worry of the day bubble up inside me and I can feel myself about to explode. Spinning around and leaning in close to his face, I attempt lower my voice to a whisper, but it's the hiss of steam before an eruption. "You must stop calling me Patty. My name is Patrice."

He holds out his hand as if we're being introduced. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Patrice. I'm Oliver."

I can't stop years of training and expectation in the corporate world. I put my hand out toward him. Then I remember I don't want to shake this man's hand. Not when he's acting to undermine me in the eyes of the students. I try to snatch it back before he grasps it, but he's faster than I am, even in his weakened state. He holds on to my hand, but he's not trapping my fingers. I could pull away. I will pull away, but in the second that he takes my hand, I feel warm for the first time tonight. And not only in my hand. I look at his face, see the smile that stretches from his mouth to his eyes, and the warmth spreads through me.

I'm not at all interested in exploring that feeling, nor am I interested in letting go. His hand stays wrapped around mine.

"Oliver," I say.

"Patrice."

He looks at me from his position sprawled across the couch. But "looks" isn't exactly the word. He gazes. Our eyes lock. The dimly lit room holds us in a cocoon of flickering firelight. His fingers pulse around mine as if he's making sure I'm really here.

I'm here. And so are twenty-five students. But I still don't want to pull away. What is going on here?

I stand in front of him, absorbing the comfort of his touch, watching his face for confirmation that what I feel is truly happening.

A voice penetrates our cocoon. "Did someone call the doctor? 911? Anyone?"

I pull my hand from Oliver's grasp.

For the first time in my employment at Chamberlain Academy, I am annoyed to hear Michael Carraway's voice.

I turn to Michael and see genuine worry on his face. I can help relieve this worry. "I have not spoken to a doctor. Would you be willing to phone Dr. Mercer's emergency number and talk through the situation with him?"

Michael nods and jogs away. I assume he's heading upstairs to find the doctor's personal number in the Chamberlain personnel files.

Millie comes over and looks at Oliver. "You need ice."

She points to a student and says, "See if any of the small trash cans have extra liners, or if there's a can without any garbage in it. Fill up a liner with some snow so he can put it on this knee."

I watch the student rush away to be helpful. I wish she'd given me a job to do.

I am not skilled in being a medical go-between, so I will leave the ice business to Millie and the students, and the health-related conversation to Michael, the doctor, and Oliver.

How quickly my brain has captured the idea of this man as Oliver. Only a moment ago, he was absolutely and definitively Mr. Kline.

I step away from the couch, but Oliver says, “Patrice, wait.”

The spell we were under has broken, but I turn back to him. He points out into the darkness.

“I wanted to make you some hot chocolate.”

He did?

“That is not necessary,” I say. But what a thoughtful gesture.

“Well, I started the process. And there’s a giant vat of it cooking on the stove over in the kitchen. We need to send someone to turn off the flame. Bring the cocoa over. Grab a new crate of mugs.”

I process most of this, with the exception of new mugs, but my brain catches on the detail of the giant vat. When he said he wanted to make cocoa for me, he didn’t mean for me. He meant for all of us.

In my head, a small saucepan of simmering chocolate is a lovely, generous act. But a huge cauldron, possibly scorching on the heat in an empty building seems like ten kinds of mess waiting to happen.

I give him a single nod and walk away. “You’ll need help,” he says. “It’s really heavy.”

I had every intention of asking a few students to go to the cafeteria and take care of it, but now that he’s assumed I’m going, I realize I really should not send teenagers into off-limits areas of the school unaccompanied. In the dark. In a storm.

With Michael attempting to reach Dr. Mercer on the phone, I’m running out of capable adults.

I approach a circle of students sitting on the floor. “I need some help, please,” I say.

One jumps to his feet so quickly it’s like a reflex. Someone asks for help, he leaps into action. I wait until he turns around to thank him for his willingness, only to discover it’s Hayes Kline. The first to volunteer.

Not what I expected. Unless he thinks I’m handing him my keys and turning him loose on campus. Not likely. Not a chance.

“Coat,” I say, and he jogs over to a pile of jackets and backpacks piled next to the suitcases that stand stacked against a wall. He riffles through the coats until he finds his own, then jogs back to me.

“Kitchen,” I say, and he nods. Maybe he’s used to taking single-word orders. He doesn’t try to start up a conversation as we leave the warmth of the Hall and step out into the night. Snow is pressing down out of the clouds, covering the campus in a thick blanket. Many inches have fallen since we brought the students back from dinner, and the dip in the white landscape is the only clue that we’re on the sidewalk.

Hayes puts a hand to my arm. “Here’s where my dad fell. There’s probably still a lot of broken dishes.”

“Broken dishes?”

“He was carrying a box of coffee cups. He slipped on ice. The box fell with him. I tried to clean it up, but it was hard to see where all the pieces landed.”

After this boy helped his father inside and saw to his comfort, he came back into the storm to clear up the mess?

“Here,” he said, moving past me. “Walk in my footsteps so you don’t slip on anything.”

Not that I was planning to chat with him on our errand, but now I find myself speechless.

He walks a step in front of me, digging his shoes into the sidewalk and making a windshield-wiper motion to clear the largest possible space for my feet. It’s strange and sweet and

uncomfortable and surprising, this whole journey to the kitchen.

I'm still in my work clothes, because I'm still at work. I may never leave work again if this storm keeps dropping snow at this rate. But I really wish there was a chance to change clothes before I attempt this walk to the kitchen again (not to mention something reasonable to change into). No one should make this trek in leather pumps, and certainly not three round-trips.

When we get to the door, I unlock and prepare myself for the acrid odor of scorched chocolate and sugar. No such thing. The largest of the stock pots stands on a burner over low heat, simmering and smelling divine.

I turn off the heat and find some large pot holders. Hayes tries out a few lids from a lid rack until he finds one that fits the pot.

We haven't spoken since he passed me on the sidewalk. Now I wonder if he is better prepared to locate cups than I am.

"Do you by chance know where to find mugs?"

He grins. "Why would I know that?"

I don't bother answering, but I turn away so he doesn't misinterpret my answering smile. If I spend much more time with this particular student, it might become impossible to loathe him.

"There is a storage closet over there," he says and points past my shoulder. I don't ask how he knows. This boy has been a student here for two and a half years, and he knows the campus better than I do. Of course, he probably made all his discoveries in questionable ways, under the cover of darkness, and in direct opposition to rules and orders. So not only do I not ask how he knows, I try not to even consider the many possible ways.

We walk to the doors in the wall. The first contains towels and dishcloths, paper products, and cleaning supplies.

The second holds the dishes. Shelves of serving-ware. Hayes finds a crate and lifts a champagne flute from it. "Not

exactly what we're looking for, right?"

I don't answer him, but I point to the wall to the right of him. He picks up a crate of mugs, testing the weight. "It's pretty heavy," he says.

"I can manage." I reach to take the crate from his arms. He's right. It's heavy.

"We could get one of those rolling carts," he begins, but I shake my head.

"The snow would make it impossible to roll it."

"I could shovel again really quick," he says.

I believe we are both thinking of his father's unfortunate fall. I appreciate his caution.

"Thank you for your concern, but I will walk carefully. I'll carry this. You carry the cocoa."

I tilt my head toward the door and follow him back into the main kitchen. He turns around and makes sure the storage room lights are off, then grasps the handles of the industrial stock pot and hefts it. There are at least four gallons of cocoa inside. And the pot itself is very sturdy. We must look completely foolish lurching through the snow under the weight of our bundles, attempting to step in the rapidly filling footsteps we made on the way to the kitchen.

As soon as we come inside the Hall, students rush over to take our loads from our arms. Someone finds a collapsible table and sets it up by the fireplace. Another student places the pan next to the pan, and one begins to serve the cocoa.

Michael is nowhere to be seen. The robotics student named Gillian helps hand mugs of cocoa to others. A crowd stands around the couch where Oliver reclines. This is a perfect time to get out of these wet shoes.

I look back to reassure myself that nobody needs anything. And then I realize, with a bit of alarm and a lot of sadness, that they seem not to need me.

I'm grateful for the other adults in attendance. They are sure to be helpful as I try to make the best of this whole

unfortunate situation. Perhaps we'll even make a good team. For a second of weakness, I think about how I could go up to my office and stay there, make any necessary arrangements, and leave the implementation to Oliver and Michael, with Millie in attendance.

What happened in the past few hours to make that possibility a disappointment? For the ten years I've led this school, I've taken great pride in the fact that I help deliver students into the world prepared to begin challenging university experiences. Why does it make me sad to see that they don't need me to serve them their bedtime cocoa?

And is that really what's bothering me? Am I disappointed that they took over and helped each other? Or am I sorry that none of the students feels comfortable looking me in the eye, making jokes with me, bringing me their worries about being stranded and far from their families, the way they're doing with Oliver? The way they did with each other over the dish sinks tonight?

I do not want to be Oliver Kline, I remind myself.

But a small voice in the back of my mind wonders if perhaps I could learn to be a bit more like him.

I text Michael a message that I'll be back in a moment. I walk up the huge staircase leading to my office and then close the door behind me. I stand there, leaning, as I kick off my sodden shoes. They may never recover from this day. I can't imagine ever wanting to put them back on.

The small closet behind my desk holds my satchel and purse, a pair of slippers which I put here on a whim and have never worn, and my yoga clothes. There is also a blanket, a pillow, and a warm wool sweater. All concessions to possibilities that have never been realities. Except for the yoga clothes. I truly enjoy practicing with London Worthington when she does faculty sessions.

I get out of the soggy mess that was once a very nice suit and into my yoga pants and thick, creamy sweater. Stepping into the slippers feels both a relief and in every way wrong. I am the chancellor of this school. Can I really walk down the

stairs and among the students wearing slippers? But I do not want to put those pumps on my feet ever again, and definitely not paired with leggings and an oversized sweater. Maybe there are people who can make a public appearance in such a condition, but I am not one of them.

The inside of the closet has a full-length mirror, one I never use. I know what I look like when I leave my home, and I know what I look like when I return. There's very little change, so why would I need to check my reflection during the day? But today is different. There has been far more weather, for one thing. And I've had my arms in soapy water for an hour. Not to mention a wardrobe change, which definitely damaged my updo.

I tug the pins from my hair and rake my fingers through the mess it has become. There ought to be a hairbrush in here somewhere, some emergency skincare supplies in case of prolonged time spent in the office, and something more than the lipstick in my desk drawer. But there are no hidden cosmetics, only an emergency deodorant, and there is no brush, so I finger-comb my hair until it feels unlocked from its twist. I am not sure what makes me swipe the lipstick over my mouth, but I choose not to consider the motivation too carefully.

I check my reflection.

The woman in the mirror cannot actually be me.

Every day I come to this office to work. I run a top-tier educational institution. When I stand in this room, I exude authority. I project confidence. I maintain influence. But the woman in the mirror shows none of these things.

Looking this way, I do not seem to belong in this office. I look like someone's mother.

Something tickles at the back of my throat at the thought, but I swallow it away and turn from the mirror. Closing the closet door, I sit at the desk and open my email.

There are hundreds of messages.

This is normal message load for a school day, but there is nothing normal about today. And Michael and I have been away from our computers for hours in all this dinnertime madness.

I find a message from Michael, sent when he first took an accounting of the students remaining on campus. I put that file side-by-side with the emails and looked for names in common. I answer each of the messages from concerned parents with as few words and as much confidence as I can, considering I know nothing about when they will be able to see their students. I let them know there are several adults who remained on campus, and that we are seeing to the comfort of their students. Once I'm satisfied with the message, I copy it into a response to each of the concerned parents' emails.

Almost at once, I start getting messages back. I read the first one. "Solange is not my *student*. She is *your* student. She is *my* daughter, and I want her with me for Christmas. What are you doing to make that happen?"

How am I supposed to answer that? I've rarely seen such aggressive use of italics. I decide not to tell her I don't control the weather, and as for answering the comment about Solange not being her mother's student, well, what else can the woman expect from me?

I cannot maintain an ongoing digital conversation with every worried mother, father, and caregiver. As soon as I'm confident I've reached out at least once to all the parents with students still on campus, I close the email program and stand up. As uncomfortable as I feel among the students, I know I need to be there with them.

There are not many parts of my job that I feel I need to prepare for with a deep breath, but I stand and consciously fill my lungs before I walk back down the stairs to face the students. And Oliver Kline.

OLIVER

Laughing kids, hands cupped around hot cocoa mugs, tell me and each other stories about school and projects and the Winter Show and life on campus. They sit on the arms of this couch and on the one opposite, crowding six or seven into seating made for four. Other groups of kids settle into other couches around the space. Some are on the floor, leaning against knees of their friends—and I wonder if they were friends before today.

Hayes seems to know them all, but that's how Hayes rolls. I have heard a few kids introducing themselves to each other. The school only has a thousand students, but that doesn't guarantee they cross each other's paths regularly.

Someone asks, "Who wants more?"

A few kids raise their empty mugs, and a couple pull themselves from their seats to offer the refills.

As they move, I get a clear view of the massive staircase and the woman walking down it. If I hadn't watched her walk up, I wouldn't believe it was Dr. Patrice Moreau coming back down. She's wearing an oversized sweater and leggings, and her hair hangs loose and wavy over her shoulders. She looks relaxed. She looks about ten years younger. She looks beautiful.

Wait.

Not that last one. Because that's weird.

But, yeah. She really does.

Calm Patrice is a very attractive woman. She moves toward me (or, I should say, toward the students) with a strange shuffle. Then I look down and see that she's wearing some of those sweater-y boots that are actually slippers, and the way she's sliding across the wood floor, it appears she's not used to walking in them.

I nudge Hayes, who's sitting on the couch near my feet. "Give the chancellor your place."

He looks up from his phone and does a double take. Like he's looking for her, but he can't find her—and then he does. He glances at me with a look of surprise before he jumps up, saying, "Dr. Moreau, here's a seat for you."

I try to sit up a bit more so my stretched-out leg doesn't take up so much of the couch. If she's going to sit close to me, I'd rather have her farther from my feet. Maybe closer to my arms, My chest. My face.

The kids go silent as she steps into the group, but I hear a few whispers.

She sits at the edge of the cushion, like she's perched in preparation to leap up again at a second's notice.

"Hi," I say.

She nods and looks around, and there's no way she doesn't notice how quiet it got when she came over. "How's everyone doing?" she asks the circle in general.

Nobody answers. She glances over at me.

"Everyone is amazing. These are the best kids in the world."

A few kids pretend to deflect, but others beam at my compliment.

"And the leg?" she asks.

"Still attached," I say, hoping to play off how much it hurts. And how much I wish it didn't. I know this is the world's stupidest timing to get hurt.

"Has Michael reached Dr. Mercer?" she asks.

The kids seem afraid to speak or to leave. They just sit, either staring at me or taking furtive glances at Patrice. I can't blame them. The transformation of their chancellor is almost unbelievable. Do they recognize how lovely she is? Or does their fear-filter still put her into some category other than "woman?"

"I haven't seen Michael for quite a while," I say. Mostly to get her to keep talking to me. To keep looking over at me, giving me an excuse to look back. She looks so ... human.

A guy with a handheld video game hits pause and looks up. "He and the shuttle driver were walking outside a while ago."

Nice. You go, Michael. Of course, I don't say that aloud.

Patrice looks annoyed. Or maybe concerned. "I'd rather nobody was outside in this storm," she says. She looks ready for action. Maybe she's planning to go outside and find them? Bring them back in?

She's saved from any unnecessary heroics as the door opens and Michael pushes a wheelchair inside. Millie sits in it with a box on her lap. For a second, I think she must have hurt herself, too, but she leaps out of the seat and brings the box over toward me.

She pulls out two different leg braces, a foldable cane, and some ace bandages.

Michael's right behind her, holding a pair of crutches under his arm. "I got Dr. Mercer on the phone, and he said, based on your reported injuries, that you most likely sprained your knee."

Sounds about right to me.

Millie tosses me a small bag. "He said to take three of these, every four hours."

Dr. Moreau stands, all chill gone. All calm wiped away. "You took medication from the clinic?" Her expression looks horrified. Baffled. Ready to go to war, honestly.

Millie shakes her head. “No. Of course not. From my purse. They’re ibuprophen tablets.”

A few of the kids laugh softly, but I watch Patrice.

She doesn’t visibly relax.

Michael to the rescue. He hands her a key. “Dr. Mercer talked me through where to find these supplies and made sure we got the right ones. He said he’s happy to be on call for Mr. Kline as long as he’s needed, but he won’t be able to get back. He’s out of the state for the holidays.”

Then he turns to me. “If you’re up for it, he thinks it’s a good idea to get you braced as soon as possible. Then more ice.”

Hayes Kline makes an exaggerated face of concern. “And what will we do if we run out of ice? On a night like this? While we’re snowed in?”

All the kids laugh, and a fissure of release seems to go through the crowd. Someone shouts that they know where an ice machine is. Kids move from their seats and Michael comes around to help me navigate the brace options. One is a stretchy pull-on and one has Velcro straps that wrap around the leg. The pull-on is probably better for a dozen reasons, but the other one will go over my pants. And I have no intention of doing the work it would take to remove the pants. Especially now that I can both feel and see my knee swelling.

As Michael and Hayes help me get the brace on, I focus on Patrice again. She stands nearby with her arms crossed, watching. Somehow this gesture that seemed so familiar and fit her so well has softened. Maybe it’s because her sweater covers her knuckles and her hair’s down. She looks more concerned bystander and less angry authority figure.

I try not to wince as the straps tighten over my thigh, but just in case, I look at the floor. If Patrice is still watching, maybe she’ll give me the benefit of the doubt that I’m a stoic patient.

For the record, I’m neither stoic nor patient. But I never claimed to be perfect.

After I'm strapped in, I swing my legs around and sit with my feet on the floor. It's been less than an hour that I've been sprawled across this couch (is that even possible?) but it feels great not to take up more than my share of space.

I'm not giving up the end seat of this couch, not until I feel ready to try out the crutches. I like the support of this sofa's arm behind my back. I get settled into the corner and casually stretch my arm out over the empty seat beside me. Not that I'm expecting anyone in particular to come sit next to me. But if she does, I'm ready.

Millie brings me a glass of cold water, and I'm grateful that she thought of it. I take three of the pain relievers and thank her.

"You bet." She leans in. "I have a few more if you need them."

"I hope we'll be out of here before I run out of these." I shake the bag she gave me.

"You're going to want to keep elevating that leg," she says. Like someone who watches a lot of medical dramas.

I laugh. "Are you an orthopedic surgeon when you're not driving shuttles?" I ask.

She doesn't laugh with me. "No. I'm in physical therapy school."

I'm a little embarrassed at how much that surprises me. I assumed that being the shuttle driver was her only story. Shame on me. I should know better. I thought I did know better.

At least going forward I can *do* better.

"Then I'm very glad you're stuck here with us," I tell her.

Dr. Moreau sits down on the couch, but not close enough to be within reach of my arm. She tilts her head back until it rests on the couch cushion and blows out an exhausted breath. "Is there any chance eating soup and bread and drinking hot chocolate makes teenagers tired?" She asks it in a whisper, as

though afraid someone might overhear that she wants the kids to go to sleep and, in revenge, stage an all-night party.

I don't think she really expects an answer, but I'm actually a parent, so if there's an authority here, it's probably me.

"In my limited experience, teenagers are only tired in the morning. Never at night."

She turns her head my way and gives me a tired smile. "That is terrible news."

"Agreed."

She drags herself into an upright seat. "I suppose they aren't going to figure out sleeping arrangements by themselves. And if they did, I probably wouldn't like their choices." She slaps her hands against her thighs and stands up.

I feel like it's necessary here for me to say I'm not a voyeur. I'm not a creep. I'm not one of those men who objectify women. Patrice Moreau is not an object to me, but as she moves from sitting to standing, all the different parts of her body working in beautiful harmony, she is certainly enjoyable to look at.

She walks to the center of the large foyer and puts her fingers to her lips and whistles to get the kids' attention. It's a nice trick. I've seen it done often. My mom used to whistle like that for us when we were kids, and I promise, I never once saw it the way I'm seeing it now. It makes me very aware of Patrice's mouth. The (admittedly) few occasions I've seen her smile. The way her lips form my name.

I wonder if Millie gave me something stronger than ibuprophen, because I'm feeling a bit floaty just now. As the students gather around her, Patrice gives them instructions I can't hear. Probably because her back's to me. Probably not because my pulse is thudding in my ears.

It's the knee sprain. The combination of shock and pain. It has to be. Because a costume change shouldn't give the insufferable woman this much power over me. If she walked over here and demanded I stand up and lift this enormous

couch over my head, I'd do it. Or (and this is much more likely) die trying.

Within a couple of minutes, kids are coming back into my space, each carrying a rolled-up yoga mat. They start unrolling the mats onto the floor, scooting chairs out of the way. A few kids move close to the fireplace, and others seem to prefer the solitude of the room's corners.

Michael wanders around the vast space, nudging kids into inclusion whether they want it or not. I haven't seen Hayes come back with a mat yet, and I get a bit nervous watching for him. Is he planning something? Is he already carrying out some new prank?

I see him a moment later. He stands in conference with Patrice. She seems to be listening to him as he gestures toward something outside, in the opposite direction of the cafeteria. She gives him a long look, then nods in what looks like a hesitant way and hands him her keys.

He jogs over to me. "Hey. So I'm going to grab a few kids and raid the linen closet in the nearest dorm. I know there's one in my dorm, so they must all have them. They're stocked with blankets and sheets and stuff. I'll see if I can find some pillows. You need anything?"

"I'm okay—as long as they're not going to make the old guy with the broken leg sleep on the yoga mat."

Hayes grins. "You're lucky, old man. The stated rule is that you have to have voted in at least one national election to sleep on furniture. Everyone else gets the floor."

"Seems perfectly reasonable."

"Does it though? I say couches are for anyone who's ever dunked a basketball. Or gotten a 1600 on the SAT."

I shake my head.

He shrugs and grins. "Outvoted. I see how it is. Okay. See you in a minute."

"Wait, Hayes." I grab his sleeve and tug him back so he's standing right in front of me. I wish I could stand up and look

him in the eye, but I can't. So I use my voice of authority. "You're holding the chancellor's keys. I'm sure that's giving you a pretty serious temptation to pull something."

He gives me his patented puppy-dog face. "I can't believe you don't trust me."

"Really? You can't? Want me to remind you why I drove up here?"

He looks away. "Nope."

"Okay. Just please don't do anything stupid. Or anything funny. Or anything dangerous. Or anything involving Christmas decorations that don't belong to you. Do I need to keep talking?"

"You really don't."

"Glad to hear it."

He waves.

"Wait."

He stops, and his hands go into his jeans pockets. He blows out a frustrated breath. "What?"

"I need to hear you say it."

"Say what?"

"That you're going to behave. That you're not going to make things worse."

He deadpans. "I'm going to behave. I'm not going to make things worse."

It's what I asked for. Exactly. Why does it not feel like what I wanted?

"Am I excused?"

There's the edge of contempt. The teenage annoyance, spread thin so it doesn't cause any parental clap-back. That slight hint of disrespect that kids use so frequently on their parents that some adults think it's the only way teenagers are capable of communicating. Hayes so rarely speaks this way that I know it's only because I pushed him.

But if it means I can go to sleep tonight and not worry that he's going to do something stupid that will get someone hurt, I'll push as much as I need to.

“You are excused. Love you.”

He leaps over the couch like he was mid-race in the hurdle event. I hear him say, “Bro. I need your help.”

And he leads a band of kids out into the snow.

PATRICE

Of course Hayes Kline knows where to find pillows and blankets on campus. I hope he realizes what a show of faith I'm making by handing over a key. I wouldn't have done it if I thought there was any possibility of him getting off campus with it. I've seen films. I know keys can be duplicated even if you only have a pressing. But I gave him a time limit, so I think he'll be back soon.

I can't do it in slippers—or at least, I very much don't want to. Michael and Millie are busy helping kids settle themselves. Oliver is laid up.

And I want to trust Hayes.

There are many reams of data suggesting that within an organization, a bit of stated trust goes a very long way in procuring expected behavior. So I asked him where to find blankets, and he told me his dorm has a closet labeled "Linens." I told him not to go all the way to Cedar Elm hall, but to look in the same location in Redbud hall. And that he has ten minutes to report back to me.

Some of the students are opening their suitcases and pulling out pajamas. A few thought they'd be sleeping sleep in much warmer climates tonight, so there's some borrowing of sweatshirts and socks by those who packed for the tropics. Kids are moving in and out of the Hall's public restrooms to brush their teeth and wash their faces.

I walk past students who are talking to their parents on the phone, assuring them they've eaten, that they're fine, that their

medications haven't run out, that they're comfortable. That they miss the family, too.

The door opens and Hayes and his team walk in. I check the time. Almost ten-thirty. They've been gone only nine minutes. The blanket retrieval team made it back before their deadline. I walk over, hold a hand out for my key, and offer to help the group of students carrying armloads of pillows and blankets that look like they might be used in an army hospital. There's a girl who has a huge pile of pillows in her arms stacked almost to the top of her head. She hands half the pile off to me. I would imagine very few of Chamberlain's students need to use school-issued bed linens in their dormitories. This population is more likely to have custom-designed duvets with matching sheets, curtains, and robes. And I am willing to bet every girl in this room has at least three pillows on her bed. But I have no intention of allowing any of these people to wander back and forth to the dorms through a deserted, snow-filled campus for bedspreads. Certainly not when these institutional-looking pillows and blankets are available.

As the delivery team and I walk past each of the yoga mats, we make sure everyone has a pillow and two blankets. I will keep the fire burning through the night, which is no trouble as it runs on gas. It manages to put out a decent amount of heat for a largely decorative display. And it comes with the added bonus of keeping a light burning.

I hand a young-looking boy a second blanket, and he says, "Oh, it's okay. Make sure everyone else is warm enough."

He's refusing a second blanket?

It's such a surprising comment. If I have one widely held conviction about the students at my school, it's that they believe they deserve every good thing that comes to them. But here is a boy, in shorts and a sweatshirt with socks pulled up to his knees, willing to forgo a comfortable night's sleep so someone else can be warmer.

I glance up to find Hayes watching our exchange, and he gives me a nod. I believe through our silent communication he

just promised me to come back around and give this boy another blanket after the students are all settled.

As we pass Oliver Kline, sitting up straight as though at attention on his couch, a girl passes him a pillow.

“I’m sorry I’m no help,” he says, looking at me with that handsome, earnest expression.

My instinct is to nod and move on, but something tells me to stop a moment. If I let this opportunity pass, I might regret it.

“You were a great deal of help getting everything organized and putting this evening to rights,” I say. I know I’m being too formal, but it’s not as if I can sit down beside him and pat him on his uninjured knee and call him Oliver as these students stand by and watch.

Not that I’d do all of that even if nobody was watching.

One of the students holding a pile of blankets says, “Dinner was great.”

Another laughs and says, “And we don’t mind if we’re down one chaperone, right Hayes?”

Hayes Kline looks at me and then at his father, smiling but saying nothing as his friends bump him with their elbows.

Finally, Hayes speaks up. “There won’t be any trouble tonight.”

I know it’s only words, but the words are a comfort, especially coming from him.

As we move on, I take a moment to wonder why I believe him. The boy is gifted at convincing authority figures that he will never break a rule again. He’s had years of practice promising only good behavior to come. So even though he seems sincere, I plan to sleep with one eye open tonight.

Not that I have any choice. It’s hard to remember the last time I spent a night in a room full of people. A two-day concert in the summer when I was a university student? But that was different. We were outside. I was young. We all made the choice to be there.

And I was not in charge.

I hand a student the last pillow in my pile and turn to survey the room.

A few of the students have pulled their mats together and surround the boy with the guitar, singing along as he plays some songs I've never heard. Some of the students read books. Some faces reflect the light of the phones they hold.

Others lie facing each other, talking with their heads propped on their fists.

Michael walks the perimeter of the gathering, looking as uncomfortable as I feel. I move toward him.

"I'm sorry you will have to stay here tonight," I say. "Have you been able to reschedule your travel plans?"

He shakes his head. "I wasn't going anywhere this year. I'm saving money for a trip this summer."

"Oh? Where will you go?" I ask, attempting a casual conversation with a person I speak to formally every day. I realize I'm standing with my arms crossed and unfold them in an attempt to look relaxed as I watch the students settle in.

"France."

I turn to look at Michael. "Really? Have you been before?"

He nods. "My grandmother lives outside Paris."

I feel a combination of excitement at the news and guilt that it's a surprise. I uncross my arms and stand there looking at Michael.

"How many years have you and I worked together?" I ask.

"Six." He answers quickly, as if I'm giving him a test and speed will increase his score.

"Six years, and you have a French grandmother I've never heard of before tonight?"

Michael shrugs. "She never came up."

I understand what he's not saying.

"You mean I've never asked."

“It’s nothing to do with the business of the school,” he says.

I wish his response surprised me more, but I see clearly our discussions are rarely personal. I have never asked him about his family. He has never asked me about European travel. It has been many years since I visited my family in France. Now I feel the hint of a wish that I could be there tonight.

A wish that they’d asked me to come back.

One of the student shrieks, and I turn to see that she’s batting something off her shoulder.

“I would like to hear about your grandmother. Perhaps after I exterminate an insect?”

Michael chuckles, a sound I’ve never heard him make before. “That would be great.”

I move toward the spot where the shrieking student now dances from foot to foot on her yoga mat.

“What is the problem?” I ask.

She freezes, then slowly settles with both feet on her mat. She looks over at me. “Sorry, Dr. Moreau. Spider.” She gives a visible shudder.

“Does anyone see the spider now?” I ask. The students in her cluster don’t seem concerned.

A boy looks at me and says, “It crawled away. That way.” He points behind himself, toward the unoccupied part of the lobby. Then he winks.

He holds my eye contact long enough that I’m supposed to recognize the communication we just had. I can’t say I know exactly what the details of our understanding are, but I nod anyway, assuming he wants me to pretend I see it.

“I’ll go see what I can discover,” I say.

I take a few steps away from the sleeping mats and bend over, pretending to pick something up from the floor.

The boy shouts, “She got it.” Several of the students clap and cheer, and I walk to the door and pretend to drop something out into the snow.

Did I just perform a pantomime? I believe so. Did I lie to a student? Not exactly. Did my little show make it possible for one of the students to relax enough to go to sleep? I certainly hope so.

I look back toward Michael, and he stands very close to Millie. He has the posture of a man who would not be grateful for an interruption in his current conversation to speak about his Parisian grandmother. The two of them stand with heads tilted together in a way that suggests they are getting to know each other very well in the short time we’ve been together today.

Is it a short time, though? It feels like I’ve been stuck here with these students for days. Forever. I’m exhausted by the unexpectedness of all of it. I had every intention of locking up the Hall as the last shuttle pulled out of the drive this afternoon and not thinking about Chamberlain Academy again for three weeks.

Maybe tomorrow that can happen.

A woman can dream.

Tomorrow morning we’ll hear the sounds of snowplows. Phones will jingle with flight rescheduling alerts. The students will pick up their backpacks and walk onto shuttles, into the airport, and out of my business. Right after breakfast.

Breakfast.

Quel dommage.

Without Oliver in the kitchen, how will I feed these people?

I make my way past the students as they settle onto their mats, looking like overgrown toddlers at naptime. As I approach the couch where Oliver reclines, I tap him on the shoulder.

“Pardon me,” I say.

He gestures for me to take a seat beside his legs. I need to be close enough to him that the students don't overhear my worries, because I don't need anyone panicking about breakfast just as they're all settling down.

But *I'm* panicking about breakfast.

I sit on the edge of the couch beside Oliver's legs. He pushes himself upright and leans close so he can hear me whisper.

"How do I feed all these people in the morning?"

"There's a huge box of oats. With a scoop the size of a shovel."

I stare. He expects me to shovel oats into something and the students will eat it? They're not horses.

I shake my head.

"You don't feel good about oatmeal?" he asks.

I don't want to tell him I have no idea how to cook it.

He doesn't wait for me to answer. "Is there a better alternative for breakfast?"

There are a thousand better alternatives for breakfast, which is why I have an omelet and a croissant waiting for me at the Chamberlain Corner Café every morning. Ms. Thurston has my order prepared and packaged by 7:15, and Michael picks it up for me on his way to the office.

But Ms. Thurston is away. And now I have to deal with oats.

Oliver puts his hand on my arm.

Although I'm feeling tense and anxious, I don't pull away. I stare at his long fingers as they rest there on my forearm, right there on the rolled hem of my sweater.

"Patrice? Don't worry about food. I'm on it."

Now I look up to his face. "No, you're not. You can't walk. You can't stand up."

He shakes his head. “I bet I can. But Michael brought over a pair of crutches and a wheelchair from the clinic. I’ve got the food handled. You worry about ... all the rest of it.”

I breathe out a short laugh. “That actually sounds like a reasonable division of labor.”

“That’s a relief,” he says. “Because my skills outside the kitchen are not going to be much use to you.”

“Because I don’t understand the benefits of corporate leadership training models and interpersonal communication maximization?” I ask.

He sits for a second with his lips parted, as if he can’t remember what he was going to say, then he leans close and whispers. “You know what I do for my job?”

I sit back, increasing the distance between us, and nod. “I know where my donors’ money comes from, and I know what my students’ connections are.”

A slow grin spreads over his face, and he’s objectively a very handsome man made more handsome by this smile. I bet he practices it in the mirror. “Have you watched my videos online?”

I am not a woman who lies under normal circumstances. This is the most abnormal circumstance in which I’ve found myself in many years. “No.”

His smile slips. Then he pulls his phone out of his pocket and hands it to me. “Want to see?”

Do I want to watch this man charm an audience of hundreds through a streaming device while he sits here beside me on this couch?

Yes.

But, no.

I shake my head. “I want to know that the students will be fed in the morning, and now I know. Thank you, and goodnight.”

I stand up, and Oliver moves his hand. I think he's going to reach for my arm, stop me from walking away. The skin at the back of my neck warms at the idea. But he simply whispers, "Good night, Patty," and slides his phone back into his pocket.

Patty.

This insufferable man. I hide my face, just in case a smile is trying to come out.

I hate that I'm counting on his contribution for as primal and basic a need as food. But at the same time, I'm so grateful he's here and willing to help.

OLIVER

It's finally quiet. I've been dozing on and off for a few hours, but every time a kid gets up and then resettles, I'm awake and fully aware. Patrice is sleeping on a couch on the other side of the room. Maybe so she can see the kids from a different angle. Maybe so she's as far from me as she can get.

It's for the best. Something about sleeping in close proximity to her makes me sure I'd stare at her when I wake at every sound. And I really don't need to be caught staring anymore. Especially as she sleeps.

Not that it's all about me. Or Patrice.

These poor kids. Snowed in at Christmas time. I look out the huge wall of windows into the dark night, and it's just snow and more snow out there. The flakes pile up against the base of the windows, covering all the landscaping. I can't even find the sidewalks anymore. It would take a really surprising weather event for us to get these kids out of here tomorrow. And tomorrow is Christmas Eve.

I'm going to have to think of a way we can make Christmas special, because if things keep going the way they're going, we're celebrating here. I don't think planning a Christmas party is on Patrice's radar.

I fall asleep again when kid number six comes back from using the bathroom, and I'm sleeping deeper this time. I dream I'm standing on a coastal hill, seagrass at my feet, flying a kite. When I look up at the kite, twenty-five kids are holding

on to the string. I know they're the stranded students, and I want to bring them down to earth. I try to reel the kite string in, but then it turns upside down and becomes a fishing line, and I'm standing on the edge of a rocky river, holding a fly rod in one hand and, with the other, pulling kids out of the water with a pool skimmer.

I wake up again, this time feeling cold air blowing around me.

I hope that doesn't mean the heater's stopped working. Cracking my eyes open, I see that it's still dark and the fire's still on. That will go a long way to keeping us warm right here, but this localized fire isn't going to keep pipes from freezing if the heater's blowing cold air. I'll make sure to mention it to Patrice once the sun's up and it's officially morning.

Knowing there's nothing I can do about any of it now, I tuck my head down into my pillow and pull my blanket over my ears.

The next time I wake, it's warm again.

I must sleep deeply for a while, because I wake to laughter. It's not dark anymore. The kids are up, and something has them amused.

My first deep breath of the day is one of relief.

This laughter is great news. Maybe they're reading rescue messages their phones. Maybe roads are open. Maybe flights are rescheduled.

The gray light filtering in through the windows isn't all that encouraging, weather-wise. And it's difficult to see in the dimness, but I think it's still snowing. I really hope I'm wrong about that.

I hear the kids calling to each other, maybe waking the sleepers. I sit up and look over to the couch where Patrice slept. She's gone, her blanket folded and stacked on her pillow.

Someone shouts, "It's huge!"

A guy climbs halfway up the staircase and, in a very loud voice, starts singing, "O Christmas Tree." But he doesn't know

the words, because all he sings are the same lyrics over and over. “O Christmas tree, O Christmas tree, O Christmas tree, O Christmas tree.”

I move myself off the couch, holding on to the edge to heave myself up to my feet. My knee throbs, and I know it won't hold me, so I don't try to put weight on my left leg. I hobble around the lobby until I make my way around the huge fireplace wall. Then I see it.

In the entry hall, a huge, snow-covered evergreen tree stands nearly reaching the room's thirty-foot ceiling, leaning toward the window-covered wall. Its trunk is propped up by chairs, their backs leaning against the wood, and the tree is decorated with dozens of silver balls and white ribbon.

I hop closer. Oh, no. The ribbon is definitely toilet paper. And I think the balls are ... aluminum foil? Yes. There's an industrial-size box at the base of the tree—a tree that I'm pretty sure was part of the landscaping when I drove in yesterday.

Hayes.

I look around the room. He has to be in here somewhere. And if I know him at all, he's at the center of the celebration.

About eight kids hold hands and dance around the tree, giggling as pine needles poke them in their faces and snatch at their hair. I watch the circle go around twice. Hayes isn't there. Meanwhile, the wood floor is puddling as the snow melts off the branches and onto the parquet slats.

I'm going to kill him. I am absolutely going to murder him.

I look to the stairs. The kid, Lucas, I think, is still standing there singing the same three words.

I've got to find Patrice.

I've got to find Hayes.

A terrible thought rolls into my mind. What if Patrice has already found Hayes, and she's giving him exactly what he deserves right now?

Of course, she should have brought me in on this conversation. I'm right here in the building. Naturally, she probably assumes I'd want her to let Hayes off with a small slap on the wrist. That is not what I want. I want him nailed to the wall. Hung by his toes from the rafters.

Good thing I have a minute to cool off.

Fortunately for Hayes, it takes me forever to hop my way up the huge staircase, hugging the banister and taking an embarrassing number of breaks on my way up to Patrice's office. To Dr. Moreau's office, rather. Because she and I are going to be all business again, starting now. Starting in ten minutes. Starting whenever I can haul myself to the top of these stairs.

I open the door to the chancellor's office suite and see Michael at his desk, but he almost doesn't look like himself. He's in a set of Chamberlain sweats and a ball cap. He looks like he's playing a character. Only the ramrod posture is the same.

I point to the door, hoping my expression is asking my question, because I have not quite regained my ability to breathe.

Michael stands and nods. "They're inside."

I wish I could storm in, but all I can manage is a hobble. And there's no slamming a door with pneumatic hinges.

Hayes sits in the chair opposite Dr. Moreau's desk. The chancellor is still wearing the oversized sweater, and she holds her head in her hands. I see the anxious look in her eyes as she swivels toward the opening door.

Maybe she wants to speak first. This is her office, after all. And it's possible Hayes wants to speak first and put his side of the story out there, since I've always believed his version of events over anyone else's. Up until this morning, I've considered that an essential part of our relationship—an act of love. But now?

I don't wait for either of them to speak. "Hayes Maxwell Kline. I am horrified at what you've done. This is the absolute

last straw. Through all your dumb stunts I've stood by you, supported you, believed you. Every time you got busted for pranks, I took your word over everyone's because I wanted to trust you. If you said someone was overreacting, they were overreacting. If you said you were blamed for someone else's mess, I believed you. I was sure if you said you didn't do it, that was true. But this?" I gesture out the door, downstairs, into the snow, everywhere. The whole fiasco. "This is unbelievable."

My voice grows louder and I stand looming over his chair. "You promised me you would behave. You gave me your word. I have never been so ashamed of you."

Hayes is blushing furiously, his eyes sparking and cheeks flaming. I know that look well. I bet his ears are hot. This is the face of my son trying not to cry.

But his expression doesn't move me at all. I'm only getting started.

"When you told me your expulsion was unfair because you were only putting up a Christmas decoration? Okay, well, you neglected to tell me that the decoration you referred to used spray paint on a school monument. Not to mention hanging your chancellor in effigy from the bell tower."

I can both hear and feel my voice getting louder. I have to lean on the chair next to Hayes or I'm going to fall over, and I'm not ready to be finished. "I raised you better than this. I gave you every tool and every opportunity to be a contributing member of society, and you throw it all back in my face like this? You take your privilege, all the generosity granted you by Dr. Moreau and the school, a warm place to sleep during a storm, and you repay it with an act of vandalism? Someone could have been seriously hurt. And that tree must have been part of the landscape for decades. Do you even have any idea how old it was?"

His voice is quiet, but in my pause for breath, I hear his answer clearly. "Eighty-one years."

"Eighty-one ye—how did you know that?"

Hayes tosses a small brass placard to me. In embossed letters blackened by age, it says, “In honor of my beloved first child, Wanda, I plant this tree. May both grow proud and strong as a beacon to the world.”

This is much worse than I thought. I know who Wanda Chamberlain is. Everyone knows Wanda. She’s the heart and soul of this campus, and my punk kid has managed to chop down the tree planted to commemorate her birth?

My next inhale is the starter on the engine of my yelling. I am very ready to let him have it again.

A small throat-clearing sound from Patrice stops me.

“Mr. Kline, would you care to take a seat?”

I almost shout my answer at her, but only because I’m revved up. I really don’t want to yell at Patrice.

I blow out a breath and shake my head. I don’t want to be on the same plane as Hayes. I want to loom over him in paternal disapproval, leaning down and radiating menace.

Then I nod. I should sit. This isn’t how anything gets solved.

I take the chair and turn to look at my son. “I apologize for my tone. I shouldn’t have shouted.”

He nods and mumbles, “Okay.”

“But I don’t regret my words. I am terribly disappointed in you.”

He sinks lower in the chair. “I get it.”

“And what do you have to say for yourself?” My voice has a mind of its own, and it’s getting louder. Again.

Hayes shakes his head.

“Nothing, huh? No misunderstandings? No excuses? No overreactions from the big bad adults?” I can hear myself. I know this voice, and it’s not one I’m ever proud of. I sound not only angry but also cruel. And I can’t seem to stop.

“You want to tell us it was an accident? That you didn’t mean to chop down a landmark tree, but somehow it just *happened?*”

My son stares at the floor in front of his feet. Feet that are bare. Probably because his socks and shoes are soaked from a midnight vandalism adventure in the snow.

A quieter voice cuts in. “Do you have any more to say?”

That’s right. A little help from the chancellor is what I need right now. I don’t have to be the only bad cop. She can take a turn yelling at Hayes, and I can organize my next offensive.

But when I look at Patrice to catch her eye, she’s watching me. Waiting for me to speak. Looking at me with the raised eyebrows of expectation. She wasn’t asking Hayes.

“Who, me?” I ask.

She nods.

What is going on? But I think I know my line. “No, ma’am. I’m finished.”

She nods again and turns to Hayes. “Very well. Now that your father has made his opinions clear, perhaps you’d like to explain things to him.”

Hayes shakes his head.

She waits what seems like forever before asking him again. “You don’t want to tell your father what you told me?”

Hayes runs his hand over his hair, a gesture that his mother used to do almost exactly the same way.

When he speaks, his voice is low. “He seems pretty sure he knows everything.”

I feel his words like a slap. A punch.

Because he’s right. I generally run on the assumption that I see things clearly. That my perspective is the right one. That I’m fair-minded and careful. All of this has worked in Hayes’s favor until today.

And it rarely occurs to me that I might be wrong.

There's a sick feeling inside me that's telling me I might be wrong now.

PATRICE

The boy woke me early this morning with apologies. Standing at the side of the couch. Stammering. Hair ruffled from sleep. He said something was happening and he wanted me to be aware. He said the damage had already been done and there was no fixing it.

Then he asked me if I'd be willing to listen to him.

My first instinct was to walk across the room and wake his father, let him deal with Hayes and whatever emergency he had caused, and never speak to either of them again. But I closed my eyes and counted to ten in three languages before I stood up. Told Hayes to wait a moment. Folded my blankets to buy a minute to compose myself. Then followed him to the Hall's front door.

The entrance was filled with the snow-covered giant tree. It leaned against the wall as if its trip inside had exhausted it.

A group of boys, red-faced and trying not to laugh, lay on their backs on yoga mats, staring at the ceiling. When I looked over at them, they attempted to fake sleep. I was in no mood to deal with their antics.

"Upstairs," I told Hayes.

He followed me. I heard his feet on the stairs. He hadn't even put on his shoes. All the way up the steps, I walked in silence, sifting through all my questions, concerns, assumptions, and anger.

So much anger.

But the staircase is long. And the murmur of voices from downstairs didn't carry well. The sound of students waking was low. Slow. Far away.

I unlocked the office door and led Hayes inside. Again.

He sat on a chair, stared at the floor, and told me his story.

“Last night, when we went to get shovels? I grabbed a few friends. We followed Mr. Carraway into the shed. He unlocked the door so we could get in, and then since we'd have to come back in to put the shovels away, he left it unlocked. It was the smart way to handle the snow cleanup. None of this is his fault.

“While we were in there, we saw other tools. Mowers. Weed trimmers. Leaf blowers. Rakes. And an axe and a few saws.”

He looked like he was about to be sick.

“I didn't go back out with them when they left the Hall in the night. I didn't help. But I didn't stop them, either. When they got up, I heard them. I pretended to be asleep so they'd leave me alone. I woke up again when they pushed the tree into the Hall. They were quiet, but the doors were open and the wind was cold. Then someone ran to the cafeteria and got foil, and the guys tossed foil balls into the branches. Someone found a supply of toilet paper and they threw that into the tree, too.

“I watched from my place on the floor. I could see they were having a great time. I wasn't about to stop them, because I knew they wouldn't stop. But I knew they'd gone too far.”

He looked up at me then. Eyes full of regret. “I know what going too far looks like now. And I'm so sorry.”

He held out the placard. The one from the base of the tree. The one Wanda Chamberlain's father stuck into the ground eight decades ago. I didn't want to touch it, so I shook my head and he tucked the hand holding it into the sleeve of his sweatshirt.

We talked for several minutes. I asked a few questions. Michael came up to the office as soon as he woke, saw Hayes

and me speaking, and closed the door. And then Oliver arrived, full of righteous parental anger.

And now we sit, the three of us, with very little idea of how to move forward. Is it my place to tell Oliver that Hayes denies responsibility? Do I fully believe the boy was not involved? He is, after all, a master of teenage manipulation. Is it possible he orchestrated the whole prank and then decided to cast the blame on his friends?

Of course it's possible.

But I watched his face as he spoke to me, and I'm watching it now. There is a difference between regret and guilt. And I believe his regret is real. And that the guilt is for his past pranks. I believe he was not involved with this one.

Might I be wrong?

Certainly.

I have been wrong before. Even if mostly, with this particular student's behaviors, I've been right.

I decide to wait.

As my eyes move from Hayes to Oliver and back again, I can see Oliver cooling down.

His face has returned to its usual color. He's breathing regularly. And he keeps peeking at his son as though he's waiting for Hayes to make a statement or a move.

I will not be the one to speak. If I had more courage, I'd step out of the office and leave the two of them to discuss all of this. But I am still responsible for what happens on this campus, and I don't want to miss any relevant information.

So I continue to wait.

If I look out the window, I'll see the hole where Wanda's tree ought to stand. The window is behind me, though, and I have no intention of standing up and putting my back to these two. It would feel disrespectful to the silent battle they're both entrenched in.

Finally Hayes speaks. He keeps his eyes on the floor, and his voice cracks in a very unfunny way. “I think Mom would be disappointed.”

Oliver grunts in agreement. “You think? I know she hoped for better behavior from you.”

Now Hayes turns in his chair and faces his father. “I don’t mean in me. I think she’d be sad that you’re so quick to think the worst of me.”

Oliver’s mouth drops open, and Hayes continues. “She wanted us to be a team. And we’ve done pretty well about it. But today, right now, you’re raging against me.”

Oliver interrupts. “Not against you. Against your behavior.” Then he looks pensive. “And maybe also against you. I’m sorry about that.”

Hayes shakes his head. “Yeah, okay, but you’re missing my point. You’re so quick to assume I’m responsible when something goes wrong.”

Oliver snorts. “I wonder why.” He looks to me, and I wonder if he expects me to speak up. To step in. To add something to the discussion. Not a chance. At least, not yet.

“I try to make life good, Dad. I try to make people happy. Everyone struggles, and I think everyone has a hard time sometimes, even if their life looks perfect on the outside. And I really want to make people smile. I know I’ve done some dumb stuff along the way, and I know the bell tower prank was going way too far. I’ve apologized to Dr. Moreau for that, and I’ll keep apologizing. I know now how hurtful that was. And I’m so sorry about it. I get it. But Dad, I promised not to make any trouble last night. I kept my promise. And the second something bad happened, you assumed it was me.”

Hayes stops for a breath, and Oliver opens his mouth to answer. Before he speaks, he looks at me. I shake my head, just a tiny movement. He sees. He stops.

Hayes goes on. “I want you to wait a minute. Give me a chance to tell you that this thing this morning wasn’t me. I didn’t cut down a tree. I didn’t plan it. I didn’t sneak outside

and bring it in. I didn't decorate it. I'm not standing around it right now, singing carols and having fun. I'm not taking any credit from the other kids, and I don't deserve any blame from you."

Oliver makes an awkward effort to turn his chair toward his son.

"I want to believe you."

Hearing those words, I feel like I know Oliver Kline. Our outlooks are vastly different. Our organizational strategies don't match up in any noticeable way. We have contrasting reactions to many situations. Our personal belief systems might be close to opposite. But we both feel this same way about Hayes this morning. We both want to believe him.

Hayes looks from his father to me and back to Oliver. "And I want to earn your trust."

"What does that look like to you?" Oliver asks, and I recognize my cue to step away from this conversation.

I push my chair back. "I'll leave you gentlemen to discuss the matter," I say. "You have use of this office as long as you need it."

They both stand when I stand, Hayes reaching out to shake my hand, and Oliver clutching the arms of his chair for support. He must be in a great deal of pain—physically and emotionally. I rest a hand on each of their arms as I pass them.

The office feels enormous in the time it takes me to cover the few steps to the door. The silence is thick as Oliver and his son wait to continue this crucial conversation in private.

As I shut the door behind me, I lean against it, closing my eyes. When did this become a regular posture for me? I feel utterly exhausted. My exhale goes on and on.

Finally, Michael asks, "Are you all right?"

It's as close to a personal question as our conversations generally get.

I give him a single nod, but don't open my eyes yet. I'm not quite ready to make the next phone call and face the

realities of what stands in my lobby. And what the campus has lost.

“Tell me something good, please,” I whisper, needing a single instance of positivity in order to move forward.

He doesn't hesitate. “Millie White is a really amazing person.”

I bat my eyes open. Stare at Michael. His cheeks glow with a blush.

“Is she?”

This is enough of an invitation for Michael. He begins to explain how helpful she's been. What a remarkable attitude she has about being stranded here with a building full of strangers. How much she's contributed to the positive outcomes we've experienced so far during our emergency.

He does not need my nods of understanding. He has no use for clarifying questions. He simply opens his mouth and lets fall the torrent of compliments. Her humor. Her intelligence. Her practicality. Her way with the students. And he hasn't even gotten started on her beauty.

Of course, he gets started on her beauty. He reminds me, in case I've forgotten, how her eyes shine. How her smile lights up rooms. How perfect her posture. How dazzling her laugh.

It's as if Michael Carraway secretly memorized all the most overused lines in every sentimental novel and presents them to me now as an homage to Millie's perfection.

As unexpected as this is, it helps me pull myself together. I can forget for a few seconds what goes on in the room behind me. There is much grief and heartache that needs to spill over in order for Oliver and his son to move forward together. Even being an observer of such things bruises my heart.

I know Hayes was quite young when his mother's cancer took her from him, but until now, I've only seen that sad history as a justification his advisor uses to overlook his worst behavior. But today I saw a sliver of the young man's real loss and wanting. Even though he might have continued to hide such a personal pain from me, he let me see it.

And as much as Hayes grieves his mother, Oliver must grieve his wife. The life they had together, and all they planned for their future. The suddenness and horror with which that future disappeared. The thought of his life interrupted in such a tragic way gives me pause.

As Hayes said in my office, no matter how perfect and shiny a person's life looks to outsiders, everyone has wounds they carry. Some people are quick to show theirs. Some find it helpful to open their hearts like books and let everyone see their pain. To share.

Others hide. I am a professional hider. Some of us hide so successfully we barely remember the causes of our injuries. We simply put on the armor to protect ourselves and never take it off. It becomes a permanent shell, through which nothing can penetrate to our broken hearts. I can only imagine what message my shell must send to the students here, their parents, our teachers, the staff. It must be simple to attach an imagined explanation—and often an unfair one.

Maybe for all this time I've assumed incorrectly about the reasons for Hayes Kline's misbehavior. It's possible I've imagined Oliver as a nonchalant stage mannequin, spreading the corporate emotional-fitness messages of the moment.

If I consider fairly, maybe I will see there is more to each of these people than I've given them credit for. Perhaps I've been too tough on both of them.

OLIVER

I am not a person who wallows, but a day of wallowing sounds pretty excellent right now. It's eight in the morning on Christmas Eve, snow is still piling up outside, twenty-five kids are stranded here, my knee hurts, I just shouted at my kid in the ugliest way, and now I'm supposed to make breakfast for everyone.

After Hayes and I talked, I feel wrung out. Maybe in a good way. I know vulnerability and interpersonal honesty are exhausting, but I don't think I've felt it like this. Not in a long time, anyway.

When we've said what we can, shed a few tears about Sarah, and apologized to each other for the tenth time this morning, I stand up beside my chair. As I hold out my hands for a hug for my boy, he wraps his arms around me. Tight. Solid. I realize he's as tall as I am. Hayes will always be my kid, but he's also becoming a man. I hope I'm helping him find the tools to be a good one.

This thought causes me to question what kind of man I really am. Introspection is a dangerous instrument, kind of like those metal tooth scrapers dental hygienists use. You need it, but in the wrong mood, it can be really painful.

I feel scraped.

Am I the kind of shallow guy who prefers to keep things easy? To believe without question what my kid tells me so I don't have to explore the possibility that we've got a behavior problem? The guy who maintains a general air of good humor

and chill until something undeniable pops up in my face and I lose my mind?

These are the kinds of thoughts that can keep me sitting in Dr. Moreau's office long after Hayes leaves.

I stare at the window behind her desk, not watching the snowfall but knowing it's happening. I don't know how long I stay, but eventually there's a knock at the door.

Instinct moves me to say, "Come in."

When Patrice opens the door to her own office, I realize I've been in here a long time. She must have been standing out there waiting to get back into her office since Hayes left. I pull myself up from the chair and know suddenly that I need three things: a shower, a toothbrush, and a few of those painkillers.

"Thank you for giving Hayes and me some time."

She nods, closing the door behind her. Looks like she's got more to say to me. Whatever it is, I deserve it.

I wait for her to say whatever she needs to say to put us back on the chancellor/parent path, but she says nothing. Simply stands with her back against the door watching me.

Finally she speaks.

"Are you okay?"

It's the least formal thing I've heard her say to me or anyone else, and it takes a few seconds to process.

"I, um, sure. Yeah. Yes. Fine."

She smiles with one side of her mouth as her eyes flit to mine and then away, showing me she doesn't believe me, but my attempt was at least amusing.

"Is there anything you want to talk about?"

I don't quite know what to say to this. Is there anything I want to talk about, like how I'm losing control of my kid? Or questioning if I've ever been a good parent? Or how much my knee hurts? Or how she looks like a completely different person with her hair down? Or how I can replace a nearly hundred-year-old tree? Or if we're ever getting out of here?

Yes. And no. I shake my head. “I’m good. How about you?”

Letting her head fall back against the door, she stretches her neck and exposes her throat. I look away, because seriously. That neck. Granted, I might be running on very little sleep and therefore susceptible to dramatic thoughts, but it’s definitely the most beautiful neck I’ve seen. The throat of a goddess. Who would have thought?

She sighs. “This experience is not building my confidence in my ability to do this job.”

I turn and face her, sitting on the edge of her desk to rest my leg. “Are you kidding? You’re perfect for this job. Look at that wall full of awards that prove it. You’re a star. Nobody else could have maintained control and order during this emergency like you have done. The organization alone is impressive.”

She gives a low, throaty chuckle and I will do anything, absolutely anything to hear that sound again. “We’ve got injury, vandalism, possible starvation, and seven million unanswered parent emails. This is not my idea of order.”

Her head is still tipped back, her eyes closed.

She goes on. “And I need to call Wanda Chamberlain and tell her about her tree. She is the kindest and most generous woman who has ever lived, but this is not going to be a fun conversation.”

Nothing helpful comes to my mind, so I say nothing.

Maybe she misinterprets my silence, because she cracks one eye open to look at me. “And yes, Mr. Kline. I know what fun is. At least, I can recognize it when it happens, even if it isn’t my specialty.”

Everything about this encounter is different than any other time I’ve spoken with Patrice. She’s showing her exhaustion, sure, but she’s also dropping her formality. Maybe it’s because, after Hayes’s expulsion, I’m no longer a stakeholder in Chamberlain Academy. She can let down her guard with me. I’m just a man, not a student’s parent.

How is it possible to like an idea and hate it at the same time?

“I think fun is supposed to be in my wheelhouse, but I’m not feeling it right now.” I can’t hide how dejected I feel. I know she hears it.

Pushing herself out of her lean, she stands in front of me. One hand goes to her hip, and with the other, she points at me. “Oh, no. You can’t get out of this now. You are the fun adult here, and you better get ready to show it. I’m about to go downstairs and hand out threats. You have to come behind me and soften the landing.”

I don’t know where I get the idea, and even as it’s coming out of my mouth, I know it’s total nonsense. But I say it anyway. “What if we switch?”

Her hand is still on her hip. That finger, still pointed at me. But she can’t seem to make words form. Her lips are parted, and I can’t take my eyes from her mouth. I try to remind myself about the rude, impatient things I heard coming out of that mouth, but all I can think of now is what it would feel like to kiss her.

No.

Not now. Not ever.

She hates me. And I’m not her biggest fan, either.

Something about being snowed in is making my brain turn mushy. *Get it together, Kline.*

Okay. She didn’t say no, so I try again.

“What if I go down there and be the enforcer? What if I get the kids who took down the tree together and let them know what their punishments will be? What if I make them prepare an apology statement for Mrs. Chamberlain?”

In very slow motion, she lowers the pointing hand. That’s encouraging. But now it mirrors the other, fisted at her hip. Slightly less encouraging. “And then what is my role?”

I shrug. “You get to be the good cop.”

That is a very long sigh. “Pretend I don’t know what that looks like.”

It’s almost like she’s asking me for help.

“Smile at them. Show sympathy. Offer to listen if they want to talk.”

She shakes her head. “They’ll never believe it.”

I want to tell her they’ll believe it if she doesn’t change back into her suit and heels. If she continues to look like a real person. But that’s probably neither helpful nor relevant.

“They will. Give them a chance to articulate what they were thinking, what they thought would happen. You might be surprised at their reasoning. Look how well you handled Hayes this morning.”

“Nothing reasonable about this,” she says, back to her clipped tone.

I push myself up, and now we’re standing together in the middle of the office.

“Weren’t you ever a dumb kid?”

Her head shake comes so quickly I know it must be true. This is a woman who has no blots on her record.

“Didn’t you ever have a friend who got in trouble?”

It’s like those words pull the rod out of her back and leave her sagging.

I don’t know what that simple question means to her, but there’s a story there. It doesn’t look like she’s going to tell it, but I watch as her face changes. She softens. She’s not smiling, exactly, but she’s not scowling. Not scowling really is a good look on this woman.

Whatever she’s remembering, it’s going to help this morning go better. Whoever she’s thinking of will help her see the kids differently. As people, not only students. Even as kids, maybe.

PATRICE

I show Oliver where the elevator is and insist he take it down to the lobby. It's either that or I walk behind him down the stairs, slowing my steps to match his. It's better if I wait a few minutes and let him get downstairs and call the vandals out on their misbehavior.

Besides, I have to call Wanda.

I have never looked forward to a phone call less.

But I know it's not going to get better until I deal with it. And even then, it quite likely won't get better, but at least it might not get worse.

She picks up on the second ring.

"A very merry Christmas Eve," she says. Her voice rings through the phone clear and bright. Almost like she's singing.

"And to you," I say.

"Everyone sleep all right? All the students accounted for?"

At least I don't have to tell her we're missing anyone.

But really, I can only hope that's true. I didn't exactly perform a head count this morning. I'll have Michael take attendance at breakfast. Breakfast. Another problem to deal with.

But not just this minute.

"Everyone is well. We had one accident, but it was not a student. All is under control. But there was an incident I need

to speak with you about.”

I can't say more than that until she invites me to. I need to hear that I've got her full attention.

“An accident and an incident? Unrelated?” She sounds cheery. That will not last long.

“Yes. Completely unrelated.” I can't pretend to feel as merry as she sounds.

She hears the seriousness in my voice. “All right. Why don't you tell me what I need to know.”

It's an invitation but not a question. And the musical note has left her voice. Wanda is now all business.

That metaphor Americans love about tearing off the bandage? I'm leaning heavily into the efficacy of that one today.

“Some of the students snuck out of their sleeping area and cut down an evergreen tree on campus. They brought it into the Hall.”

The sound Wanda makes might be related to a laugh. Or perhaps she's simply making noise to let me know she's listening.

I don't know how to go on. My pause lasts long enough for her to choose to fill the silence.

“Too bad any tree would look small in such a tall space,” she says.

My breath leaks out of me as if I'm a punctured tire. “It's a very large tree.”

“Oh?”

Can't she guess? Can't she be the one to say the words, so I don't need to speak them aloud? But how would she ever assume this?

“The tree they chose,” I say, and then I stop, unable to finish the sentence.

My mouth is suddenly very dry. I try to swallow, but there's nothing there.

Wanda's voice comes through the phone line as a whisper. "Yes?"

I cannot say the words. At least, not while I need to continue to breathe. I can give her another hint. Or at least I can try. "This tree, that is the tree in question, to be clear, it was one of the lovely trees planted by your father."

Not that I'm being anything close to clear.

She can make her assumptions now. She won't make me say the words.

"Oh, that is terrible to hear. He did so love to oversee tending to the grounds."

I've heard this about him. But she's still not making the leap in logic. She is not going to make this easy for me.

"Wanda," I say. I've never called her by her name, and now that the syllables have come from my mouth, I can't make anything follow.

"Yes, Patrice?" She has likewise always called me by my title. And as that emotional distance is shaking, so are my hands. I stand up. Maybe this will be easier if I'm pacing across my office.

"It's the Wanda tree."

Does she know this is what everyone calls it? Does she know it has special landscape lighting that shines up into its boughs? Is she aware that there's a student tradition of sweethearts kissing in the large space beneath that tree, sheltered by the needled branches?

Whether she knows or not, she says nothing.

I hold the phone to my ear, waiting. I would not blame her if she held me personally responsible for this. I cannot imagine what this news is doing to her.

I wait.

Nothing. Not a word. Not a sound. I check the phone's screen to make sure we are still connected. We are.

I can't leave this unstated for another second. I must tell the whole story.

"The one your father planted when you were born," I clarify. "The tall pine."

"It's a Black Hills Spruce," she says, and only on the last word does her voice break.

I hold the phone to my ear as I listen to Wanda Chamberlain, the school's beloved grandmother, cry.

Would this be easier for me if we were together, in the same room? I could read her expression, certainly. But I've never been good at offering comfort. Maybe it's easier for her to hear the news this way, as we are connected only by telephone.

I wait. After a moment, the sound of her tears slows and then quiets.

Eventually, she speaks. Her voice is tremulous and soft.

"Do you know who is responsible?"

"I will know soon. I am going to speak with the students after our call. But Hayes Kline, the boy I expelled yesterday, is the one who let me know about the damage to the tree. He was not involved, and he was eager to help in any way he could."

"Mmm."

"I know that doesn't erase his past mistakes, but I thought you'd want to know that it seems he's learned something."

Wanda clears her throat. "I suppose that's our business. Student learning. As soon as you have the responsible students gathered, please call me again." She no longer sounds like she's crying. Now her voice is stronger. And she does not sound sympathetic to the situation. "I will want to hold a video call with the students involved."

This seems far more than reasonable. "I will arrange it at your earliest convenience."

“Very well.” This is a new formality. Generally, Wanda is cheerful at the close of a call. I am the one who speaks with prim correctness.

“I’m terribly sorry, Wanda.” I want to project my sadness for the situation. To act, as Oliver Kline would say, with a bit more humanity.

Her answer verges on cold. I wonder if this is what it feels like for people to interact with me.

“So am I, Dr. Moreau.” She ends the call and I stand holding my phone in my hand.

Naturally she holds me responsible for the senseless killing of the tree that symbolizes her father’s love. As well she should. I hold myself responsible as well, even if I am not the one who held a saw or an axe. I am the authority here, and under my watch, this awful thing happened.

I will not allow myself to be surprised if the board calls for disciplinary action. Oh, but I hope they do not move to fire me. I am so very attached to this job and to my place here.

Even as I think it, I consider that I’ve possibly never expressed this thought to anyone. I have worked my entire career to not show my feelings. My ability to lead without emotion makes me reliable. I behave in expected ways. This has always been a benefit. But today, I think I regret it.

Or maybe I simply regret the end of the conversation with Wanda Chamberlain. In fact, I resent the entire discussion, the fact that I needed to have it, and the students who made it necessary.

And speaking of students, it’s time for me to go downstairs and make sure Oliver is keeping to the plan. I wonder if he’ll shout at the students like he did at his son.

Honestly, I hope not. I can only make a display of so much convincing empathy. If I have to balance a very angry man, I’m going to have to pretend to be a very sympathetic woman.

I don’t think I have it in me.

Michael isn't at his desk when I come out of the office. I hope he's someplace with Millie. He works very hard for me, and I have no idea if he feels his work is rewarding. But this? A chance for him to experience a Christmas romance? That seems like a nice reward for anyone.

I send him a text asking him to prepare a video call with Mrs. Chamberlain.

I look down at my leggings and sweater-slippers. Maybe I should change back into my suit. But the thought of putting those pumps back on seems dreadful. I'll take my chances that the students will be able to take me seriously when I'm dressed like I'm going grocery shopping. In the same clothes I slept in.

The Hall is silent. I can't hear a single sound. I make my way to the staircase and look down. Six students sit on a couch, phones in their hands, as Oliver looms over them, his arms folded across his chest and a single crutch tucked beneath his arm. From my viewpoint, there is not a visible hint of a smile on his face.

Moving quietly, I make my way downstairs. I don't precisely tiptoe behind the staircase, but I don't show myself.

I glance across the rest of the Hall's lobby. All the other students are sitting on couches, and all stare in the general direction of the six who appear to be on trial.

"Did you write it?" Oliver asks. His charming, modulated voice is different now, his tone severe.

All six on the couch nod.

"Read it to me."

As if they're a Greek chorus from an ancient tragedy, they speak together.

"I took part in a thoughtless, careless prank. I have damaged school property and ruined an irreplaceable landmark. I know this is not what you hoped to hear from me today, but I wanted to prepare you that a punishment is coming."

He coached them on a message to send to their parents? This is more than I expected. I thought he'd bluster at them. Raise his voice. Frighten them. And then I'd come in and—what? Wipe tears?

This is much better.

There is no shouting. At least not now. And, even better, he is not playing with them. He is not entertaining. And he does not seem to be standing for any nonsense.

“Show me.”

The boys turn their phones to face him. He inspects each and then instructs them to send. Once again, he looks at each screen for a delivered message.

“All right. Now hand them over.” He holds out both his hands, and the students stand up and give him their phones.

“Come see me when the sidewalks are clear, and we'll discuss the next step.”

They nod and pick up their coats.

This is not exactly what we planned. He is not playing the part of Dr. Moreau (stiffness, anger, retribution) so I can come in and play the part of Mr. Kline (laughter, joking, warmth). For which I am grateful, because I have no idea how I might attempt such a thing.

Instead, he handled it himself. He was serious, but not cruel. Firm, but not angry.

He made the students take action, and now he's putting them to work.

When they put on their coats and go outside, I come out from behind the staircase.

“There you are,” he says. He doesn't look particularly happy to see me, but maybe he's still channeling the Bad Cop.

I want to let him know he handled the situation better than I expected, but that is not a terribly positive message. I can choose better words.

“That was well done.”

He glances at me and then away. “It was a job that needed to be handled, and nobody else was doing it.”

Is he reprimanding me?

“Because you decided we would switch roles.” I can hear my voice growing sharp.

“And you decided not to show up at all.”

That isn’t fair. I’m here now. But the students have moved out of the building. And he isn’t wrong. I waited until they’d gone.

I want to tell him about my call with Wanda. How she’s heartbroken. That I have no idea how to proceed with an appropriate punishment. But he leans on the crutch and turns away. I could follow him, but to what purpose? If I explained about my conversation with Wanda, he could do nothing to help either me or her. Chamberlain policy decisions are meaningless to him.

I make my way to the other students gathered on the couches, looking for Michael. I need him to tell me the names of those six students so I can continue to do my job.

OLIVER

My skin feels hot and I'm shaking. Either I've developed a fever, or playing the tough guy is really not for me.

Just in case, I pop a few of Millie's ibuprophen tablets into my mouth and swallow them down at the drinking fountain. Now that the kids who pulled the prank are out the door, everyone else is started to make noise again.

I find Hayes with his nose practically touching his phone screen. "Talking to Tessie?" I ask.

He grins up at me. "She sent me a picture of my present. She had it delivered to our house." He flashes the phone at me.

I have no idea what I'm looking at.

He can tell, so he starts to explain it to me. "So, these are three different games. This one," he says, pointing to something that looks like a metallic four-legged bug on its back, "is the shocker game. Everyone holds a handle. When the light turns green, someone pushes the button and everyone else gets an electric shock. So you want to be fastest."

"Sounds fun," I lie. It sounds like torture. "What's the lumpy thing?"

He laughs. "Shocker potato. You remember that old game hot potato? This potato gives the loser an electric shock."

What weird kind of relationship does my son have with this girl? And is it him driving this bizarre gift exchange? Or is it her?

I point to the picture on the phone. “That one looks like the electronic memory game I had when I was a kid.”

“Totally. It’s retro. But with a shocking twist.”

“Let me guess. When you get the sequence wrong, it shoots out confetti.”

He rolls his eyes. “Close.”

“So this themed gift pack,” I say. “Is it supposed to mean something? Like a symbol of the electricity between you?”

“Dad. Don’t be gross.” But he can’t stop grinning.

“What did you get for her?” I ask. Of course, now I’m not so sure I want to know. What if there’s another bizarre theme that I don’t really want to understand?

“There’s a flower shop in town that does a bouquet-of-the-month thing. They have a greenhouse, and they do some kind of sustainable flower farming thing I’m supposed to feel good about, you know, environmentally.” He shrugs. “Tessie likes flowers.” That grin again. He’s crazy about her.

“That’s a very good gift. Nice job.”

I can’t remember many details of the last Christmas I had with Sarah. She was sick, but still home. I don’t remember presents. I only remember worry.

What I wouldn’t give to be able to buy her sustainable flower bouquets.

I readjust my crutch and clap my hands. “Okay. Time to get these hungry people over to the cafeteria. Help me out, will you?”

Hayes gets up off the couch and pulls on his shoes and coat. He moves through the room, telling crowds of kids it’s time to make breakfast.

My leg throbs, and I feel my heart pounding as well. I know what this racing pulse means—I’m worried I’m going to wipe out on the sidewalk again. Afraid to walk in case I fall. Is this what it feels like to get old? Because I have to say, not ideal.

Hayes returns to my side. “Ready?”

I nod.

“Dad. You’re not wearing a coat. Or shoes.”

“Aside from that, totally ready.”

He gives me a sideways look and runs off, returning before I make it to the couch where I left my coat.

He’s got the wheelchair Michael brought over from the clinic last night.

I shake my head. “I don’t need that.”

“Is this some kind of macho thing, Dad?”

“What? No.” Yes. Definitely.

“You need it. And the sidewalks are clear for you.”

I hate that any of this injury situation happened. I think if I walk, I can pretend I’m fine. But that’s crazy. I’m not fine.

“If you don’t use it, someone else will. I heard Jefferson Lamping say he’s going to ride around in it all day, and we should all call him the king of Christmas.”

He watches me balance on one leg and pull on my coat. I don’t think I’m making much of a case for myself.

“Come on, Dad. Let me push you around a little.” He gives my shoulder a gentle punch.

Fine. For Hayes, I’ll take the wheelchair.

As soon as I sit, I sigh in relief. My leg feels better and so does this anxiousness that’s been following me around all morning. And if I do wipe out on the icy sidewalk, at least I’m halfway down to the ground already.

Hayes pushes me out the door, and we follow the kids who shuffle over the sidewalk in front of us. The punished kids did quite a good job on the shoveling, even though the snow still flies and you’d need a huge team of workers to keep the sidewalks clean for more than a few minutes.

Hayes leans over the handles of my wheelchair and speaks into my ear. “So. Dr. Moreau ...”

I shake my head. “Not now.”

“Not now what?” he asks, sounding genuinely curious.

I’m not sure how to say this to him without using words I’ll regret. I give it a shot. “I’m the adult here, and I’m supposed to say positive things about the other adult. But this moment I have nothing positive to say.” The way she left me to punish those kids, without any authority other than the fact that I’m a legal adult? How she conveniently decided that “my part” of the real world, the part about listening and empathy, simply doesn’t matter, and can be skipped? Yeah. I definitely don’t have anything nice to say. I had to handle every part of that interaction without any support from her—and it’s *her* job.

“Really? Nothing?”

I scoff. “Like you do?”

Hayes swerves the chair to avoid running over a pinecone on the sidewalk. “I was going to say she was really cool with me about the tree stuff this morning.”

Cool is not a word I would ever expect Hayes to say about Patrice Moreau.

“What does that mean?”

“She listened. She asked questions. She kept her temper.”

Unlike me.

But we’ve already been through my apology. And I really think this isn’t about my bad behavior.

“And you expected something else?”

Hayes pauses. Stumbles through a couple of starts. Then says, “When I’m in trouble here, Ms. Harker deals with me. She’s my advisor, right? And so she’s the one who is in charge of going through the restoration process with me.”

“Restoration?” I ask. I have no idea what Hayes is talking about. I’m a little ashamed I’ve never heard of this before. I probably could have asked.

“It’s part of the deal around here when you screw something up. Some schools are proud of their one-strike-and-you’re-out policy, but Chamberlain considers character building an important educational pillar.”

“Are you quoting from a policy manual?”

“Yep. I’ve read it dozens of times.”

Dozens? Is he kidding, or has he been busted for bad behavior that often?

“Anyway,” he says, “the bell tower prank was the first time I had to meet one-on-one with Dr. Moreau. And she didn’t try to hide the fact she was not happy with me.” He lets out a short laugh. “She was scary.”

“I believe you.” I had the same feeling in my first meeting with her, but I don’t think it’s all that helpful to say so.

“But today, she was cool. Not like she wanted to hug it out or anything, but she acted different. Like she was ready to believe I might not be all bad.”

I reach a hand across my shoulder and squeeze his fingers as they hold the wheelchair’s handles. I want to say something supportive and dadly, but I have no idea what’s the right tone to take right now. It would not be accurate for me to say that any school would be delighted to have him, and he knows it.

But I’m delighted to have him.

“You’re the best thing in my life,” I say, glad that we’re far enough away from the other kids that only Hayes hears how my voice shakes. It’s not like I don’t tell my kid I love him. I tell him all the time. But, since he lives at school, usually the conversation happens over the phone. He ruffles the back of my hair with one of his hands.

“You’re not so bad yourself.”

There’s probably more I should say, but I open my eyes to the cold breeze and just let our words settle. I think how my boy’s life would be different if he had known his mother better, longer. I consider the new life he and I will have if he lives at home and attends to public school. I wonder how he

feels about his future. As we get within a few feet of the cafeteria building, he leans over my shoulder again. “Anyway,” he says, as if we were still mid-conversation, “Maybe don’t be so hard on her.”

I can hardly remember what we were last talking about.

“Her?”

“Dr. Moreau. She’s doing her best, even if her best includes clearing out the troublemakers from her school. And even if those troublemakers are me. Or if they’re following my example.”

I know he’s trying to downplay the situation, and I don’t believe for an instant that he’s this calm about losing his place at Chamberlain. But he’s showing a new kind of maturity by speaking about the chancellor this way.

I wish she could have heard what he just said about her. Especially because I don’t think I could effectively pass on a compliment like that. I doubt she’d trust it. And I don’t want her to think of either me or my son as insincere.

She already thinks so little of us.

But I can’t dwell on this worry, because now it’s time to consider breakfast. Brunch, more like, it’s so late in the morning. But what better day for a brunch than Christmas Eve?

Hayes rolls me into the kitchen where a few kids stand around, picking up and putting down cooking and serving utensils. I look around to inspect my team of volunteers.

“All right, people. Here’s the plan. I’m the boss and you do whatever I tell you. Any questions?”

A girl salutes. A few kids laugh. But mostly, they seem ready to take direction.

“Wash hands. Put on aprons. If you’re not a person who has ever used a gas stove, please don’t offer yourself for French toast duty. Report back here when your hands are clean.”

They scatter to the sinks, and I know this would go faster if I stood up there with them. Honestly, it would go faster if they all walked out of the kitchen and left brunch to me, but I can't hobble from one side of the kitchen to the other carrying loaves of bread and cartons of eggs. So I'm stuck being director. And, fingers crossed, it will all be fine.

When I made dinner last night, I used what I found first. Today, I need to do some further exploration of the pantries and the freezer. But navigating those spaces from this chair is going to be more than a little tricky.

I instruct the first few washed and aproned kids to bring out at least five loaves of sliced sandwich bread from the freezers. The next kids are on egg duty. Of course we're going to prefer real, actual eggs, but I don't remember seeing a fridge shelf holding dozens of eggs, so I tell them to look also for the liquid almost-eggs in cartons and for powdered eggs from the pantry.

"Butter," I tell the next kid.

"Toppings. Syrup, and if you can find some, frozen fruit." Three kids run toward the pantry and another to the freezer.

A guy with extraordinary bed-head hair comes out of the freezer with a bag of breakfast sausage patties cradled in his arms. "I found meat."

"Great. Now find a good way to cook it." I point toward the stovetops.

A girl stands in front of me wringing her hands. "I can't cook and I don't want today to be the day I learn how."

"Then you're perfect for the table crew. In fact, you're the leader." I point to the closet that holds the dishes, glasses, and remaining mugs.

She grabs the hand of a friend and runs across the room.

I hear a guy complaining that everything is frozen. "We're not going to eat until tomorrow."

A girl hip-checks him. "Trust the process, Wyatt. We've got this."

I like this girl. “Great attitude,” I say, giving her a couple of claps.

Hayes comes out of the freezer with two huge containers of orange juice concentrate, holds them up to me for approval, and starts opening cupboards to find pitchers big enough for them.

I park the wheelchair close to the stove, but far enough away that kids can move around me, get to their utensils, and carry out their projects. My hands are twitchy to flip the bread, to turn down the heat under the sausages, to make sure the sugar is dissolving on the thawing berries, but I roll myself back a few more feet to let the kids do their thing. It’s better for them to get the experience, even if some of the food is a little over crispy. Or soggy. If it’s made with love, it will taste great, right? And we don’t have to spend any time worrying about salmonella or e-coli. No. They’re doing great. Great. Seriously, it’s fine. I sit on my hands and holler directions and shout out encouragement.

A few minutes later, the table crew stick their heads back into the kitchen. “Tables are set. How long until food is ready?”

Someone at the French toast station calls back, “We’re ready to start serving as soon as anyone wants food. We’ll just keep it coming until everyone’s done.”

I’m not sure it occurs to them that half the kids stranded at Chamberlain are already in this room. Working together. Eager to help make the best of this situation.

Andie, the girl who was supposed to wake up in Bali this morning, stands beside me. “What else needs to be done?”

“How do you feel about dishes? Because you could get a crew together and get started on those. Fill some sinks? Soak some pans?”

“I definitely feel great about that,” she says. Turning to the cooks, she asks, “Who has something ready to wash?”

It’s so great to watch them, each ready and willing to get in and make things happen. I fully understand that this isn’t

everyday behavior, but it's also true this isn't everyday circumstance. And are there a bunch of kids sitting at a dining room table right now, scrolling on their phones, oblivious to the work that's happening, waiting to be served? Yes. Of course. But these kids are rising to the occasion, and I'm happy to be here to see it.

Humming a Christmas carol, I try to do a little spin in the wheelchair, but I only manage a wide, sloppy oval before I pull to a stop in front of Dr. Moreau. She stands with her arms folded, looking like an angry drill sergeant. Or at least a disappointed chancellor.

"What's wrong?" I ask, feeling a little defensive. "These kids are amazing. They're doing a great job."

She nods, and when she speaks, it's so quiet only I can hear. "And what is left for me to do?"

I'm surprised. Does she feel left out? Like we came over here in secret to feed the students? She did ask me to figure out food. But now it seems like she wants to be involved in the breakfast.

I nod her toward the kids piling slabs of hot French toast onto a platter. "You can help serve if you want. Get the kids started eating."

She gives me a short nod. And if she puts her fingers on my shoulder as she passes, I'm sure it's only so she can navigate around the chair without getting her feet rolled over. Understanding this does nothing to stop the electricity radiating from the place her fingers rested. Why does she have to be so horrible and so beautiful?

Maybe that's not fair. Maybe she's not so beautiful. It could be that she's the only reasonably-aged woman on the premises. I take another look, just to quantify what I'm seeing here.

No, it's true. She's beautiful. Even after the crazy events of the last twenty hours, she has fabulous waves of blonde hair. And her light brown eyes are lovely and intelligent. Don't get me started on the sweater-and-leggings combo. It's working, is

what I'm saying. And she would only become more beautiful if she shook off her stiff posture and showed the kids she knows how to relax.

But she's here, with them, asking to help. Moving through the kitchen with them. Putting herself into the mix. So maybe she's not so horrible after all. It's a different picture than the one I got of her last night as she stood stiff and solo at the dishwashing station.

Looser. More relaxed. Comfortable, maybe?

PATRICE

I have never been so uncomfortable in my life.

Standing here at the edge of the kitchen watching Oliver Kline organize breakfast-making from his wheelchair. I hope the chair isn't a message that he's so badly hurt, only that he's directing from the seat. In any case, he's calling out instruction, giving compliments, laughing with the students, and I'm quite sure that when I walked in, he was singing.

He's so casual with them. As if he is, in fact, enjoying their company.

When I ask what I ought to do, he looks surprised, as if my offer is unexpected. Does he think because I don't know how to make soup from pantry ingredients, I'm useless in the kitchen? If he thinks that, he's not wrong. I'm basically useless. Until someone tells me what to do.

He gives me an assignment and an excuse. If I lift one or two of the trays of food and take them to the students who are gathering around the tables in the dining hall, I can walk away from the work being done by the ones in this kitchen. But I want to be here for a moment. To thank these students for their help.

"This all smells wonderful," I say to the back of a young man flipping bread on the griddle. "A very nice *pain perdu*."

He jumps a bit, as if my voice startles him, but he manages a smile. "What's that mean?"

“Lost bread. It’s what you make when the baguettes go stale.”

“Do you want the first piece?” he asks, holding a slice out to me.

I shake my head. “I’ll wait until everyone has been served,” I say, but that is only an excuse. Was I supposed to take the hot, buttery bread from his utensil with my hands? And put it directly into my mouth? Or was the gesture simply part of the invitation?

He laughs. “I’ll find you a plate when you’re ready.”

It was a joke. He was playing with me. Too bad I’m out of the habit of playing. It doesn’t come up often in my job.

I manage a smile in return, but he turns away before he sees it.

“You’ve all created an amazing meal. Well done,” I say. A few kids turn and smile, a few thank me. But I can feel their hesitation. I recognize it. I feel the same. I don’t know how to chat with these students.

They are no more comfortable speaking to me than I am speaking to them. How do I bridge this student-administrator gap today without jeopardizing my authority when school begins again in January?

Oliver has it easy—he will never be in a position of influence with anyone here besides his own son. For him, there is no threat to his career if these students think he’s fun, or if they joke with him or bump his knuckles or laugh about something I don’t understand.

He can be their friend.

That is a path closed to me.

How could I do my job if the students thought of me as a friend? Impossible. For the tiniest moment, and for the first time ever, I regret that impossibility. And I wonder if I can find a way to think of these people as anything other than students.

I really don’t think I can.

But I can help transport food from the kitchen to the dining hall.

I lift a platter of sausages and a bowl of warm strawberry compote (where in the world did they find that?) and walk to the door. Several students follow me, and Hayes Kline rushes ahead to hold the door open for us, humming.

The students found the dinnerware we use for formal-occasion meals. Tablecloths. Linen napkins. Candlesticks. Boughs of pine from the cut-down tree line the center of the tables, and they've pushed three long cafeteria tables together, allowing everyone who is stuck here on campus to eat together, as opposed to scattering among booths and tables as we did last night.

Music plays through someone's Bluetooth speaker, and as I lead some of the kitchen crew into the dining room, the students waiting at the table stand and applaud the effort. At the thought that these students are so gracious and grateful, I flush warm—mostly from pleasure at their surprising behavior, but partially, I admit to myself, from shame that I expected so much worse. I assumed they would be angry, scornful, and put out. Instead, these students are thankful, helpful, and generous.

How has it never occurred to me before that they might be capable of such goodness? Have I never put myself in a position to see the best of them? Or have they never behaved in such a way before? Does an emergency situation simply bring out the best in people?

As we place the platters, a student offers me a seat at the end of the table. The stools are connected, but he gestures as if he wishes he could pull out a chair for me.

“Thank you,” I say, sitting even though I'd rather wait until everyone else is seated.

“My pleasure.”

I see the last of the students file into the cafeteria, including those who shoveled the sidewalks in punishment for their vandalism. They're followed by Michael and Millie, and

if I'm not mistaken, the two of them are holding hands. But as I watch, they separate to remove scarves. However, the look they share is more of a gaze than a glance, and I smile to myself at their happy Christmas connection.

The rest of the cooks and preparers join us from the kitchen in a parade of platters and pitchers, Oliver Kline bringing up the rear. He rolls himself to the top of the table, at the end closest to me where there is no stool. He is directly to my left, and he smiles like there is no place in the world he'd rather be than a vast student cafeteria, unable to drive away, with twenty-five teenage strangers sharing a meal.

It occurs to me this isn't simply appearance—it's true. He is delighted to be here with them.

I stand.

Resisting the urge to clap twice for their attention, I simply begin to speak. "We owe this amazing feast to a team of students and Mr. Kline, all of whom worked together to create a meal we can share now. Before we partake, let's give them all a round of applause for their excellent efforts."

The clapping goes on longer than I expect, with cheers and bows and so much laughter.

"Happy Christmas, everyone," I say, gesturing at the food-laden table. "Please enjoy."

Around the table, students lift trays and hold food out for their neighbors, loading plates and making sounds of delight.

It's the holiday break, and they're stuck on campus.

It's Christmas Eve, and they're thrilled to be having breakfast together.

My need to know when the storm will end presses on me, making it difficult to breathe normally. Or maybe that's the look in Oliver Kline's eyes as he watches me pass platters around the table. I've not seen that kind of look directed to me in many years. If I didn't know better, I'd think the man was interested. In me.

I hand him a pitcher of maple syrup just to have something to do with my hands.

He's still watching me as if he's waiting for something.

I suppose he must be waiting for an official statement of thanks.

"Mr. Kline," I begin.

He shakes his head. "Oliver, please."

Why does this take my breath away? "Oliver, thank you for organizing such a lovely breakfast. I don't know how you managed it, but this is truly remarkable."

He leans in close and speaks so softly none of the students hear him over their talking and laughter. "Patty, do you know what you just did?"

Lost my mind? Stopped breathing? Forgot my place? I cannot possibly say any of that.

"Called you by your name?"

The smile he aims at me ought to be bottled and sold immediately to the department of transportation. It would melt the snow on all the roadways. "That was nice, but I mean with the kids."

I have no idea what I just did with the students.

"You played the good cop." He beams, as if he's proud of me. "You thought you couldn't do it. You kind of ran away from your chance to do it earlier today. But you did it. You were great."

I shake my head to deny it. "I wouldn't have any idea how to do that. All I did was show a bit of appreciation. It was simple politeness. There was no other way to thank them for their good work."

He nods and affects a look of great wisdom. "And look how well they accepted your praise."

I can't hold his gaze, so I look at my plate.

"Wow." His voice is soft. Breathy. Reverent?

I look back to his face. He's leaning against the arm of the wheelchair, tilted toward me as if he was a flower and I'm the sun.

"Patty, you're beautiful when you blush."

What am I supposed to say to that? I feel the heat continue to fill my cheeks. I need to say something.

"Don't call me Patty." It comes out of my mouth in a rush of air, before I can even think if I want to say it. Because as much as I generally dislike nicknames, this one is starting to grow on me.

My reaction is too fast, because as soon as I say the words, Oliver sits up out of his lean, turns to the student on his other side, and asks how she's enjoying the breakfast.

OLIVER

She's told me she doesn't like it. So why do I keep saying her name wrong on purpose? It's playful, right? But she doesn't want to play that way. And if only one of us is playing, that's no good. Worse, it's unkind, and I like to think that above all things, I'm kind.

I kick myself (you know, metaphorically, since one of my legs currently refuses to work) for pushing too far. And just when we were beginning to communicate better, to talk like real people, to see some things the same way.

And now I have to wonder, why does any of that matter when Hayes isn't coming back here to finish high school?

I know why it matters. Because despite everything, I like Patrice Moreau. I mean, sure—I admire her competence and her leadership. I've got to hand it to her—she runs a tight ship around here. But it's more than that. I like seeing parts of her personality that are hidden. I like the feeling I'm uncovering a secret, gentle part of her.

And I like the way she looks when she smiles.

There's a mildness in her eyes that gives the impression that somewhere, deep beneath the management techniques and organizational behavior, she has a soft side. And it's beautiful.

Maybe I don't deserve another chance with a beautiful woman. I had a nearly perfect marriage for six wonderful years. Maybe what I had with Sarah was the best life can get—I'm certainly ready to believe that. Maybe it just doesn't happen twice. But does that mean I don't go looking? That I

sabotage my chances, however small? Have I been going about this all wrong?

Or maybe I'm not doing anything wrong, and Patrice Moreau is simply not interested in me. It's not impossible to believe. I mean, it's not pleasant, either—but not impossible.

I finish my brunch and watch the kids talk to each other, laugh together, and generally make the most of this unexpected wrinkle in their holiday plans. When did I lose the ability to roll with it this way?

Maybe it's part of being a responsible adult.

Hayes walks around the table, handing seconds to anyone who will take them, offering to refill glasses, basically playing host. The other kids seem to love him. I hate that he's losing this place and these connections, but despite the fact that there's no future for him at Chamberlain, here he is, enjoying the moment. Making it good for the rest of them.

If only Patrice would give him another chance. But I know I can't ask it of her. I can't beg her to keep him. Especially now that things are starting to feel less frosty between her and me. I would never want her to think I'm growing attached to her—fond of her—because I think she'll keep Hayes. And I'm almost convinced that Hayes getting kicked out of school is exactly what he needs to grow up. To think about the consequences of his actions.

In any case, I wish Patrice could see him the way I see him. It wouldn't change the way he behaved and the mean, awful prank he played, but it might make her more willing to forgive him. To trust him.

I roll myself back from the table, ready to rustle up a cleaning crew when Patrice stands.

She knocks on the table for the kids' attention and then says, "Who didn't get to help make breakfast? Hands, please."

Half the kids around the table raise their hands. "Wonderful. You're on dishes. Follow me, please, and carry what you can."

Michael Carraway jumps from his seat. “I’ll handle the cleanup,” he says. “Millie and I will help the dishes crew.” He takes the plate from Patrice’s hand. I hear him say, “You should take a break.”

Patrice shakes her head. “I’ve done nothing,” she argues.

“It’s supposed to be your vacation, too.”

She looks ready to deny that, but instead, she rests her hand on his arm for a second and nods. “Thank you.”

Then she turns to face me. “Oliver, would you allow me to show you around campus?”

Me? Is she talking to me?

I mean, obviously she is. I’m the only Oliver here, as far as I know. But *what?*

Her invitation shocks me. It’s a good thing I’m sitting in a chair, because I actually think I’d stumble at the surprise. My mouth opens to answer her, but my brain is way behind and can’t seem to catch up. Instead of speaking, I nod. And I manage to close my mouth, but I’m willing to bet I still look startled—at the very least.

Patrice pulls on her coat, pulls gloves out of her pockets, and takes the handles of the wheelchair in her hands. She rolls me toward the door. I can see us both reflected in the glass. No one follows. As we move out of the cafeteria building and into the silence of the snow-filled campus, I wonder if we’ll even need to speak. It’s perfect out here, and the snowfall seems to be slowing. The boys have cleared lots of sidewalks across campus. We can still see most of the concrete in the sidewalk in front of us, and I take that as a good sign. Maybe this storm is blowing over. Maybe we’ll be plowed out of here soon.

Patrice points out the buildings as we pass them, telling me about the classes that are taught in each and occasionally naming the primary donors responsible for this element or that upgrade. I wonder if she thinks I’m planning to leave the school an endowment. If she expects that from me, she’s going to be disappointed. She should have asked me for money before she kicked out my kid.

Not that he doesn't deserve it. I've moved past that feeling now. He was wrong. She was right. But no matter how justified she is in expelling Hayes, I can't see myself getting excited about leaving Chamberlain Academy any more money than I've already spent on his tuition and student fees.

But as we pass one of the student dorms, Patrice's voice changes, and she doesn't seem to be talking specifically about this campus anymore.

"Some of these older buildings remind me of where I went to school," she says.

"In France?" I ask.

"In early childhood, yes. But I'm thinking of my later years. An international school in Switzerland. A secondary school connected to a university. I lived there for eight years."

I want to say something that shows her I'm listening, to ask an intelligent question. All I can think of is, "That's a long time."

She breathes out a little laugh. "It is indeed."

When I think of nothing else to say, she goes on. "When you live in a place like that, you make friends that become like your family. In a way, our students here do the same. My best friend Joelle was a little like your son."

Um, what? If there was anything I thought she might be planning to tell me, this is not what I expected her to say. "Really? In what way?"

When she answers, I want to turn around and look at her, because I can hear a smile in her voice.

"She was fun. Funny. Always joking and playing pranks. She laughed all the time."

I'm giving it all my best effort, but I can't actually believe Patrice Moreau was ever friends with someone fun.

"You will not be surprised to hear that it's not in my nature to lead out in matters of entertainment."

This is the least entertaining sentence I've ever heard, and I can't help myself—I laugh a little.

She makes a murmuring sound, recognizing my reaction. “But Joelle was easy to follow. She made every day an adventure. We took every class together, and I was happy to be swept along in her wake. At the start of our university studies, she helped me get into the best sorority. They'd never have taken me without her insistence.”

I have a feeling based on the parts of this story she's leaving out that Patrice has a point she wants to make, and knowing her, she's going to get to it soon.

“In our second year of university, Joelle masterminded an enormous prank in which she covered the paintings of all the school's headmasters, hundreds of years' of them, with overlays of dresses and bonnets, making all the generations of leadership appear to be women. To be clear, there were no women running these institutions. Ever. Her prank took months to pull off, because she had to create and perfect dozens of perfectly fitted costumes for the portraits. She placed the overlays on the paintings in a single night and, for a few hours, the history of the school was completely changed.”

She pauses, and I say, “That's a pretty good joke.”

“Mm,” she hums, possibly in agreement. “I thought so, and I stood up for Joelle when she was made to defend herself.”

“Good for you. That's a sign of a good friend.”

Patrice clears her throat. “We were both expelled.”

I splutter a response. “But why? It's not as if you were responsible for it.”

“I was led by her example.” She says it as if the words are rehearsed.

It feels strange having this kind of conversation with her behind me. I can't see her face. But maybe that's why she's able to say any of it.

“I assume you would like to know why I'm telling you this.”

I shake my head. “I get it. You want me to know that a person can still be successful after a setback like an expulsion. You obviously went on to finish your education at a different university. You’ve achieved all you set out to do. You don’t want me to freak out about Hayes and his future prospects. Because he can still turn out well, like you did.”

She stops the chair. From behind my back, she says, “No.” Then she walks around to stand in front of me. Teeth chattering in the freezing cold, she looks at me, studying my face. Is she waiting for a reaction? Because I’m doing my very best not to have a visible one. I have no idea how I’m supposed to respond.

Her arms come across her stomach as if she has to shield herself from something. I hope it’s from the cold—and not from me.

“No,” she says again. “I want you to understand that I have not always been the way I am. That I have reasons for disapproving of pranks. That I know innocent people can be affected by someone’s funny ideas.”

She brought me out here to tell me why she hates fun things? That seems so strange I don’t know what to say in response.

“I had to fight to be accepted to another school. I became—how would you say it—obsessive about following the rules. I knew I could not afford to ruin another chance. I felt safe in my obedience. Following the rules became my anchor. It still is.”

She waits a minute, then goes on. “And I hope you understand I loved Joelle. She was the best part of my school years. All the happiness she carried seemed to sprinkle out behind her wherever she went, and I was generally close enough to get some of it on me.”

I smile at the image her words conjure in my mind.

“What happened to her?”

She tilts her head to the side. “We went different ways. Separate universities. We grew up. We lost touch. I’m sure

she's successful and happy and her life is still full of fun."

She leaves the rest of the comparison unstated.

Rubbing her hands along her arms for warmth, Patrice continues, "And now I can see how much Hayes is like Joelle. How he brings fun and laughter and all kinds of good feelings with him wherever he goes. I didn't have a chance to see that about him until this." She gestures to the sky, the storm, the deserted campus.

Then she shakes her head. "That is not exactly true. I didn't take the time to learn this about him. And had we not been stuck here, trapped in this storm, I would never have known. But now I've seen, and now I know. You have a remarkable son, Mr. Kline. I hope you're very proud of him."

I swallow down the lump that threatens to rise in my throat. "A few basic behavior issues aside, I am. Thank you."

She puts out her hand, as if we need to legitimize this conversation by handshake. Make it a meeting. Return to formality.

I hold my hand out to her in reply, but not my right hand. Not for a shake. I take her fingers in mine. I wrap my hand around hers, my eyes never leaving her face. I want to say something, anything, all the things.

To tell her I understand what she's trying to say—how Hayes is a valuable person even if he's not welcome as a student here anymore. That her history with a friend whose playfulness had devastating consequences still lives in her mind and heart. Still informs her choices, her actions, and her attitudes. That there's a reason she's no fun. I get it. I understand what she means.

But those words are not necessary for right now. Instead of speaking, I watch her. She continues to look at me. I move my fingers so our hands are entwined. Her eyes drop to our joined hands, and as she looks back to me, she moves her eyes slowly, enacting that spell that beautiful women seem to know how to cast, the one where they flutter their eyelashes and make puddles of the men watching. I no longer feel the cold.

“Oliver,” she says. Her teeth are still chattering in the cold, but she lifts her lips in a smile.

“Yes.” Whatever it is, yes.

“How do you feel about ice skating?”

PATRICE

“**F**unny you should ask,” he says. He settles himself more deeply into the wheelchair’s seat. “Ice skating is part of my best Christmas ever.”

“And now you’re going to tell me the story?”

“Unless you have a better idea for entertainment.”

“Please. Do tell.”

He begins to speak right away, as if this story was on the tip of his tongue all day just waiting for its excuse to be told.

“When I was seven. My grandparents were spending the holiday with us. Sleeping at our house, even though they lived just down the block. It was a tradition we demanded, since on the years they went to my aunt’s house, they slept there. We didn’t want our cousins to get cooler holiday sleepovers. My little sister and I gave up our rooms—both of us, even though we knew Grandma and Grandpa would stay in the same room. So Phoebe and I set up camp in the basement. We made a fort out of pillows and blankets, found all the flashlights from the house, and packed a bag full of snacks from the pantry in the kitchen.

“On Christmas Eve, Phoebe and I set an alarm clock to go off just after midnight. We were so deeply asleep that the alarm rang for a good ten minutes before she woke up enough to notice it. Then she woke me, and we snuck up the stairs to check out our presents. Open them all up and stick the wrapping back together. Classic childhood heist.

“As we tiptoed into the living room, we saw that there wasn’t a single gift under the tree. Not one. And the stockings hung limp from the mantel. The lights on the tree weren’t even plugged in. It was the most depressing Christmas sneak in the history of the world.” Oliver chuckles, and I’m surprised how easily the sound travels down to the pond where I brush snow off the ice.

I want to ask if he gave up right away and surrendered to bed, but he’s already moving the story forward. And I stop pushing and come around so I can watch him tell the story.

“Clearly Santa had not made it yet, so Phoebe and I dragged half our blankets up the stairs and settled in to wait for him. I’m sure you can guess where this is going, but we woke in the morning to find our parents and grandparents standing over us as we lay tangled up on the couch.

“They all pretended to be terribly disappointed for a few minutes, shaking their heads at how Santa couldn’t come if we were watching for him. Phoebe shook her head and with all the five-year-old wisdom in the world told the adults that Santa didn’t mind us at all, because we were his biggest fans. At that, my grandma, who was about four and a half feet tall, started laughing and couldn’t stop. She flopped onto the couch between my sister and me and pulled us close in a hug that ended up as a tickle war. While we fought for our lives, laughing and gasping, our parents and grandpa went and brought all the presents into the living room.

“That much would have been enough to make it a perfect day, but there’s more. I only remember one gift I received that year—a pair of hockey skates. I can now admit that it was a phase, but I was deeply interested in hockey that year. My dad and my grandpa took me to Jackson’s Lake, the neighborhood’s excellent skating spot. They both put on skates and helped me figure out how to stand upright with metal blades underfoot. We stayed at the lake for hours. I remember that my mom and grandma and Phoebe showed up with a thermos of soup and demanded we come over to the shore and drink it. We obeyed, of course, because nobody disobeyed my grandma’s orders. And then we stayed, all afternoon. Walking

back home that evening, my skates tied together and hung over my shoulders, my dad holding one hand and my grandpa the other as we walked past houses all lit up with decorations and twinkle lights? It was perfection.

“Best Christmas in the history of my life.”

Now I see the look of complete joy in his face, and I can imagine him as a little boy, looking like a smaller version of Hayes, hair sticking out from under a stocking cap, grinning up at his father.

I don't know what I expected him to say, but this isn't it. Maybe I thought he'd speak of his wife, and although it might have been awkward, I want him to feel comfortable telling me any story he wants to tell.

This thought startles me. Why do I want this? When do I think we'll speak this way again, sharing memories? The question tugs at my heart. I want to listen to him again. I want to tell him my own memories. I want to get to know this man who, just yesterday, felt like the very bane of my existence.

And I don't know if I can hide that from him if I continue to stand here, gazing at him. Maybe he'll keep talking. But even if he doesn't, I need to stay quiet. At least for a few more minutes.

I retake my place behind the chair and push him forward in silence. It doesn't feel awkward. It's nice. At least for me.

Pushing this wheelchair all the way to the pond may be foolishness. The students have mostly focused their snow-clearing efforts on the paths between the Hall and the cafeteria and the parking lot, where the few remaining cars lie beneath mounds of snow. But there's a path through the snow all the way to the bubble.

Oliver points at it. “What is that?”

I explain that a donor insisted the tennis courts and the pond be sheltered so the students can have access to outdoor recreation all year long. During warm months, students can swim here, but that actually means only the very beginning and the very end of the school year. Mostly it's too cold to

swim. As soon as ice forms, the pond is kept clear of snow so the students can skate in their free time. “Chamberlain is bracketed by these bubble structures, one to the east, and one to the west.”

I maneuver Oliver in the chair as far as I can, and then I stop.

“How do you feel about using me as a crutch?” I ask.

“Oh, no. I can’t do that,” he says.

I stand in front of the chair. “You can’t? Or you don’t want to?”

He pushes himself from the seat, holding his braced, bent leg up off the ground and reaching his arm out for me. “Neither. I want to. And I can. But if I’m leaning too much, let me know, okay?”

I slip in close to his side and wrap my arm around his waist. His arm comes over my shoulder, and I’m immediately warmer. We hobble through partly-shoveled snow to the door, which is really a fabric flap like a tent. It’s slow going, and I don’t mind the walk.

I’m startled out of pondering the possible metaphor of the two of us taking this walk together through all the difficulties that may arise when Oliver takes his free hand from his pocket and touches my face. Even in this cold, his skin is warm against mine. For a few seconds, I forget to breathe.

“You have snowflakes in your eyelashes.”

I stop moving and turn to him. “Do I?”

My voice is so full of that held breath, it comes out in a cloud.

He slides his finger across my cheek and holds it beneath my eye. “Blink,” he says.

I do, and feel my lashes move when they meet his fingertip. He pulls his hand away, and I immediately feel the loss of even such a small touch.

He holds his finger up between us, and we watch snowflakes melting against his skin. I know the feeling. I was rather close to melting against his skin only a second ago.

I stare at his finger, and then I realize I'm staring past it and into his eyes.

How long do we stand here, snow falling lightly around us, and gazing into each other's eyes?

Not long enough. He clears his throat and says, "You must be cold."

Speaking of metaphors. But I definitely don't feel cold now. In fact, this is the warmest I've been in a long while despite the chill.

Of course, I could never say such a thing to him. I unfasten the flap and hold the door open.

We step inside and Oliver asks, "Can we stand here for a minute?"

"Of course. How does your knee feel?"

"I'd like to tell you it's fine. Great. And that I'm planning to run a marathon tomorrow. If marathons impress you. Do marathons impress you, Patrice?"

"Not as much as honesty does," I say.

He makes a murmuring sound as if he's rethinking his story. "Well, then, honestly, it hurts, and I'm embarrassed that it happened at all."

I nod. "I understand. But it could have been worse."

"Right. It could have happened to a kid."

"No, I mean your accident could have happened in front of all the students. In a very public forum. For instance, you could have hurt yourself falling down the staircase in the Hall."

"Okay, you're right. That's a terrible image to hold in my head. Add humiliation to the pain? That's worse. Plus worrying about the secondhand trauma the kids would experience from watching it happen. No good. Has that ever

happened?” he asks, his teeth beginning to chatter. It seems I’m not keeping him as warm as he is keeping me.

“In my imagination, it happens every time I walk down the steps. I am more careful on that stairway than in any other part of my life.” I attempt to rub my arm up and down on his back to bring more heat, but it’s an awkward move. It probably seems as if I’m hurrying him on. I replace my arm against his back and slow my steps.

Oliver looks over at me and adjusts his arm as well. Pulls me a fraction closer. Whatever it takes to keep him balanced.

“Really? You worry about falling down the stairs?”

“Literally every day. Not when I’m walking up. Only coming down.”

“Maybe that’s why you always look so serious.” As soon as he says it, he starts stumbling for an explanation. “I mean, um, well, what I meant to say—I mean, sorry,” he stammers.

I shake my head and smile at him. “No, the reason I look serious is that I am serious. No fun at all. I hate fun things. It’s true. I’ve erased the habit from my life.”

I can’t help watching for his reaction. He’s smiling, too.

“You know, the phrase ‘I hate fun things’ is kind of fun.”

“Probably only when the speaker is joking.”

“Fair enough.”

I like the sound of his laugh. So even though what I say is true, he doesn’t hold it against me. I go on. “But the worry might begin to explain why I stare at the floor so much. I have memorized all the patterns of wood and marble in those ridiculous stairs.”

“Right now, staring at the floor seems like the only way to safely navigate the world.” He’s trying not to lean heavily against me, and I’m trying to ignore how lovely it feels to be this close to a man. To his warmth. To share an activity as simple as walking outside, only in a completely new way.

“I thought it would be warmer in here,” he says.

“The point of the bubble isn’t warmth. It’s access. At least we don’t have to shovel our way to the ice.”

We stand on the edge of the wooden dock, and to the east of the dock stands a weathered shed. In warm months, students come to the pond and help themselves to the paddleboards. I’ve seen London Worthington hold yoga classes here on those boards. Shelves along one wall of the shed hold a few dozen pairs of ice skates.

I step away from Oliver to get a pair of skates. Sitting on the edge of the dock, I remove the sodden slippers and tie on the skates.

“Now I will impress you with my only skill of physical prowess, and you can provide the soundtrack.”

“What did you have in mind?”

If I had anything in mind in the past few minutes, it involves the two of us in close proximity and a great deal of staring into each other’s eyes, which I will never say.

“Any music you like. My skating is equally appropriate to all kinds of music.”

I glance at him to see if that makes him smile.

It does, and I feel proud. I would like to make him smile like that again. Often.

He leans against the dock’s upright beam. “This is how I’m going to watch the show?”

“Best seat in the house.”

“I think I’ll see you better if I’m standing closer to the ice.”

He wants to see me better.

“Maybe you should rest your leg a while. You’ve worked hard.”

He laughs. “Oh, yeah. It was really hard work sitting while you push my chair.”

He's not arguing, and I don't feel any of the tension that usually arises from a disagreement. Is this banter? Are we bantering?

I don't mind it at all.

OLIVER

If it seems strange that I'm going to stand at the end of a wooden dock inside a tent-like structure while the woman who just expelled my son skates in front of me, you're just going to have to trust me. You would have said yes, too. You weren't there. You didn't see how her eyes sparkle. How the snowflakes drift behind her hair. How she holds out her hands and offers to help me.

I'm fascinated by the way her hair sweeps across her neck, how her fingers move on the laces, her occasional glance over to me.

She scoots to the edge of the dock. "Once I was a very terrible skater," she says. "All I could do was a large figure eight. Turn right, then turn left. Over and over. And I fell all the time."

"And then you practiced every winter and became an award-winning competitor?" I suggest.

She laughs and shakes her head. "No. I got taller and more stubborn. Now I am only a slightly terrible skater. But I rarely fall down."

"That's an improvement, right?"

She isn't laughing now. "I'm not sure about that, and today I don't think so. I never try anything I don't already know I can manage. I'm still moving around the ice in a wide figure eight."

I'm not unable to hear nuance in a conversation. I can sense a metaphor when it's right in front of me.

"And you wanted to come here so you could show me you're willing to do things that don't come naturally to you?"

She tucks her arms tightly around herself. "Something like that."

I shift a little so my leg can rest on the boards of the dock. "Is there something you'd like to try?"

"I've always wanted to skate backward."

I nod. "That's a little scary. You can't see what's coming."

"Exactly."

We aren't talking about skating anymore. At least, we're not only talking about skating.

"Well, I think it's a great time for you to try reversing. And I'm right here, cheering for you."

She looks at me and then down at her feet. "It would be easier if you were on the ice with me."

I want to wrap my arms around her. If my voice is almost a whisper, it's only because we're all alone out here. "I wish I could come onto the ice, too. I would love nothing more than to be with you, standing by you, supporting you when you try moving in this new direction."

For a few warm, wonderful seconds, Patrice Moreau stares into my eyes. I feel none of the cold, none of the pain in my knee, none of the annoyance of holiday vacation time lost. Only this surprising woman, standing at the edge of the frozen pond.

Long before I'm ready for her to move away slides onto the ice. It's a bit of a lurch, and I'm glad. If she'd managed to make it to the ice with as much grace and beauty as she's shown me already today, I'd be completely lost to her.

An interesting thought pops into my head: I might be lost to her anyway.

I tuck that away for exploration later. What I know for sure is that it seems like a very good idea to get back into close proximity. To put my arms around her. To kiss that mouth, especially now that it's not pulled down into a grimace.

Patrice moves toward the center of the pond and wobbles for a second. Then she glides into a few serviceable strokes. She's not bad at this, not at all. And I can stand on this dock all day if it means I get to watch her as she looks up to see if I'm still here.

I pull out my phone and start blasting the Nutcracker Suite as loudly as it will play from my speaker.

Patrice laughs when she hears it. "Tchaikovsky? Really? Maybe we should start with something simpler. Like 'Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star,' perhaps."

"That's a pretty classical piece, too, right? Didn't Mozart compose that melody?"

"No," Patrice says, twisting her head to keep her eyes on me as she makes the turn. "Common misconception. It's a French folk song. He just wrote arrangements of it."

"Did you study music?" I ask, loving the way her conversation seems to make the skating easier for her.

"No more than everyone did."

"Probably more than I did." I hold up my phone, which is still blasting the Sugarplum song. "This and the Mozart thing—which apparently isn't even true—are actually the only two things I know about music composed before 1985."

She laughs, and once again, she tilts her head back. If I thought her neck was tempting when she was showing me her most impatient side, her lack of empathy for my son, her frustration? It's nothing compared to how that neck looks to me right now. Long and elegant doesn't even begin to describe it. This neck is a work of art.

She pulls herself to a stop, turning toward me. "All right. It's time."

I am glad for the distance between us, because whatever she's talking about, it's not me kissing her neck. I nod as if I'm definitely on the same page. Sure. It's time. For something.

As I stand and watch, Patrice Moreau makes her first attempts at backward skating. She's not elegant. She's halting and stumbling, and she's smiling. She's working on something uncomfortable, and she's grinning. I can't help thinking this is a great development.

She staggers backward, hesitates a bit, wobbles, and catches herself.

Calling out to me, she shouts, "Did you see? I didn't fall." Both her arms come up in victory fists. It's adorable, and I wonder if this formal, elegant, sophisticated woman knows how good a look *adorable* is on her.

I clap and cheer, and when I stop, I hear more cheering. I look over toward the tent flap and see a bunch of the students rushing toward us. Hayes and Cam, the kid who played the guitar last night, hold the folded wheelchair in their arms as they make their way through the doorway.

Patrice glides to a stop and stands with her feet wide. It's the safest stance, but also could be seen as a power posture. She doesn't look like she's trying to exert authority, though. She watches the kids as they run in to the shed behind me, pass each other skates, and make their way to the dock.

Hayes and Cam take the wheelchair down to the ice, and as Cam sits, Hayes pushes him around. They look at each other and high-five, grinning. Then they leave the chair and skate back over to where I stand.

"Come on. You're skating, too," Hayes says.

I don't tell him how this influx of teenagers just ruined a perfectly good moment, because of course it didn't. It just added a new layer.

Hayes wraps an arm around me, and Cam comes in on the other side. Together, we move as slowly as the ice and my injury require. And now that I mention it, can I say how tired I

am of this sprain? How many things about this whole snowed-in adventure would be better if I could walk unaided?

Oh, well. This is what we've got, and I'm all in.

In the few minutes they've all been here, the kids have filled the ice rink. A few sit on the uncovered planks of the dock and tie on skates, some of them jumping up and getting onto the ice like this is a regular thing they do.

A few others are more hesitant, but friends pull them onto their feet and hold on to hands and arms.

Hayes and Cam get me into the wheelchair and tell me they'll be back when they've got skates on. The whole situation is rowdy, raucous, and fun. I look over to see how Patrice is handling the altered state of her solo skate experience.

She's still standing in the same spot. Not skating around in wide circles with the kids who loop along the edges of the cleared rink. She's watching me.

I give a little wave to show her I see her, and she puts both arms out in front of her and takes hesitant steps toward me. And they're actually steps. She's not gliding on the ice—she's making her way out of the crowd. Kids move around her and out of her way, but I'm not sure she's even seeing them.

She moves her eyes from my face to the ground at her feet and back again. When she's far enough from the loop of skating traffic, she releases a visible breath and glides over to me, stopping herself by taking the handles of my chair.

"This is unexpected."

Is she disappointed? That we're not alone anymore?

Before I can ask, she clarifies. "I didn't think I'd have something to balance on."

And with that, Patrice shoves the wheelchair into the tide of swirling, swooping skaters making a wide circle around the pond. It takes her about half a lap to figure out how to angle her skates to get me rolling, but soon, we're swept into the current. Some kids (probably most kids) pass us easily, but it's

not a race. Many of them shout encouragement to us as they skate by. A few do turns and jumps and loops, and I clap and cheer since I don't have to make any effort when it comes to moving across the ice. I'm a passenger.

I listen to Patrice laugh. I hear her answer some of the kids when they ask her questions. She mutters something that I'm pretty sure is a French curse under her breath at one point, but mostly she sounds delighted.

And even though I can't see her as she stands behind me, she's never been more attractive.

Hayes glides by, turns around, and skates backward in front of me. "Need a break? Want me to take over?"

"We're fine, I think," Patrice says, and again, no matter how improbable it sounds, I hear that smile in her voice. Hayes gives us a thumbs-up before he speeds away.

I can't wish all the kids would disappear, but there's something to miss about Patrice and me being here at the pond all alone. An opportunity I should have taken advantage of.

"Thanks for helping me skate," I say. Although the turns are awkward and this is definitely not what this chair was made for, it's nice to be here with her and with all of them.

"And I thank *you* for helping me not fall over."

I'm not sure what makes me say it. The words are out of my mouth before I think too much about them—about what they might imply. "We make a pretty decent team."

"Hm," she murmurs behind me. "I believe it's truer to say you are getting good at being both the enforcer and the entertainer."

"What do you mean?" I ask.

"When you're here, there's really no need for me."

I try to turn around to look at Patrice's face, to see if she's as serious as she sounds. Because this is crazy talk—nobody could run Chamberlain the way she does, and nobody else could take charge of this snowed-in experience the way she has.

She shifts away from my shoulder, so I try turning the other way, but now it's clear she's hiding from me.

Maybe she needs to say—and hear—things that come across more easily when we're not face to face.

“Patrice,” I say, hoping she can hear me even as I lower my voice enough that my words won't travel to the kids all around us. “You do an amazing job with these kids. You provide opportunities for them to excel. You give them a million ways to learn and experience life.”

She sniffs, and oh, please let her not be crying. “The school provides the opportunities. The teachers give them experiences.”

Okay. Maybe she's just cold. Noses run in the cold.

“That's true, but it all happens with you at the head of the organization. You're the leader.”

She says, “But I don't feel like I really *do* anything for them or with them.”

“Nobody expects an orchestra conductor to pick up a cello or a clarinet and play it in the middle of a concert. You do your part as leader. Everyone else fills in, however they're capable and trained.”

She takes the curve and then speaks again. “But isn't it possible I could do better, be better if I chose to include a bit more humanity in my conducting?”

Her voice. It's wistful. She wants this. She wants to make personal connections with these kids. At least she wants it right now, as we make our way around the oval with these stranded students.

I wish I could face her right now. I wish she could see my sincerity as I speak these words to her. But this will have to do. “Look at how well you're doing right now. Is it really that difficult to laugh with them? To play with them? You can do this. You're great at it. You're a natural.”

She makes a *pft* sound. “There is nothing natural about me laughing with students. I've never worked so hard in my life

as I'm doing right now.”

“Okay,” I concede. “Maybe it’s not natural. But with a little practice, it can become second nature. If you want to, you can do all of it. Run the greatest school in the world. Be a little fun. Give them a solid framework to learn within. Connect with them. You can have it all.”

Before she responds to me, her phone rings. She holds the wheelchair handle with one hand and pulls her cell out of the pocket of her yoga pants with the other. I can tell, because we pull out of the circle and drift to the right, toward an unused part of the pond.

“Yes?” she says. Maybe I can help her inject a little personality into her phone answering habit.

“Yes. Yes. I’ll be ten minutes.” She stashes her phone and hauls the wheelchair back into the flow of the skaters.

“Everything okay?” I ask. Maybe it’s about roads opening. Maybe flights are rescheduled.

“That was Michael. Wanda is ready to hold a conference call with our tree vandals who are sweeping the dining room.”

I hadn’t even noticed that those kids were missing from the skating party. Not that I noticed the lack of Michael or Millie White, either. I guess I only have eyes for Patrice.

What a strange and wonderful thought.

Patrice does her loud whistle, and Hayes skates over to her.

“Can you take over?” she asks.

He tosses her a salute. “Happy to.”

As she skates past the wheelchair to attend an unprecedented disciplinary meeting, she stops for a second, takes my hand, and looks into my eyes. “Thank you,” she says.

“For what?”

She leans down so our faces are only inches apart. “For believing in me.”

And if I blink I might miss what happens next. I've never been so glad not to blink. Patrice Moreau brings her face close to mine and kisses my cheek.

Cold? What cold?

PATRICE

The walk back to the Hall is cold, lonely, and dreadful. As in, I am full of dread. In my professional life, much like my personal life, I like to know what is coming. So much that I build meetings around agendas. I organize. I live by the calendar. I plan, and I execute my plans. But today has been unexpected in every way, and I'm embarrassed to realize that for a while, I forgot about the tree incident.

It was swept from my mind by spending a couple of hours with Oliver Kline.

That can only be dangerous. Anyone—man, woman, or child—who makes me forget my responsibility must be a hazard.

But what a delightful hazard he is.

Can I allow myself to circle around in the orbit of fantastical, romantic thoughts for a moment? Yes. But only a moment.

Or two.

As soon as I reach cleared sidewalk, my hike over the snow turns to a march, and by the time I arrive at the Hall door, I feel like I'm myself again. In control of the upcoming meeting, prepared to dole out necessary punishments, and as unfeeling as I need to be to get the job done.

Then I walk inside.

Michael has the six students sitting on the couch in front of the Hall's large fireplace. He must have taken them to their

dorms to change, because each of them is wearing Chamberlain formal dress: Shirt, tie, jacket. They sit upright, as if there's a threat attached to leaning back on the couch's cushions.

Each one has his hair combed—still wet from a shower, I assume. Oh, I'd love a shower. I wonder if anyone would notice if I found an empty dorm room and got myself cleaned up.

Of course someone would notice. Especially right now. I'm needed here, to facilitate this conversation between these six students and Wanda Chamberlain.

I wish she was here in the building. I wish she and I had time for another conversation after the awful crying one. I wish I knew how she wants me to proceed here this afternoon.

But she's the one who hired me. And I was her choice because I'm good at maintaining order. I keep organizations running smoothly. I demand results and I get them. She wants me to behave the way I always do. And I can do that. Very well. Bad Cop, at your service.

Why does the thought make me sad?

Michael sees me walking through the Hall's lobby. He looks slightly alarmed.

"Did you set up the video call?" I ask, taking control and hopefully relieving him of some of his worry.

"It's all ready. She's supposed to phone in two more minutes."

He's standing at a strange angle, looking at me with a very uncomfortable expression on his face.

"What is it? What are you not telling me?"

Michael flushes and looks at the floor. Do I even want to know what else is going wrong? I don't have time to wait.

"It won't get any better until you say something," I tell him, my Bad Cop voice warming up for the main event.

He takes a glance at me and then stares over my shoulder. “You look disheveled.”

I was not expecting that. I cover my mouth and let out a short laugh. “Well, it’s not in your job description, but can you make me presentable?”

Relief rolls over his face. “No. But I bet Millie can.”

He waves toward a corner of the room, and Millie must have been watching for him, because she jumps up from the chair she’s in and jogs over.

Michael may be able to tell me I’m a mess, but he doesn’t seem to be able to tell this woman the same in front of me. Fine. I can handle this.

“Miss White, is there any chance you can make me camera ready in less than ninety seconds?”

Millie laughs and pulls a hairbrush out of her bag. As I run it through the tangles and mats the snow and skating have made of my hair, she grabs a lipstick. Or I think that’s what it is until she reaches over and draws it across my cheeks.

When she says, “Close your eyes,” I just do it, continuing to pull the brush over my scalp. If she’s turning me into a clown, so be it.

She uses gentle fingers to blend the makeup stick onto my eyelids and cheeks. Holding her hand out for the brush, she parts my hair in the middle like I’m some teenager, tugs at the neck of my sweater, and grins.

“You’re perfect,” she says. “Good luck.”

As I walk away from Michael and Millie, I hear him repeat her words, but he’s not speaking to me. “You’re perfect.”

The two of them together are an unexpected bright side to this phone call.

Michael’s cell phone is on a tripod in front of the couch, and as I walk over, it begins to ring. I swipe to answer, and Wanda’s face comes onto the screen.

She's not grinning, and she's certainly not laughing, but there is no mistaking her.

"Mrs. Chamberlain," I say. "Thank you for making time to speak with us today."

Then I step to the side and out of the way.

Wanda's voice comes loud and clear through Michael's phone's speaker. "Gentlemen. I believe you have something to say to me."

All six boys sit up a bit straighter, which I wouldn't have thought possible. Then they all start to speak at once. Variations of "we're so sorry" roll through the vast lobby for nearly a whole minute before Wanda cuts them off.

"In a perfect world, I'd be there on campus with you. Of course, that's not true at all, is it? Because in a perfect world, you'd all be home with your families and we wouldn't be having this conversation at all, as none of this would have happened. But since I am not in the room with you, and since the evidence points to you needing to tell me an unpleasant truth, please take turns. Say what you need to say one at a time. Charles, you go first."

Of course she knows the students' names. Michael sent her a list, but she probably knows them by sight. She knows their faces. She knows their personalities. She's on campus almost every day. She is a fixture.

I could do so much more here on campus if I knew the students the way she does. Would it improve my ability to manage the business of the school? Probably not. Would it add an element of humanity to my leadership? I don't even need to think about it. Clearly it would make a vast difference.

The one called Charles speaks first. He confesses to opening a maintenance shed on the grounds and removing a saw. He says he helped choose the tree. He wants her to understand that he didn't know the relevance of this particular tree, he just thought it was the most impressive. He's terribly sorry.

Wanda says nothing, but she nods to let the students know she's listening. The next boy, Parker, confesses to much the same. Big tree, fun surprise for the shut-ins. So very sorry.

The next student speaks, then the next. There is a great deal of apology, and no talk of restitution at all. Because of course, there is nothing these people can do to make up for this loss.

After all six of them have had a chance to speak, Wanda clears her throat.

“I have spoken to the available board members, and we have come to an agreement.”

I watch the students' postures sag.

“But before I explain, I need to tell you something. Something about my father, the man who planted a sapling many years ago.”

One of the students drops his head. Guilt fills the room like oxygen.

“He loved this school. It was his great joy and his responsibility. His inheritance, if you understand such a concept. He was chancellor throughout my whole childhood. And he was dedicated to offering students both an excellent educational opportunity and a solid character-building experience.”

Another of the students sinks deeper into the couch, as if he could hide from her words.

“And we learned from him. We learned responsibility. Reliability. Compassion and kindness. Hard work. And, in the tradition of the great schools, academic honor, dedication, and excellence.”

Are the students breathing? Difficult to say, because there is no chance any of them are going to make a sound while she speaks.

“Of all the things my father taught me, the one I hold onto most firmly is care. Care for the spaces we inhabit, for the

world around us, and, above all, for the people with whom we interact.”

She takes a shaky breath, and I hope for all our sakes that she doesn't cry while her camera is on. Not that these students don't deserve to feel the guilt of making an old woman cry, but I don't know how any of us will recover from the pain of it.

She does not cry. She leans forward and speaks very clearly. “You all know how to care. And even though this act was a careless one, I trust that your apologies are sincere. I feel that you care for me. And for our campus. And if you will agree to a few conditions, I would like to give you a chance to continue among us as students at Chamberlain Academy.”

They're breathing now. That sigh is loud and long, and it comes from six sets of lungs at once. Seven, if you count mine.

Wanda proceeds to set out a plan—a probation. She gives them a list of things they must do and a different list of things they must not do. I pull out my phone and record her conditions so I can assure the parents of these students that their sons can earn their continued enrollment at our school.

When she is finished reading her list, she sits back and asks, “Do you have any questions?”

Each boy stands and takes a step toward the phone on its tripod, as though they could get closer to this woman who shows them such remarkable compassion.

They all speak at once again, and then take their turns thanking her, repeating their apologies, promising nothing less than perfect behavior from this moment on, and giving Wanda due credit for their bright futures. It's a wonder she isn't laughing at them. But she is completely serious. In her forgiveness, in her conditions, and in her benevolence. And at least for this moment, the students are equally serious in their dedication to their best behavior and their devotion to Wanda.

“Chancellor?” Wanda's voice cuts over the rush of gratitude.

“Yes, ma'am.”

“A word in private?”

I take the phone from the tripod and move to the foot of the staircase. When she can see I'm alone, she rubs her hand across her eyes and sighs.

“Can I count on your support in the board's decision?”

Does she really need to ask? “Naturally.”

“And if there are any other recent disciplinary actions that need to be revisited, I can assume you will treat those cases with equal empathy and mercy?”

My mouth is open in surprise. I cannot speak. She isn't questioning my authority, nor is she demanding I rescind Hayes Kline's expulsion. But she is asking me to rethink my decision to send him away. To reconsider. And possibly to restore his status as a student here.

I don't know how to do that. It feels like too much of a leap into the unknown. How will any student take me seriously if a rulebreaker like Hayes continues to enjoy student status at Chamberlain? Every student will know within minutes that I've gone back on my ruling, because the students who are stuck here already know he's not supposed to come back in January. I'll never have a shred of credibility when it comes to reprimands and punishments.

I want to tell her I can't possibly reconsider. That I'll be seen as weak. Irresolute. That my decisions will all be up for discussion and disagreement.

I can't run the school this way. My reputation is critical to my ability to administer here. I need the students to understand that my word is law.

Wanda is feeling some warmth and tenderness because of these students' apologies, because it's Christmas, because she's a kinder, gentler person than I will ever be. But I cannot behave like Wanda. I want to tell her if she wants Hayes to remain here, she can negotiate with him.

However, that isn't how this works—she's not the one who expelled Hayes. I am. And if he's to be reinstated, that

decision is in my hands. And it's not a decision I had any intention of considering before this moment.

She waits patiently for me to answer her question, if we're pretending it was a question at all.

I will not pretend I misunderstand her, nor will I act as though I'm eager to follow her example of leniency. She knows me. She knew what she was getting when she hired me. She knows my strengths as well as my limitations. So I say what I can.

“You can count on me to make the best decisions for the school.”

OLIVER

I keep the skaters at the pond as long as I can, and it's long enough to share an idea with them. A little Christmas Eve surprise. They're all good sports about how to make tonight work; some of them even seem excited. When they start complaining about frozen fingers and toes, I know it's time to get them back inside. With a lot of help, I organize the cleanup, and a few kids help lurch me up the slope while a few others carry the wheelchair to the sidewalk.

My knee is feeling better, or maybe it's only numb from the cold. At least the snowfall has slowed.

If things continue in this way, we really should get out of here soon. It snows all winter in Vermont, right? There are systems in place for storms. So we should get shoveled out of here within a reasonable time. I only wish that reasonable time was today.

As soon as I think it, I wonder where Patrice will go when we all leave campus. She hasn't mentioned any plan to leave town. Was she planning to spend Christmas alone? And is that because she has no other choice? Or is alone her preference? If that's the case, she's got to be more than frustrated about how many unwanted guests she's hosting.

Pushing the wheelchair into the Hall, Hayes leans over to whisper to me, "Will you find out what happened with the guys? I want to make sure they're okay, but I don't want to ask them before I know if they're expelled, too."

If they're expelled? Where is there room for *if* here? Hayes is kicked out of school for a (stupid, cruel, yes, but ultimately) harmless prank. Those boys destroyed a landmark. They better be expelled. His mess is cleaned up. No lasting damage.

The thought surprises and shames me. I already decided my son's punishment was fair. Strict, but reasonable. Now this possibility of leniency for someone else's kids makes me want to bring down the hammer of justice? That's not really like me. Besides, of course they're expelled. They really have to be. I shake off the thought and push myself through the crowded lobby to find Patrice.

I move past the clumps of kids standing around the fireplace and don't see her. When I hear laughing and cheering, my heart stops for a second—another prank? I don't think either Patrice or I can live through it. But then I round the corner and see the tree.

Gone are the foil balls and toilet paper streamers. From the top down, it's halfway covered in twinkling lights, and all six boys responsible for bringing it down are unwrapping more strands of lights and hanging huge gold ornaments wherever they can reach. And where they can't reach? Patrice Moreau stands in the basket of a stretched-out scissor lift near the top of the tree, leaning over to arrange ornaments and straightening lights.

This is their punishment?

I have to say, none of them look very punished. They're laughing and talking, and someone is blasting cheesy Christmas tunes from a speaker. A few of the kids who were skating surround one of the tree vandals, and I hear him yell, "We get to stay at Chamberlain!"

All the friends cheer and laugh, and I take a minute to deal with the unpleasant emotion I'm feeling. He's staying? This kid, one of the ringleaders in this act of deforestation, isn't expelled? And he's broadcasting it loud and clear.

There is no mistake.

No way.

Completely unfair. Hayes didn't do any singing or dancing around when he was punished. And he didn't hang out with his friends highlighting his prank. Hayes is stuck without a class schedule for January, or even any idea what school he'll be enrolled in.

I wish Patrice was down here near the ground, because I have a few questions for her.

The rest of the kids make their way to the tree and ask how they can help. The guys point out the ornament crates piled beneath the lowest branches, and as I sit there steaming (both because the outside of me is defrosting and vicious thoughts boil in my head) everyone snowed in at Chamberlain helps make the vandalized tree beautiful.

Eventually Patrice lowers the scissor lift and comes back to earth. When she gets to the floor, a few kids run to her to bring her to the other side, to show the tree from this angle, to see how good this part looks over here.

With the efficiency I've come to expect, she inspects their decorating efforts, nods, and instructs the boys to return the empty ornament crates to their place in the storage closet. I wait for her to come over to me, to let me know what's happening with the festival of the wrecked landmark, even to tell me how the phone call with Wanda turned out. But if she sees me (and how could she help it? I'm the one in the wheelchair over here), she doesn't move toward me.

Instead, she walks across the lobby to Hayes, says something to him, checks her watch, and they both nod.

What is going on? If she's going to have another administration-led chat with my son, I should be in the room. If she explains to him why these other kids seem to be hosting a party while he's busted, I'd like to make sure that explanation holds up.

"Mr. Kline? I'm starving." It's Jenna Porter, of the black fingernails and two-household Christmas, the girl who looked thrilled at the thought of missing the days with her dad because it would guarantee her better gifts.

Food. Right. That is kind of my territory these days. It seems like all these kids do is eat.

“Great,” I tell her. “Let’s go over to the cafeteria and figure out how to pull off a Christmas dinner.”

I turn to the room. “Who wants to help in the kitchen?”

Kids move toward us in a wave.

My conversation with Patrice Moreau can wait, and I can spend all the time I need developing my arsenal of solid arguments about how unrealistic and unfair her school’s punishment system is.

Jenna pushes my chair with startling speed and mobility, and on the way to the kitchen, she fills me in on her family’s plans.

“When the roads are clear and the airport reopens, I’m heading straight for my mom’s house in LA. Looks like Dad gets to take me for a really great spring break trip.”

“Nice. Do you get to choose?”

“I’d better. He’ll want to go skiing in Aspen or something. No more snow for me. I’m thinking Mexico.”

“*Muy bueno.*”

We arrive at the kitchen followed by half a dozen other kids who volunteered to help.

I send them to look at stocks in pantry and fridge, knowing if I thought about defrosting something from the meat shelf hours ago, we might have a better idea of where to begin with this meal.

In a couple of minutes, Jenna stands in front of me with several pounds of dry pasta and a huge can of marinara sauce. “Spaghetti night?” she asks.

Another kid says, “Mashed potatoes. We always have mashed potatoes for Christmas Eve dinner.”

Someone else holds another few loaves of sandwich bread. “Grilled cheese, please.”

“Should we vote?” someone asks.

Jenna looks indignant. “Vote? No way. All of it. Like a real cafeteria. Choices, you know.”

I shake my head. “No nutritionist in the world would approve a school menu of white carbs, more white carbs, and different white carbs.”

Jenna scuffs the toe of her boot lightly at the front wheel of my chair. “Come on, man. Live a little.”

How can I argue with that logic?

I try to put my frustration about Patrice’s inconsistency out of my mind for a while, because it’s not going to help make dinner. And so I grin at Jenna and we embark on preparing the most filling, most comforting, least healthful Christmas Eve dinner anyone in this crowd has ever seen.

As it turns out, Jenna has a carefully curated collection of punk Christmas songs on her phone, a number of which are surprisingly sweet and thoughtful. I take over the music for a while, making the kids listen to a song of my choice a few times. Then we’re stirring and mashing and melting and slicing and draining, and it’s time to serve.

The little guy, Fletcher, whose parents’ plane rerouted to Miami, comes into the kitchen to report that his parents are staying with Gwendolyn’s grandparents and having a wonderful day. At the beach. It’s hard to imagine just how vast the temperature difference is between there and here.

As the kids carry the vats and platters and bowls out to the table, I make sure everything is turned off and wiped down. I almost wish there was more work to do so I could avoid the dining room. Then I decide it’s a really good idea to just stay in here. Where it’s quiet. Where the smell of caramelized onions mingles with the slight metal tang of canned marinara sauce and nobody is talking to me.

I push myself over to the side of the room so the back of the chair is against the wall and lean my head back. Breathe.

It’s been such a chaotic whirlwind since I arrived on campus I’ve barely had time to think. I’m thinking now. I’m

thinking about disappointments: my own and everyone else's, all these kids and their parents wishing they were together (except for Jenna, who's working the system to the extreme), how Patrice could probably use a break, how Hayes might really be struggling but is trying so hard to be a voice of good sportsmanship and cheerfulness.

He really is the best kid. And so what if the thought of how great he is makes me a little teary? I'm alone in the kitchen. Nobody has to know I'm giving in to a bit of parental emotion.

And that's the very moment the door swings open and Patrice walks in.

If there's a possibility for worse timing, I can't think of it. With no wish to see her while I'm showing everything I'm feeling, I'm literally backed into a corner. No escape.

She sees me right away, of course. I'm the only other person here.

Pushing the swinging door closed behind her, she watches me. Then she takes a stance at the door so nobody else can push it open.

"Are you hiding?" she asks, standing with her back against the door, as far from me as the room allows.

I don't want to answer her, but eventually I nod. "Little bit."

"From them?" She tilts her head to the dining hall. "Or from me?"

"I guess both. Just wanted a minute alone."

She gives a tired chuckle. "I understand. And I won't stay if you don't want me to. But is there something you need? Do you want me to bring you anything to eat? It doesn't look like they left you much food in here."

I don't want to talk about food, and I'm not buying her gentle act. "So the guys? The ones who cut down the tree? They're not being punished?"

I see the expression of relaxation erase itself from her face. Stern, no-nonsense Dr. Moreau is back, even considering the

sweater and the hair cascading over her shoulders. That didn't take long.

"The board agreed on an appropriate penalty." It sounds like she's reading it from an email. She has no emotion in her voice.

That's fine. I have enough emotion for both of us. And then some. "Putting up lights and decorations is appropriate penalty? They cut down a hundred-year-old tree and get to play Santa's elves, while my kid gets kicked to the curb without a backward glance?"

"Nobody's been kicked," she says, and her voice is still firm and emotionless, but there's a glint forming in her eyes, one that suggests a fight is coming.

Great.

Bring it on.

I point toward the dining room. "Hayes is busted. Those kids are hosting a party."

"Other students' punishments are in no way your business."

"It's not like you're keeping it a secret, though. Those guys just made your main building look like Christmas Town, and you cheered them on. They're heroes. And they're getting away with this why? Because your cold heart melted? How convenient. It's a Christmas miracle."

I hate the way my voice sounds. Sarcastic is not a good look on me. If only I could stomp out of here right now, regain a little composure. Stop making a bad scene worse.

Patrice marches over to me, the effort made only a little less frightening in the soggy sweater-boot slippers. She stands rigid, her hands on her hips.

"This was not my choice. I'm going along with a board decision. And I'm attempting to do exactly what you've been recommending to me. Work with the students. Be human. But aside from all that, student penalty outcomes are none of your concern."

She has to be kidding.

“You made it my concern when you sent me downstairs to be the bad cop with kids I don’t even know in a school I don’t work in.”

She huffs out a frustrated breath. “That was your idea.”

“And you left me to do it all alone.”

“Mr. Kline, I came in here to explain the board’s decision to you—not that I owe you this information. I thought you would be interested to know, as you kindly assisted in the follow-up to their prank. There is a four-tier plan of restitution in place, determined by Mrs. Chamberlain, and the first step is to make the best of a difficult situation by decorating the tree and documenting its story. Bethany Walker, our talented student photographer, has begun a series of photos that will accompany the written story of the tree’s planting, its long life, and its unfortunate end.”

Now she leans in, her voice growing louder. It’s an alarming combination.

“The ecology project the students will undertake in the spring and next fall will begin with replacing the tree and dedicating space for more biodiverse plantings, all done by their hands and at their expense. There is an engineering element in the works. The projects they will do for Wanda Chamberlain’s home and property have yet to be officially determined, but believe me when I tell you, these students will continue to earn their places at Chamberlain Academy or they will be expelled. It is not for you to determine if the board’s decision is fair, and if it is not to your taste, that is an unfortunate but ultimately unimportant outcome.”

If I could back up even a centimeter, I would.

“As far as your son’s punishment, I intended to let him tell you, but it’s clear you have no intention of waiting before you let your self-righteous anger explode all around you. So I’ll tell you myself. After consultation with Wanda, I offered Hayes a deal that would allow him to continue on as a student

here, which he politely declined. I assumed he would accept, but I allowed him to decide. He chose to decline my offer.”

This makes no sense at all.

“Why didn’t you include me in the conversation?” I ask, my voice tight with anger.

“There are steps and procedures in place.”

“But I’m right here.” I try not to shout, but this is madness.

She shakes her head. “You were not involved in the offense in question. You did not make his mess, nor did you clean it up. It was an administrative decision to offer him reinstatement. He is capable of choosing his next steps. He chose not to stay.”

I open my mouth to argue, but no words come out.

She goes on.

“The very second the roads are passable, you are encouraged to drive away from our campus, and there will be no reason for you to return. I thank you for your efforts in making the best of a difficult situation, but I will require nothing more of you.”

She turns and walks away, and I sit here in this chair, my mouth hanging open.

What just happened? She offered to reinstate Hayes? And he said no? And in my frustration and anger, I managed to make every single part of a bad situation worse.

I pull out my phone and text Hayes. *‘Can you come into the kitchen please?’*

He walks in a minute later holding his plate piled high with spaghetti and mashed potatoes, the last bite of a sandwich filling his mouth.

After he swallows, he asks, “What’s up?”

What’s up? I force myself to push away any remaining Moreau-based anger and remember that this is my son, whom I love, and who, no matter how great he is most of the time, is still a kid and therefore subject to being a little dumb.

He jumps up to sit on the counter opposite me and spins a huge bite of pasta onto his fork.

I breathe in and out before I ask. “Did Dr. Moreau speak with you?”

He nods, chews, and swallows. “Yeah.”

That’s it? He’s going to make me work for this. “Did she offer to re-enroll you at Chamberlain?”

Fork halfway to his mouth, he nods again. “Yeah, but I don’t think it’s a good idea.”

Am I hearing him correctly? Not a good idea?

“What is that supposed to mean?” I ask, unable to think of a better question because my brain is busy trying to keep the frustration out of my voice.

He puts the mashed-potato-laden fork down on his plate, then sets the plate beside him on the counter. “She only offered because she likes you. And I don’t want her to resent that decision later. Or to resent you.”

I sit there shaking my head, unable to compute any of this information.

I need to formulate an intelligent question—to clarify this misunderstanding we’re having. I need to ask carefully, so there’s no further confusion.

“What?”

It’s the best I can do.

Hayes tilts his head and raises his eyebrows in a gesture I recognize from my own cache of non-verbal communication tricks. Loosely, it translates to, “Come on, man. You’re not trying very hard.”

“You’ve lost me.”

“Dad.” Was that a patient sigh? Seriously? What is happening here?

“Just tell me what happened.”

He shifts on the counter and starts again. “Dr. Moreau asked to see me. We had a meeting in her office while you were making dinner. She said Wanda Chamberlain suggested she should reconsider my expulsion, and she asked if I’d like to stay.”

I nod, following along even though I’m very surprised. This is not very Moreau-ish. A move like this will definitely hurt her credibility. Her reputation.

“I told her I love it here, but maybe it’s time for me to be done.”

“Why would you say that?”

He runs a hand through his hair. “Because she only asked me to stay because of you.”

I shake my head. “I don’t know what you mean.”

This is followed by a frustrated sigh. “It’s so obvious. She’s been so nice to me since you showed up. Like she’s acting like a totally different person. She’s into you, Dad. And that’s not a great reason for me to stay. It feels like cheating. Like when I was little and people used to give me things because Mom died.”

I roll myself over to where Hayes sits and put my hand on his knee. “I think you misunderstand.”

“I’ve thought about it a lot. What if I stay, and then I do something stupid and it messes everything up between you two?”

I want to remind him that there’s nothing between Patrice and me, but he goes on without a pause.

“What if you two start dating and then you break up and she hates me? It’s a lot to put on a kid, Dad. That’s all I’m saying. It’s way better if I get out of the way.”

I shake my head, unable to form words.

“You might not even like her the same way she likes you, and that’s fine, but you’re not blind, Dad. You have to see she’s crazy about you.”

How many times can I deny this? If he was here five minutes ago, if he heard what she said to me, he would not believe the words he's saying now. The very idea that Patrice Moreau would give Hayes back his place at Chamberlain because she's—what?—interested in me? It's crazy.

“Let's just move past that for a minute, okay? Because whatever attraction might be there, I think you misunderstand your options in reference to being enrolled here at school.”

Hayes slides off the counter and stands with his hand on my shoulder. “Maybe let's not move past it just yet. I need to say something to you. If you like her, I think it's time for you to act on it. Mom's been gone a long time. You deserve to have someone in your life. And if it's Dr. Moreau, I think that's great. Opposites attract and all that, right? Maybe you're perfect for each other.”

Who is this logical kid and what has he done with my son?

He must see the bafflement in my face, because he gives me a long look. “Wait. *Do* you like her?”

“I barely know her.” But I answered too fast, and now I'm busted. I can see it in his smile.

“You do. You're having a magical Christmas romance.” His voice is playful again, and I can see how delighted he is at the thought.

I shake my head, but then I decide to be honest. “Okay, listen. Yes. Kind of. Maybe. But I blew it.”

Hayes sits down again, this time on a crate from under the counter so we're at eye level. “Did you kiss her yet?” he asks, as if that's any of his business.

“No.”

“Did you want to?”

A hundred times. “No comment.”

He laughs. “I don't know how you managed to fall for my school's chancellor and then wreck your chances in a couple of hours, but I suggest you go out there and find her. Fix it. Be brave.”

PATRICE

That man. He is the most frustrating element of this completely frustrating experience. When I offer his student a most generous forgiveness, Oliver hurls blame and anger at me. Unbelievable.

I don't regret my conversation with Hayes, but I wonder what really made him say no to my offer. I know he loves attending school and being a Chamberlain student; he said so a dozen times at our previous meeting. His excuse about wanting to spend more time with his father feels lacking. Not untrue, exactly, but incomplete.

I check my watch. Can it really be only five o'clock? Of course it's dark already, but it feels like it should be much later. For one of the shortest days of the year, this is the longest day in my memory. I need a few minutes alone. I know I should stay in the cafeteria, help with clean-up, be here with the students, but Mr. Kline seems to have them all in control.

Control is not what I feel when I'm in the same room with him.

I walked into the kitchen a few minutes ago thinking about skating and holiday magic and—I shudder to remember it now—considering kissing that man. Not that he gave me any room to act on it. Because he took one look at me and all his warmth disappeared. And then he acted like ...

Like me.

Exactly like me. When faced with a difficult situation, he ran with the least forgiving conclusion. Well, fine. If he wants

another door closed between us, I'm happy to close it. And lock it. And push a few heavy furniture items against it, just to be safe.

But "happy" isn't the word to describe what I'm currently feeling. I walk across campus with my arms wrapped around myself and remember sitting at the pond snuggled close to his side. I feel the wind scrape across my cheeks and remember his eyes on my face, warm and wanting.

None of that feeling remains except in my memory.

We tried to switch roles for a while this morning and found that we're no good at doing each other's jobs. I ought to stick to being the bad cop. It's where I belong.

But then I remember the feeling of standing with those six students as Wanda offered them their pathway to continuing here. As they showed both her and me sincere gratitude. As they thanked me, over and over, for helping them make the best of the situation they created. As we beautified the tree and they made plans for the biodiverse groves they'll plant in the spring.

Every part of that experience pulled and tugged and hurt—but not because it was wrong. Not because I regretted any of it. Because we were opening ourselves to each other, giving and receiving confessions and accountability and forgiveness.

And when Wanda suggested I try again with Hayes Kline's punishment, I hesitated. But after I considered all the options, it felt like the best course to withdraw his expulsion.

I'm not ashamed to admit I was wrong about Hayes. There's more to him than I previously thought, and the more is quite lovely. He has shown himself to be useful in an emergency, warm and generous with praise for his fellow students, sincere in apology, and genuinely helpful. All of that makes it difficult to wash my hands of him.

Even his refusal of my offer to keep him at Chamberlain was gracious. Somehow he managed to turn it to a compliment for me. Yes, I was wrong about Hayes Kline.

And I fear I was wrong about his father, too. Not my first impression. That seems to be fairly accurate. But the way I allowed myself to see him as the man I wished for, not the man he is. Just as well. Such a distraction cannot end well for me.

The steps up to my office have never felt so long. I practically pull myself up by the hand rail. Almost there. I feel like I'm holding my breath waiting to hide behind a closed door to exhale.

When I pull open the outer door to the administration office, I step into the reception area and realize I'm not the first to seek refuge up here. At the opening of the door, it becomes very clear I'm interrupting Michael and Millie in what can only be described as a romantic moment. As they both leap to their feet and disentangle from each other's arms, I see Michael's expression, flustered and embarrassed. Meanwhile, Millie looks delighted.

He steps toward me. "Dr. Moreau." His voice is far too loud, and he clears his throat before he goes on in a milder tone. "What can I do for you?"

I glance from his frown to Millie's grin.

"Not a thing. Carry on, you two."

She understands before he does, and she moves to his side and wraps both her arms around him.

"Yeah, like that's going to happen," he murmurs under his breath.

Millie laughs. "I certainly hope it's going to happen."

I move into my office accompanied by the sound of Millie's gentle teasing, glad she and Michael found each other.

At least these two got their magical Christmas romance.

I sit behind my desk and wake up my monitor. The computer is still open to my email program, and there are far too many messages for me to deal with. I drop my head onto the desk and wish I could stay here, hidden, slumped over in this chair until every last student is gone.

However, after the way I spoke to Oliver, I can't expect him to continue to help me, to see to the students' needs, and to entertain and amuse them. I don't deserve his help anymore. I'd like to be able to say I don't want it, but I want so much more from Oliver than I'm comfortable admitting, even to myself.

With a sigh, I sit up. So much of what needs to be done is impossible until I know how long we're stuck here on campus. I can't tell parents when they'll see their students. I can't make arrangements for a crew to clear up the snow on campus. I can't decide how to move forward without any information, and as frustrated as I feel, the families of these students must be even more so.

I begin to mentally compose an email message about the student who played the guitar last night. Hayes called him Cam. I find his information and send a short note to his parents, telling them his talent impressed and inspired his fellow shut-in students.

I send another to the robotics student's family, and one to the photographer's. I wish I'd seen more of the students who displayed their talents so I could reach out and let their families know how these students are making the best of a bad situation.

Speaking of bad situations, Wanda copied me on the emails to each of the students responsible for the tree incident, and I see that she's given the parents all the pertinent information. There is nothing more I need to say to them now, and the realization comes with a huge wave of relief. I send Wanda a message thanking her for taking over that piece of administration. I think what a gift she is to our school's community, and then I realize thinking it isn't quite enough. I add a few sentences to the message.

"You are the heart and soul of the Chamberlain Academy society, and I am grateful to learn from you as I watch you lead these students."

Then I go back and delete the last word. Change it to "people." It feels better, but not quite right. One more delete,

one more change.

“Kids.”

They’re kids. Children. So much more than their enrollment status. In my efforts to run the school in the most efficient manner possible, I have relegated each of them to nothing more than ID numbers, behavior issues, and acceptance letters. But spending these last two days in their company, I’m seeing them in entirely new ways. More than that, I *want* to see them differently. To know them better. To understand them.

Once Wanda’s message is sent, I scan the inbox to see if there’s any reply to our repeated messages to the department of transportation. Nothing. Emergency services? The same. I try to relax, knowing that they’ve got an entire state to clear up. Nothing about our situation here on campus is ideal, but we are warm, dry, and fed. Our electricity is on. Water runs from taps. Many people are surely experiencing far worse conditions.

And we have Oliver Kline. Oliver Kline is making every student feel better in every way, as often as possible.

I don’t want him to leave feeling the way he did in the kitchen. I don’t want him to drive away from here resenting me for handling everything poorly. Maybe I don’t want him to go at all. For the second time today, I take stock of my talents and strengths and find all of it—my usual source of confidence—an unreliable net to fall into.

Oliver is wonderful with the kids. He entertains them. He feeds them. He plays with them. He’s surrogate father for each of them during this disastrous holiday.

But it’s not a disaster after all. And that is all because of him.

I need to find Oliver. To speak with him. To apologize and try to say the right words this time. To keep my fear and frustration from coloring the message of gratitude I want to give him.

Before I leave my office, I knock on the connecting door. I hear Millie's laugh, and she calls, "Come in. Come out? Come on through."

They're sitting on the couch, her feet stretched out on Michael's legs. He looks like he's struggling between the need to jump to his feet as I enter the outer office and the desire to stay exactly where he is.

I know he doesn't need my permission, but I wonder if *he* knows it. I make a motion for them to stay right where they are. "Can I bring up something for you to eat? When I left the cafeteria, there were still lots of options.

Millie shakes her head. "We're good, thanks."

Michael adds, "We'll be down to help keep watch tonight in a little while."

I thank them, wishing I could tell them they won't be needed, but I'm not at all sure they won't be needed. It's becoming increasingly clear I need all the help I can get. Running Chamberlain Academy is not a one-woman job.

I leave them behind the closed door and hope their moment can last as long as possible.

Walking down the staircase and staring carefully at the steps beneath my feet, I don't notice that all the kids are gathered together until I'm almost all the way down. I stop a few steps from the bottom and watch.

Kids are snuggled up in groups on the couches, blankets pulled over them. They've pulled several couches into a big circle so everyone is together. Hayes is perched on the arm of one of the couches, and Oliver sits beside him. A boy is telling a story, and as I stand and listen, I realize he's telling about his family's holiday traditions. And it appears they're all doing it, taking turns and saying what they'd be doing if life were normal today.

If life were normal, what would I be doing?

I think about it as I look around the room. Whatever it is, it wouldn't be as lovely as this.

I cross the remaining space and make my way to the least conspicuous edge of the gathered students. As much as I try to keep from stopping the flow of tradition-talk, the kids notice me when I arrive, and they sit up straighter, tuck away blankets, and direct all their eyes to me.

I want to tell them to ignore me, pretend I'm not here. I wave their attention away and smile, shaking my head to convince them I'm not going to interrupt. I'm only part of the audience. I want them to continue telling their stories. I want, if I'm honest, to get Oliver alone.

But he's not mobile, and he's the center of this gathering. Or maybe it only seems that way to me because now I can clearly see him at the center of all the good things that have happened in the last two days.

Like it or not, I've killed the mood. Every student is looking my way. Am I supposed to say something? What do they expect? What are they waiting for? The silence grows awkward and finally Hayes stands up from his seat on the arm of the couch and does a faux-formal throat clearing.

"Dr. Moreau, we have a little something for you."

From the next seat on the couch, Oliver takes out his phone and presses a button, and a familiar tune plays across the gathering. All the kids pull out their own phones and, glancing between my face and their digital notes, begin to sing "*Petit Papa Noel*," the French children's favorite carol. The one my grandparents used to sing to me.

Their accents might be horrible, but I don't even notice. Every one of these students, stuck here at school against their will, has taken time and made the effort to learn this song. So they can sing it for me. To me.

I look across at Oliver. He's singing, too, and—is that directing? He's leading the song. He organized this, I know it. And it didn't happen just now. Somehow, I'm sure he worked with the students over hours, maybe even as long ago as yesterday, to teach them to sing this song for me so I will feel the comfort of home and childhood as I spend this unplanned and unexpected Christmas Eve with all of them.

Oliver looks up at my face and smiles, and then he goes fuzzy. Watery. Unclear. Because as I stand here listening to these people's unexpected gift, I begin to cry.

OLIVER

Oh, no. This was not the plan. She's crying. The firelight catches the tears as they roll down her cheeks. And it's not just a little cry. Lots of tears. She puts her hands to her face, hiding in the sleeves of her white sweater. The kids keep singing, because the song lasts forever, but I just stare across the gathering and watch Patrice.

When the song (finally) ends and she removes her hands from her face, she's smiling. I exhale a huge sigh of relief when I see it. Tears still flow from her eyes, but she radiates the most beautiful expression of gratitude as she looks from kid to kid around the circle and then, in an action I'm willing to bet she's never done before, holds her hands to her heart.

The move doesn't look practiced in the least. It looks as if she's trying to hold herself together.

"That was beautiful," she says, her voice trembly.

Then she looks directly at me. "Thank you. *Merci.*"

Andie, the girl who is not in Bali with her parents, stands up and takes three steps over to Patrice. She holds out her arms and waits. Patrice looks startled, and possibly a little scared, but after another long second, steps into the arms of the waiting girl. Before the embrace breaks, several more students are standing with the two of them, arms reaching out to join in the hug.

I nudge Hayes and tell him to help me stand up.

He jumps up and lifts me by my arms. I'm getting more used to moving around with this huge brace on, but nobody's going to mistake me for someone graceful.

Who needs graceful? Graceful is totally overrated.

I hobble my way across the circle, and when the kids are done offering Patrice hugs and handshakes and smiles, they move away. I stand there in front of her, knowing I'm way off balance—physically and emotionally.

“Do you have a minute?” I ask her.

She swipes her sleeve under her eyes. “Of course.”

I nod toward a quieter corner of the lobby, and she comes to my side, puts her arm around me, and leads me away from the crowd, exactly as if two dozen kids weren't watching us.

But they are. Oh, you better believe they are.

When we get what I hope is far enough away from our audience, I stop.

“I feel like I do nothing but apologize, but I definitely owe you another. Patrice, I'm so sorry for the way I spoke to you. For the way I jumped all over you about the kids you didn't expel. That I didn't listen. None of this is like me. I'm used to saying the right thing in the right way at the right time, and I've done nothing right with you. I'm so sorry.”

She slips her hand from around my waist. I miss it there instantly. Then she slides her fingers down my arm and doesn't stop until her hand is holding mine.

Her eyes meet mine. “I believe we are both not quite ourselves right now. But I hope I can figure out how to keep some of this new personality after this holiday is over. You've shown me a new way to lead here. I want to be better.” She leans in a little closer to me. “And that means, I want to be more like you.”

I shake my head. “Right now that seems like a terrible idea. I've been horrible to you. The worst.”

She smiles. “You've had a few moments. But so have I. And then you do something like this.” She gestures over her

shoulder to the students who are definitely staring at us. It's so quiet, they're probably all holding their breath.

"What is it you think I did?"

"You taught them that song. For me. To make the holiday special for me."

I nod. "Everyone was completely on board. I didn't force anyone to get in on the performance. I only had to beg a little."

"How? When?" she asks.

"Oh, you know," I say, trying to appear as if I'm not thrilled it went over so well. "A little practice in the kitchen, a little practice on the skating pond."

"You've been planning to teach them this song since you got here?"

I'm not going to lie to her, but I don't need to tell her exactly how much I wasn't thinking of ways to impress her for the first few hours of our acquaintance. "Not since I got here. Only since I started falling for you."

Did I really just say that? If the look on her face is any indication, she's at least as surprised to hear the words as I am to say them.

"This is a recurring problem for you, this falling," she says, making a nod toward my knee. "But I hope you didn't do that for my benefit." She's not laughing now, but her serious face isn't as stern as it was yesterday. And I could be wrong, because it's fairly dark in here, but that just might be a twinkle in her eye.

I hobble a little closer to her and put my hands on her waist. "You definitely don't get credit or blame for that fall. But I think you should know I definitely hold you responsible for the rest of it."

She shakes her head. "Oliver," she says, and at the sound of my name on her lips, I don't think I can even listen to what she says next. Nor can I take my eyes from her mouth. Lucky for me, she repeats herself. "Oliver, I can't be blamed."

I grin at her, but she's not smiling now.

“I guess we could call it a happy accident,” I say, wishing we didn’t have such an eager audience. I can feel dozens of pairs of eyes on us.

She puts a hand against my chest, and I lay my fingers over hers.

But instead of drawing closer, she presses her hand against me, straightening her arm until it’s fully extended. I miss the closeness immediately.

“No. Listen. This isn’t me.” She gestures to her sweater, her leggings, her ridiculous slippers. “I’m misrepresenting myself by appearing this way. If you realize in a week that you’ve been drawn in, I’ll feel terrible. This isn’t what I’m like. I’m not casual. I’m not fun. I’m not relaxed.”

I pull her hand tight against my chest. “It’s possible you’re not behaving exactly in the way you might when you sit in the chancellor’s chair. But I’m pretty comfortable believing that what I’ve seen is a real part of the real you.”

She glances around and whispers, “It’s only the real me when I’ve completely lost control of my life. When the weather cooperates, when students leave according to their schedules, when I don’t have to deal with giant trees in my Hall, I’m no fun at all.”

I start to say something, but she stops me with a finger to my lips. I’m exactly shocked enough by her touch that there’s no chance I can speak.

With her finger still on my mouth, she says, “Without *you* here, I’m no fun at all. The side of me you’re seeing right now only exists in your presence.”

I close the remaining distance between us and tilt her chin up with my finger until she’s looking directly into my eyes. “Maybe that means I should stick around.”

She doesn’t answer. Maybe because I didn’t ask a question. I ask one now.

“May I kiss you?”

She laughs. Now, it's been a while since I asked a woman if I could kiss her, but I'm pretty sure laughter is not the answer we're looking for when we put ourselves in this position.

Her fingers are threaded in mine, and she's smiling as she looks at me. "You want to kiss me? Here? Now?"

"Here and now feels like a pretty good idea to me," I say.

"With everyone watching?"

I shake my head. "They don't care. I guarantee it."

"I'm going to regret this, aren't I?" she asks, but there's no regret in her smile.

"I sincerely hope not."

She pulls her hand away from my chest and twines both her arms around my neck. "I suppose we can count it as a bit of Christmas madness."

I nuzzle the side of her face with my cheek. "I think you mean Christmas magic," I say, and bring my lips to within a centimeter of hers.

Her skin is all soft focus this close. I'm close enough to count her eyelashes. I gaze at her as if I can't get enough of this view. That's because I can't get enough. I force myself not to go any nearer, telling myself I'm not going to close the last of the distance. As much as I want to kiss her right now, I'll let her seal the deal. When she decides she's ready.

She stares at me, her lips parted. I can feel her breath on my face.

She runs her thumb along the short hairs at the base of my neck, inducing a full-body shudder.

She did not just lick her lips. Absolutely not.

Oh, she really did.

This infuriating woman is not making this easy for me.

"Are you seriously going to try to tell me this isn't you being fun?" I ask, wishing I could lift her off her feet and pull

her to me.

She leans forward and kisses the corner of my mouth. “Oh,” she says. Another feather-light kiss. “Is this fun?”

Finally, finally, she puts her hands on either side of my face and draws me to her, her soft mouth meeting mine. My eyes drift closed, and I’m lost in her. So lost that it might be several minutes before I notice the kids are cheering.

PATRICE

It's easy to tell if you're in your right mind. You simply take a step back, monitor your own behavior, and decide if it's something a sane person would do.

Kissing a student's father in front of an audience of two dozen people? Not something a sane person would do.

Laughing about it?

Again, not so much.

The only possible conclusion is that I'm out of my mind.

For the first time in my adult life, I'm enjoying the crazy.

My hands are on Oliver's cheeks, feeling the stubble growing in. I never want to take my hands off his face.

At least the students aren't swarming us. The ovation was enough for them, and now they're finding entertainment elsewhere.

Maybe it's the holiday. Maybe the whirlwind of emotions this day has caused. Maybe it is actually a hint of madness. Difficult to say, but right now, I don't mind at all that I seem to have taken leave of every one of my senses.

And standing here wrapped in Oliver's arms, I know that's not true at all. I have so many senses I never knew about. Obviously there are the basic five, and they're all on full alert. But there's the sense of relative distance—very little distance between Oliver and me. And the sense of someone watching

over my shoulder. Many someones. And that sense of balance, which I've never considered so fleeting as it feels right now.

Hands still on Oliver's face, I back away only a few inches. "Did that just happen?"

He whispers his response. "I'm pretty sure it did. If not, I've become an excellent daydreamer."

I nod. "Do you think we should talk about it?"

With a shake of his head, he moves closer. "I think we should run through it a few more times before we offer notes."

"I'm in favor of consistent effort, but maybe not in such a public forum."

Oliver chuckles. "Who says you're no fun? That's the most playful sentence I've ever heard."

I try to deliver a severe chancellor glare, but it melts from my face in exchange for the smile Oliver's closeness demands.

With my arm at Oliver's waist, we walk around a corner. The sounds of the students' conversation and music dims, as do the lights.

He leans against the wall, and I stand very close. I tell myself it's so we can speak quietly and not be overheard. I don't believe my own justification, nor do I move away.

"I kissed you." I say it just so I can remind myself it happened.

He nods. "I kissed you back. I hope you noticed."

"I noticed."

He raises his hand and runs it down the length of my hair. I don't believe there's a scientific explanation for the fact that I can feel the touch all the way to the ends of my fingertips.

I meet his eyes, trying to suppress my smile as I attempt a serious conversation. "This is going to become a story. We're about to be Chamberlain lore."

"Lore? I've never been lore. I like the sound of it."

"You don't live here."

Oliver straightens. “Oh, you’re right.” He takes my hand, and his face is serious. “No, I didn’t really think about how this has a long-term effect for you.”

I curl his fingers around my fist and hold our hands together above my heart. “I believe every effect of this will last a very long time.”

“Is there going to be trouble for you?” His eyebrows are lowered in concern. This is a very good look on him.

I nod, but it’s getting harder to hide my smile. “A great deal of trouble. How am I supposed to maintain the respect of the student body when it becomes public knowledge that at the slightest provocation, I run around kissing fathers?”

“I have questions.”

“Do, ask them, please,” I say, still clutching his hand.

“Will it become public knowledge?”

With a gesture through the wall, I say, “What are the chances fewer than half of those people caught our kiss on their phones?”

He nods. “Okay. Public knowledge, yes. What about the slightest provocation part?”

I give a drawn-out sigh. “When someone feeds, entertains, and motivates a group of kids to excellent behavior? I’m smitten. Not to mention teaching them a song from my grandparents’ childhood. What can I say? It doesn’t take much.”

“So, let me see if I have this right. Any father who comes to Chamberlain, gets stuck in the snow, makes a few meals, and sings to you gets a kiss?”

I shake my head. “Oh, no. There’s got to be the element of vulnerability. The sprain in your knee is the final straw here. If you didn’t need my help hobbling across the room? I probably wouldn’t have looked twice.” My smile fled its cage and is freely playing across my face. It may look and feel foreign, but I don’t mind at all.

He moves his hands to my hips and rests them there, holding me almost close enough. His eyes move across my face, and his smile is soft. Gentle.

“Can we talk about Hayes?”

Even though I want to stay relaxed, I feel my muscles tighten in reflexive response.

“Of course,” I say, even though I don’t want to change the subject.

“He told me you offered to let him stay.”

“True.”

“He also told me the only reason you did that was because, and these are his words, you like me.”

I shake my head. “Not true.”

“You don’t like me?”

How can he be serious and playful at the same time? I feel like I keep trying to flip a switch and I can’t keep up. Perhaps this is part of learning a new skill.

I haven’t quite made it back to playful, so I speak seriously. “I like you very much, but that has no bearing on my invitation to your son.”

“None at all?”

This look he’s giving me is full of delicious invitation, and in the face of its magnetism, I can’t pretend.

“Almost none at all.” My confession comes low and soft, and there’s more air in it than I planned for. His fingers tighten on my hips.

“Do you want to tell me why you changed your mind?”

“Does it matter? He refused my offer. He doesn’t want to stay here.”

Oliver shifts on his good leg. “I don’t think his refusal is because he doesn’t want to stay. He loves it here.”

“Why, then?”

Oliver sighs. “His mom died when he was very young. In our community, that led to a lot of special treatment. People were really generous and thoughtful and kind. He got the best elementary school classroom placement. The best soccer teams. The best party invitations. But he always knew the opportunities were unearned.”

I surprise myself by interrupting him. “Kindness never needs to be earned.”

I think my words surprise him as well. “You’re right. You’re absolutely right. But he and I didn’t recognize that. And so he began to refuse some of the invitations, pass on some of the opportunities. Act out a little, so he wouldn’t be seen as the golden boy.”

If there was ever a textbook definition of the golden boy, Hayes Kline is it.

Oliver goes on. “I think he can’t accept your forgiveness and your invitation to remain at Chamberlain because he thinks he didn’t earn it. That you’re offering because those other guys get to stay. Or because of how you feel about me. About you and me.”

On a basic level, the part about Hayes earning another chance is true. But does that mean Hayes should refuse the offer? I want to try to explain, but this is new territory for me. In my years here, I’ve certainly never negotiated the reversal of an expulsion while in the arms of a parent. Not in any way. Not even close.

I don’t know what to do with my hands. I’d rest them on my hips, but his are already there. I don’t want to cross them, because I’ll look defensive.

I decide to rest my hands on Oliver’s forearms. His sweater is pushed up nearly to his elbows. Is it possible I have never seen attractive forearms before? Looking at these, it seems unimaginable. Oliver has several obviously appealing physical traits. Smile, yes. Great hair, obviously. Those expressive eyebrows? Can’t miss them. And I’m not even considering the kissing. But this rosy, muscled space between

wrist and elbow? It might make me lose my train of thought altogether.

I look away, but my hands continue to notice his forearms. “Oliver, I’m not a person who is comfortable debating with a student. I make rules, they follow. I present opportunities, they take them. I offer privileges, they thank me. I’m not in the habit of begging anyone to stay.” I realize I’ve said all these words in the direction of his left shoulder. I raise my eyes to meet his. “I have seen so much to impress me in your son over these last two days. How can I convince him he is a necessary element of our society here at Chamberlain?”

“Maybe you tell him what you really mean.”

“I mean what I said.”

He aims that grin at me again. “The part about being—what was it?—a necessary element? What is that?”

I sigh. Do I really need to explain myself to him? Can’t he hear what I’m saying? “It means I *want* him to stay.”

Oliver nods. “Maybe start there.”

And suddenly, I understand. Perhaps people don’t hear the emotional subtext of my carefully chosen words. Maybe I need to be clearer about saying what I feel. That will be a difficult transition. It will make every conversation both longer and more emotional. Neither of which I’m particularly comfortable with. But comfort isn’t my only goal. I nod. And I give it a try.

“I want him to stay. And I want you to be in my life. Can I get everything I want? Do you think there’s an appropriate balance?”

Oliver’s hands tighten on my hips. “It’s about time you started thinking about being appropriate, chancellor.”

He pulls me close and kisses me again, slow and gentle and only mildly inappropriate. More emotional subtext. I think with enough practice, I can become fluent in this language.

I’m very willing to put in all the effort it requires.

OLIVER

I remember when Hayes was little and I just wanted him to go to sleep. To be able to turn off the parenting sign. To clock out.

I haven't felt that way in a long, long time, but the current situation brings it all right back. It may not be much past eight o'clock, but I want all these kids to fall into their makeshift beds now.

Yeah, I know. Not going to happen.

I hobble over to where the kids have pulled the couches into a big circle and let myself down onto a cushion. The corners are all claimed, so I sit in the middle of a long leather couch and try not to look as tired as I feel.

Not that I'm sleepy. I couldn't sleep now if I was alone in a room and watching opera on TV. My brain is wired and I keep looking over at Patrice as she walks among the kids, her slight feeling of residual awkwardness totally overshadowed by the way her smile transforms her face. She is stunning.

I watch as she taps Hayes on the arm and leads him out of his group. I try not to watch her mouth as she reissues him an invitation to stay. Not that I'm paying enough attention to the words she's forming—I just like looking at her mouth, remembering how it feels when it touches mine, knowing she wants to keep our lips in each other's lives.

I feel like a kid, new to dating and kissing and relationships and just flooded with hormones. Maybe there's something contagious in the air around here. I wouldn't be

surprised. And it looks like Michael Carraway has caught the bug, whatever it is. He and Millie come down the huge staircase hand in hand, grinning like I must be grinning.

I glance back at Hayes and Patrice and I wonder how the chat is going. But even more, I wonder if there's room in her life for him as more than a student. Not that I'm thinking of taking this very-brand-new something to a new level already. I'm not. But the idea is planted. The idea of Patrice learning to see her students as people she can like and respect, and maybe, someday, even love. The idea of Hayes embarking on adulthood with someone in addition to me cheering for him. Forty-eight hours ago, Patrice wouldn't have crossed my mind even as the world's most perfect caricature of an evil stepmother. But now ... I wonder. That's all. And wondering feels pretty wonderful.

About eighty percent of me wants to go over there and be part of this conversation. But the smarter twenty percent knows this is not about me. And as much as I hate that, I believe it's best for Hayes to make his choice without my input. Because things are going to be different for him here going forward—he's not going to be able to get away with anything under Patrice's watch. No more pranks. No trouble at all.

If he chooses it, I believe he'll stick to it.

I shift my attention away from the two of them and watch Fletcher and Gwendolyn, the girl whose family is hosting his parents, look at pictures of the Florida family gathering on their phones.

A few minutes later, Hayes flops down on the couch beside me.

“Hey,” he says softly, throwing his arm over my shoulder. “I decided what I want for Christmas.”

“Oh, yeah? You mean besides an all-expense paid stay on the floor in the Chamberlain administration building?”

He laughs, and I am filled with love at the sound of it. “Yeah. Besides that. Three more semesters of tuition, if you

don't mind."

I lean over and hug him. "I don't mind at all. You feel good about it?"

He nods into my neck. "Really good. Thanks."

He stays tucked in here close to me, and I rub a circle in his back. "And you think it's fair if you're a little under the microscope for a while, behavior-wise?"

"More than fair. I'm going to do the same probation as the tree guys do."

"You can handle it? And your school work?"

"No problem. And I'll be an absolute angel, cross my heart."

I snort. "Did you tell Dr. Moreau that?"

"Nah. No use making promises and ruining her surprise."

Sitting back now, he asks, "And do you want to talk about the you and Dr. Moreau situation? You went from zero to sixty there pretty fast. Should we have a conversation about making safe choices?"

It's like I can hear my own voice coming out of his mouth. "How about I'll let you know if there's anything I want your opinion about?"

He shakes his head. "No deal. You get my opinion whether you want it or not. She's great. You're great. Go forth and be great together. Just maybe not in front of the whole school anymore. Deal?"

I rub my knuckles into his hair. "Deal."

At the sound of a double clap, Hayes and I both look behind us. Patrice stands near the fireplace. "*Alors*," she says.

Several of the kids double-clap back.

Her grin widens, and she is lovely.

"It is Christmas Eve. Time to put out your shoes."

We all look at her, uncomprehending.

Someone says, “Put them out where, like outside?”

Another kid says, “Is this how you’re going to keep us from doing another prank?”

There’s general laughter at this, but I feel myself go a little defensive in Patrice’s behalf. Because, let me tell you right now, exactly nobody better be planning anything close to another prank.

Patrice says, “It’s a tradition in France. Come on. Shoes at the fireplace. I guess just one from each of us.” In a perfectly elegant move, she lifts one leg like a gorgeous flamingo and pulls off a slipper. Placing it on the artfully stained concrete hearth in front of the fire, she makes a gesture for the rest of us to follow suit.

I hand one of my shoes to Hayes, and he jogs over and places both of ours next to hers.

“That’s right. Now when Father Christmas comes, he can fill your shoes with gifts.”

Andie makes a face. “Gross. I hope it’s not anything we’re going to be expected to eat.”

Patrice smiles at her. “Considering his obstacles, we’ll be happy with anything we find this year, won’t we?”

Andie nods. “Absolutely.” She lowers her voice to whisper, “But I’m not eating anything I find in a shoe.”

Patrice pretends not to hear her.

Look what a good start she’s making at this whole leading-with-the-heart thing.

As kids move to put their shoes by the fireplace, Patrice makes her way over to the couch where I sit.

She takes the seat beside me. Right beside me. Even though there are plenty of other options. The couches are empty since all the kids are lining up their shoes. Still, she sits this close. I feel like I’ve unlocked a life achievement. Luckily for me, my arm is already stretched across the back of the couch, so I can be terribly subtle about wrapping my arm around her.

She tucks her shoulder into my side. “Days are still only twenty-four hours long, aren’t they?”

“I’m not convinced. All this weather may have changed the earth’s revolutions.”

She makes a humming sound. “Blaming the weather is an excellent notion. I think I’ll use it to explain my own recent revolutions.”

My fingers run along the neck of her sweater. “Can I share some of that blame?”

She tilts up her head to look at me. “I rarely allow others to take credit for my accomplishments, Oliver.”

I love the sound of her teasing. “And aside from pulling off a Christmas miracle around here, what have you accomplished, exactly?”

“I’ve ignored the stares of twenty-five students. I’ve answered very demanding emails and made exactly zero promises to parents and stakeholders. I’ve worn slippers in public.”

“And you skated backward, don’t forget that. You decorated a huge tree. You won my heart.”

“Won it? Does that mean we were in a contest and you lost?” she asks.

“Not in any possible way. Somehow we both won.”

“I’ve kissed a very handsome man,” she says in a whisper.

“I know I share some responsibility for that.”

She takes my free hand in hers.

“All right,” she says, as if making a concession. “I’ll allow you to share credit.”

“I hope you’ll allow me to share much more, and for a very long time.”

“For as long as you can imagine.” The combination of her whisper and her smile feels like a promise.

“Patrice, I think you should know I have a very good imagination.”

“I’m counting on it.”

PATRICE

I've never spent a Christmas Eve like this. Oliver and I sit on the couch watching the students as they gather in groups, sit up talking, sing some songs, phone their families, and relax together.

Eventually I drift off to sleep, waking only once when Oliver shifts and I realize I'm sleeping against his chest. With his arm around me. On a couch in front of two dozen students.

As I glance around, I'm fairly confident everyone is here, and I'm glad for several reasons. Most pressing right now is that I really don't want to move out of the circle of Oliver's arm. I close my eyes and fall back into a deep, exhausted sleep.

Rumbling wakes me, and I wonder if Oliver is snoring. But he's sleeping silently. When I slip from the couch without disturbing him, I notice something about the dim morning light leaking into the Hall feels different.

I put on my slippers warm from the fireplace and walk to a window to see the snow has stopped falling. A sigh of relief like a prayer of thanks falls from me. No more snow. Not only that, but I can see a column of smoke or steam or exhaust at the far end of the Hall's parking lot.

No. It's not steam. It's snow, moving up. Being pushed into a beautiful rooster tail by a huge orange snowplow.

I push both palms against the window to get as close as I can without actually going outside. Am I dreaming? My forehead touches the glass, which fogs immediately as I

breathe near it. This is not a dream, unless it's a dream come true. There is a vehicle a hundred meters away, and it's clearing the road.

I feel a tear roll down my cheek. It's Christmas morning, the plows are here, and I'm crying. Why? I attempt to catalog my emotions, but there are too many and they're far too much in conflict.

One thing is certain: we're going to get these students home to their families after all. My knees feel weak with relief at the thought. I begin to turn from the window, to make my way back to the couch, to wake Oliver and the students, to wish them Merry Christmas, to tell them the storm is over, when I catch sight of something red out in the snow.

Red and moving.

With the arm of my sweater, I wipe away the fog I breathed into the glass. What I think I saw is impossible. Did I imagine it?

No. There is a red shape moving toward the Hall. I smear my arm across the window again, and can see even less clearly. I move to the door and press the exit handle. Now it's clear, and I begin to laugh, but there are still enough tears in my eyes that I feel a little frantic. I step outside and close the door behind me.

"Mrs. Chamberlain?" I shout. "Is that you?"

In answer, I get the most welcome sound: Wanda Chamberlain's laugh. I run toward her, but the snow is up to my knees, and "run" is not exactly accurate. She's gliding, though. As I lurch toward her, keeping my feet flexed so I don't lose a slipper along the way, I realize she's on snowshoes. In a thick, red coat with a fur-lined hood. And if I'm not mistaken, she's got a sack of something flung over her shoulder.

Grandmother Christmas. Making her way to Chamberlain Academy at first light on Christmas morning.

We meet in the middle of the snow-covered quad, and with my feet sunk into the snow, for the first time, Wanda

Chamberlain stands taller than me.

She drops the sack she carries and reaches for me. I let myself fall into her embrace. As she holds me, I neither know nor care if I'm laughing or crying or both. I simply allow myself to be held in her strong and fragile arms. One hand strokes the back of my hair, and she murmurs my name over and over.

“Patrice, oh, dear Patrice.”

I may never need to go inside again.

But, I realize, she will. I tighten my arms around her in a squeeze before I let go and look into her face. She's wearing full makeup, and beneath the fur hood, her hair is perfectly coiffed. As always.

I lean across the snow and pick up her bag. “How did you get here? Did you walk all the way from your home in town?”

She laughs and winds a hand around my arm as if I'm escorting her across the quad to a meeting in the Hall.

“I would have, but it turns out I didn't need to. Sam drove by and picked me up.” She gestures to the parking lot where the snowplow driver waves from the window as he clears another stripe of snow away. I never imagined a segment of blacktop could look so beautiful.

I imagine Wanda sitting in the front seat of the enormous truck, laughing and clapping in delight as the plow cleared the road ahead of them. Maybe it didn't happen this way, but I love the image nonetheless.

“Are the kids awake?”

“They were still asleep when I saw you and came outside.”

“Let's see if we can surprise them, shall we?” Her grin is the loveliest thing I've ever seen and the only gift I'll ever need.

We enter the Hall to silence. Everyone seems to have slept through the roaring of the plow and my exit and reentry through the door. Wanda leans against the wall to remove her

snowshoes and then pushes back her hood to look up at the tree.

I say nothing, and she stands for several long minutes, staring up through the needled branches. Her hand comes to her mouth, and I worry she's going to cry again, but then I watch her kiss her fingertips and blow the kiss up to the treetop.

“Merry Christmas, Daddy,” she whispers.

I move behind the tree and attach the plug to the wall. Hundreds of lights shine from dozens of strands, reflecting off the baubles and bells hanging from the boughs.

In the pre-sunrise blue light, it's a magical sight.

“Very well done,” Wanda murmurs as she picks up her sack and looks around.

The students sprawl and huddle on the mats, blankets and limbs flung here and there. Michael and Millie sleep mostly sitting up, side by side as if they fell asleep on guard duty. Oliver stirs and pulls his blanket up to his chin.

Without another word, Wanda points to the fireplace and beckons me to follow her. She unwraps the rope cord from the neck of her red velvet sack (who in the world even owns something like this?) and reaches inside. She pulls out a beautiful, clear resin snowflake ornament the size of her hand and places it into a waiting shoe. Then another and another until all the shoes hold one. Every snowflake is tied with a glittering silver ribbon. They're stunning.

I stand at her shoulder and whisper, “Where did you find these?”

“They're my tree ornaments. I've had them for decades. Pulled them down yesterday in hopes I'd make it here to give them to the kids before they left. In memory of their adventure.”

I give a tired chuckle. “I'm not sure any of them will need any help to remember this. But this is much better than what I was going to put in their shoes.”

“What was your plan?”

“There are a few boxes of chocolate bars in the counselling office.”

She shakes her head. “This is much better.”

“A wonderful reminder for them all,” I say.

Wanda wraps an arm around my waist. “I hope they all live long enough to tell the story of this holiday hundreds of times, to many generations. And I hope the stories get happier with every retelling.”

I feel like we’ve all just been given a blessing.

“I hope the same,” I say. What I want to say is, *I hope you live forever. I hope this school never has to function a day without you. How could it? Impossible to imagine.*

But I’m still feeling the swirl of unfamiliar emotions, and I don’t want to hijack the moment with my tears.

Wanda takes another look at the gift-filled shoes and then at the sleeping students. “Should we wake them?” she asks.

I lift one shoulder. “I’m in no hurry to get them out of here,” I say. I mean it as a joke, but as the words come out of my mouth, I realize how quiet campus and all of town will be without them. How lonesome. I’m startled by the revelation. By how much I mean it—I’m in no hurry at all.

Taking Wanda’s arm, I lead her to a couch. If it happens to be the one where Oliver is in my sightline, that’s only my good luck.

We sit, and she asks me to tell her stories about our snowstorm adventure. I whisper a few answers, but when I realize everything I say is colored by my recent impressions of Oliver Kline, I turn the conversation to her experience during the storm.

“Oh, it was lovely. I stayed perfectly warm and dry, I ate a lot of toast and drank a lot of tea, and I watched more television than I have in years.”

“Keeping an eye on the news feeds?” I ask.

She laughs softly and shakes her head. “Oh, no. I watched hours and hours of Christmas romance movies. Great ones and ridiculous ones and silly ones and swoony ones. It was a very good use of my time, I assure you.”

“It sounds ideal.”

A buzzing begins in one corner of the room, and then spreads across the walls. I stand up and look around and realize the students’ phones, plugged into every available outlet, are lighting up with messages and travel advisory alerts. Time to wake them so they can respond to their parents.

Wanda moves through the piles of blankets and pillows, nudging kids and whispering, “Good morning,” and “Merry Christmas.”

I head directly to Oliver.

He’s still sleeping, his face calm and handsome in the slowly growing light. I could stand here staring at him all day, but that isn’t conducive to getting the students out the doors.

With a glance around to make sure nobody’s looking, I lean across him and brush a soft kiss across his lips.

He makes a humming sound but keeps his eyes closed. Reaching up toward my face, he murmurs, “Patrice, that better be you.”

I catch his hand in mine and place a kiss on his knuckles. “Good news,” I tell him. “Plows are here.”

His eyes still closed, he smiles and pulls my hand down to his chest. “This is the best dream.”

In what’s becoming a tug of war, I pull his hand back, tugging him upright. “Not a dream. Time to get up, Mr. Kline. We’ve got an exodus to orchestrate.”

He sits up, running a hand across his face and through his messy hair. “Why does everything you say sound like an invitation to kiss you?”

“I believe such an invitation is always implied.” As I turn to help Wanda wake the rest of the students, Oliver reaches up and pulls me back until I’m sitting on his legs.

I try to stand up, but he nuzzles the side of my neck with his scratchy chin and it renders me unable to leave.

“I don’t want to hurt you,” I say, shifting off his braced leg.

“Then don’t walk away,” he says with a grin.

“I mean your knee.” I try to make my face into a stern expression, but I seem to have forgotten how. My smile might be as big as his.

“Nope,” he says. “Can’t feel a thing.”

He kisses the soft skin beneath my ear, and aside from his lips against my pulse, I can’t feel a thing, either. But kids are starting to get to their feet, and the moment I’m considering requires at least a bit of privacy. I stand. I’m still uncomfortable displaying so much affection in front of the students. And now there’s Wanda.

But it’s Christmas, and things like this don’t happen every day.

“Merry Christmas, Oliver.”

He stands as well, taking my hands in his. His balance is much improved, and I hope that means his sprain will heal quickly.

“I wish I had a gift for you,” he says.

I take another quick glance around and see kids noticing the ornaments Wanda put in their shoes. Most of them are lined up to give her a hug, to thank her for coming, to wish her a happy holiday. I decide I don’t care if anyone’s looking. Let them see me gazing up into his face. “I can think of a gift or two that you can give me. But let’s take care of all these people first.”

Hayes bounds over and wraps his arms around his father. “It’s Christmas! Let’s go home.”

Oliver glances at me for a second before he nods at his son. “You bet. We have a few things to do here first.”

Hayes points. “Cam and Andie are gathering up all the pillows and blankets. Theo and Jenna are putting the yoga mats back. A bunch of people are heading out to shovel a path to the parking lot and clear off the shuttle. Millie is on the phone with the shuttle service and it looks like a second van is already on the way.”

I look over the gathering of students, everyone working together to move toward getting out of their forced holiday confinement. “Hayes, thank you for helping organize the cleanup.”

He smiles at me. “My pleasure, Dr. Moreau. *Joyeux Noel*.” Then he runs outside to pick up a shovel.

I stand in the arch of Oliver’s arm. “What a remarkable son you have.”

He watches his son hurry away. “He amazes and surprises me every day.”

“I’m very glad we came to an arrangement so he can stay.”

Oliver turns to face me. “So am I. I need a clear excuse to come back and spend time on campus. Plan on seeing me at every parent activity. I expect to make a nuisance of myself by how often I’m here.”

My heart feels like it might explode with happiness at the idea. I can think of only one thing that would make this Christmas better, so I make it happen. I place my arms around Oliver and go up on my toes.

“This is a holiday I will never forget,” I tell him. Then I press my lips to his, the same combination of peace and electricity flooding me as when I kissed him last night. Before this, I didn’t know those sensations could exist in the same moment. I plan to continue to observe my reactions to kissing Oliver far, far into the future.

“I have no idea how to top this,” he says, his lips grazing my cheek. “But if you can turn a weather disaster into the best day of my life, just imagine what we can do next Christmas.”

My mind is already busy imagining exactly that.

EPILOGUE

It's like my car knows the way up these winding mountain roads without my attention, which is good, because my mind is full of nothing but seeing Patrice again.

Not that I'm being careless. Each of these little flurrying snowflakes is giving me plenty of reason to watch the road.

It's been a year, but a year might not be long enough to get over last Christmas's snowstorm drama. I chuckle thinking about it. Or maybe I'm laughing because I'm thinking about something else. What can I say? I laugh a lot these days.

Today's snowfall is gentle. Normal. Adding to the wintertime beauty without being dangerous. Well within the scope of the road-clearing crews.

A few other cars drive up the mountain road in front of me, and I wonder if any of these people come to Chamberlain at every opportunity the way I do. I'm here for parents' nights, for fundraisers, for performances my kid isn't in. I come for lunch at the Café on random Tuesdays and for a date with Patrice at least once a month. It's always worth the few hours' drive.

And now it's Christmas time again, Hayes's senior year. This is the last time I'll drive to Chamberlain to pick up my son for the winter semester break. His university applications are all turned in. Life is about to change for us again. But I'm not going to hurry any of his "last moments." I'm savoring.

I park in the main administration building's lot and stare at the majestic building. Its tower with the bell that began this

whole adventure, its carefully landscaped grounds with a few new plantings. I look up at the office window where I know Patrice sits. I can't stop my grin from spreading.

If I jog from my car to the building, it's because it's cold outside. Okay, and maybe also because I'm eager.

Inside the door is an enormous Christmas tree. But even at first glance, I know it wasn't cut down from anywhere on campus. It's manufactured, and it's stunning. I've been kept in the loop on this engineering project, so I know that each needle of this sculpture was 3D printed here on campus. And that the limbs all have buttons to retract the needles into their branches for storage. Thousands of tiny LED lights shine, making the ornaments sparkle. It's a piece of art as well as a reminder of the legacy tree from Wanda's birth.

As I come around the entryway, I see the other decorations. The lobby's comfortable leather couches have been removed and replaced with rows of chairs. Poinsettias in pots line the path between rows. Filmy fabric and white roses tied to lantern posts create a walkway leading to a backdrop covered in pine boughs and holly, all of it waiting for the wedding ceremony that will happen in—I check my watch—just under an hour.

I stand in the middle of the lobby and watch the movement. This building is the heart of campus, and it's still beating. A few families come in to the Hall on their way off campus, and one shuttle bus leaves as another arrives to pick up the last of the students heading for the airport.

I hear Hayes laughing before I see him. When I turn, he's hurrying toward me with Tessie's hand gripped in his.

She runs over and gives me a hug. "Merry Christmas, Mr. Kline."

"Good to see you again, Tessie. Are you staying for the wedding?"

She shakes her head. "Wish I could. Your son looks pretty amazing in this suit. But I'm on the last shuttle out of here. Just wanted to say hi and goodbye before I go."

I know the truth—she wants to spend every possible second with Hayes. But I happily receive her smiles and watch him walk her back outside, only sort of paying attention to their goodbye kiss. I'm not a voyeur. Just a dad.

Music starts playing through the Hall's speaker system, and I look around. People begin to fill the seats. There's Jenna Porter with her black fingernails, her mom on one side and her dad on the other. Fletcher comes by and says hello and I almost don't recognize him. He's grown about six inches since I saw him at the Harvest Ball. Bethany Walker holds a camera and documents the decorations.

Almost all the kids who were stranded here last Christmas come say hello before they take their seats. There are people I don't know, of course, but it feels like a reunion. I watch for Hayes to return, and when he comes in, he's got Wanda Chamberlain on his arm. He leads her at her pace to a seat on the front row, then he comes to stand by me.

"Looks like a good turnout," I say, making dumb conversation to hide my nerves.

Hayes isn't fooled. He reaches over to straighten my tie. "What are you worried about?"

"I'm not worried," I bluster.

He laughs. He can read my voice, my expression, and my body language. I'm bouncing with restlessness.

"Show me your hands. I bet you're all sweaty and gross."

I jam my hands into my pants pockets. "No way."

Hayes puts his arm over my shoulders in a half-hug. "It's going to go great. You have nothing to be nervous about."

But he doesn't understand. It isn't worry, and it isn't new. I feel this way every time. Each visit to campus, each time I watch her walk down those stairs, every moment she first comes into view, I get the same butterflies. When my phone rings and her picture comes up, I grin like it's the first time she's ever called.

Every opportunity I have to see Patrice Moreau makes me feel like the luckiest guy in the world.

Hayes nudges me and tilts his head toward the staircase.

Here she comes. Patrice makes her way down the steps looking elegant and unfazed, even though I know she's watching her feet carefully, like always. She's wearing a silver dress and some kind of floaty wrap scarf. I don't know what to call it. I'm not an expert in women's fashion, but you can trust me—she looks gorgeous.

I make my way to the bottom of the stairs just before she gets there. She stops, her eyes on me. "You're here," she says, a smile growing across her face. A smile that's all for me.

"Of course. People are counting on me. I have a date."

I hold my hand out, and she puts gentle fingers in mine as she walks down the last two stairs and into my embrace. It's like my arms were made for this, for holding her.

"Shall we go to a wedding?" I ask in a whisper, my lips close to her ear.

"I don't think they can start without us."

"Good point." We walk through the crowd, stopping to say hello to all the people Patrice knows, which is almost everyone. Hearing her call students by their names delights me. A year ago, she was so different with them. Now she's confident. Playful. Warm. But still firm and reliable. This is a very good shift. I finally get her to the seat next to Wanda just as the music changes and everyone in the audience stands.

I kiss Patrice on the cheek and take my place in front of the wintry backdrop.

Down the same long staircase, Michael Carraway and Millie White walk, hand in hand. There are sighs from the crowd as they make their way to their places. When Michael asked me to officiate at their wedding, I was surprised, but happy to. He sent me a script, and then Millie sent a new, less formal, shorter one.

I'm using hers.

I work hard to keep my eyes and my mind on the script and on the couple, but now and then I have to look out into the crowd. At my son, sitting beside Patrice, his arm across the back of her chair, exactly like he's ready to help her with anything she might need or want.

At the ravishing woman smiling up at me.

"To live your lives together in love and joy," I say, glad to reach my last line.

Michael and Millie embrace and kiss, and the room erupts in cheers. Eventually, they walk back up the aisle and around the corner to the space that's set for a reception and dancing.

I accept thanks and handshakes from Michael's and Millie's families before I can make my way back to Patrice.

Once I'm standing next to her, her arm wrapped around mine, I can finally relax.

She leans up and kisses my cheek. "You did very well."

I chuckle. "I can stand on stage in front of a couple thousand corporate employees and tell them how to optimize their business any day. It's a thousand times easier than that was."

"But you're finished now."

"Only the fun parts are left." I kiss her cheek and hear the snick of a camera.

Bethany grins at us. "Let me get a few more of those," she says. Patrice and I pose for a shot before she moves away to capture some of the other guests.

Most of the people followed the bride and groom, and the chairs are almost empty. But almost empty is still a little too full. I pull Patrice into the closest thing this room has to a dark corner and kiss her for real.

"Merry Christmas, Mr. Kline," she says. "Thank you for making this a wonderful day."

There is so much I want to say to her, and I know we have plenty of time. But for right now, I speak the words I've been

holding on to for months. Words I've been carrying in my heart.

“I love you, Patrice.”

She leans back so she can look into my eyes. The most beautiful smile grows and grows on her face. Then she winks.

“Call me Patty.”

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Becca Wilhite loves hiking, Broadway shows, rainstorms, food, forests, books, and movies. She lives in the mountains and adores the ocean, and dreams of travel but loves staying home. Happiness is dabbling in lots of creative activities, afternoon naps, and cheese. All the cheese.

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